

The God of Grace

Knowing God

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Bible Text: Ephesians 1-2; James 4:1-6

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I wonder if you've ever been in a situation where you've had the opportunity to do someone a favor, to do someone good but that little thought that's come up in your mind, "Why should I?" That's the way the natural mind often works, isn't it? That we look for a reason to do someone good but if they've done me any good or maybe it could be completely the opposite situation in that they have done you harm and now you see a situation, an opportunity to do them good and you think, "Well, should I really do that? Why should I have to do that?"

I want us to see this morning that our God is exactly the opposite of that. That our God is the one who seeks to give even when there is no reason to do it, but there's every reason not to do it. When there is no reason to show mercy and he shows mercy. When there is no reason to forgive us, yet he forgives us. We call that grace.

On Sunday mornings we've been looking at the way that God has revealed himself to us in the various descriptive ways and this is one of those ways. This is one of the ways in the words that God has used that we might understand him a little bit more. We read in 1 Peter 5:10, "But the God of grace has called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus." We've read lots of verses about grace and, of course, we could read a lot more, but that's one in particular where he describes himself as the God of grace. The God of favor. The God who always seeks to do that which is good.

When we think of the word "grace" probably all sorts of things flow into our minds. We think of the hymn Amazing Grace. We think in terms of saving grace. We think in terms of sovereign grace. Perhaps also we also think of sufficient grace. So I want us to have a look at those things this morning.

1 What does God mean by grace?

We have our thoughts but what does God mean by grace? Most of us know that grace is often put in simplistic terms as 'God's unmerited favor to the undeserving' and that's true enough. God's unmerited, undeserved favor to those that don't deserve his favor. In other words, that God should redeem a people, buy back a people, purchase a people, die on a cross for a people who actually have no redeeming features. There is no reason why he should do that in us. In fact, quite the opposite because the Bible tells us that we are

sinner, that we are alienated from God and in fact, he uses the word “enemies.” We might not always feel that, but in theological terms that is how God sees us, that’s how he sets it down in his holy Word.

But grace isn’t something only that God gives us in Christ. It is something that he is. It’s a part of who God is. Tozer says that “grace is a self-existent principle inherent in the divine nature.” As God is a God of love and a God of wrath and a God of grace, you see, all of these things are found in him. In other words, God has a propensity to welcome the outcast. He doesn’t have a propensity to repel the outcast or maybe will welcome one or two in, the attitude and the heart of God is to welcome the outcast. That’s what grace is. God has a propensity to show pity when others won’t show pity and there is no reason to show pity. God is the one to shower us with grace and love when in fact we only deserve wrath. That is the very nature of God.

The grace of God is seen throughout the Scriptures. I remember, it must be getting on a couple of years ago now, we were looking at the early chapters of the Book of Genesis and there was one sermon entitled “Grace In the Garden.” The more I thought about that even earlier this morning, the more amazing I find it. We know about amazing grace when we come to the Easter story that Christ should hang upon a cross, that he should suffer all that he did, that he should buy, that he should bear the sins of his people. That is an awful thing and we can’t enter into the depths of the suffering of Christ on behalf of his people. That’s grace. We didn’t deserve any of that.

But come back to the Garden of Eden and think for a moment what had just happened; that Adam and Eve had just willfully sinned. They had just thrown the history of humanity into the bin for a few thousand years. Sin had entered in to change everything, to alienate humanity from God, to necessitate in human terms, the second person of the Trinity, the only begotten Son of God that he would have to come, that he would have to live among sinners, he would have to go to the cross, he would have to suffer, he would have to bleed, he would have to die, he would have to take the awfulness of our sin. Adam and Eve had just done that, that awful deed and yet Christ comes down in the cool of the day and he calls out, “Where art thou?” And he actually makes provision for them by giving them that covering of skins. He kills an animal, an innocent animal and says, “There, put those on that you may appear before me.”

And so through the shedding of the blood he shows grace to a couple of sinners that had just done a most awful deed. And if we look at that in human terms, God could easily have said, “Forget this. I gave you a garden, I gave you a sense of innocence, I gave you tremendous scope and all of these things just one thing I asked you not to do and you’ve done that and you’ve not realized the awfulness of the decision that you made when you disobeyed me.” And yet, God showed grace because God is a God of grace in that situation.

And we don’t have to turn many pages of Scripture before we come to the story of Noah. True, we cover quite a few years, but humanity has so quickly, in those few generations, turned away from God. People then didn’t have to imagine in their minds that God

doesn't exist, etc., Adam told them. He was there. Cain and Abel, and many others that were there even named in Scripture, let alone thousands that are not named in Scripture, they were aware of these things first hand. People knew that God existed. People knew about creation and yet they still rebelled. That's a great picture of the depravity of man, isn't it? We say today, "Well, people don't know." Well, God says they do know, they are without excuse because they see nature around them. They do have a Bible. They do in many places have those who will tell them of the Gospel, but in those days, they had it first hand, as it were. And yet, the depravity was such that they still rebelled against God and his Word.

So, by the time we get a few chapters in Genesis, God is so angry and sees that sin is so rampant in the world, he says, "No, we need to stop this." And it was just Noah and his family. Noah found, it says, grace in the sight of God.

So, you see that? The world is now very wicked indeed, a wickedness probably that we wouldn't want to even describe in all its depth and God finds one man and he pours out his grace upon that man. And we can flip through the pages of Scripture and we come into the New Testament and we find there who that found grace. We read in the Scriptures "that grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." Not that grace wasn't there before; we've just seen that, but grace is revealed to us in this saving way through the Lord Jesus Christ.

One has said that God can no more hide his grace than the sun can hide its brightness. And so it is as you read through the Scriptures you find some dire situations, and yet when you look carefully you see through the cracks, the grace of God is shining.

You know, no one ever came to know God and have a relationship with him other than by grace because no one ever had the right to appear before God in that sense. Go back to Abel in Genesis, swing forward to Paul in the New Testament and anyone in between and come up to our present age. No one ever came to know God other than through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So then, the grace of God. Unmerited favor. It was the grace of God that it must follow with his other characteristics and attributes and, therefore, because God is boundless in his mercy and all those other things, he is boundless in his grace. His grace is immeasurable. His grace is eternal. His grace as we see it back in the Garden of Eden is the same as it was before time began and when we see him face-to-face his grace will be exactly the same even when this world is well gone.

2 Saving grace.

It's very difficult to look at a subject in Scripture and say, "Which is the most important aspect of this?" But surely, saving grace must come at the top here in the sense that our eternity depends on this and here we see the God of grace displaying his grace in the most amazing manner.

Ephesians 2:8, “For by grace are ye saved.” You see, we have a great interest in this work. If you’re a Christian then it is only by God’s grace. And if you think you’re a Christian and you’re not sure quite how you arrived there, you need to look at that for it is only by grace are you saved, through faith and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.

Now as sinners, we are most undeserving of creatures. Indeed, if we were deserving then we wouldn’t need grace, it wouldn’t be grace, would it? It’s a wonder, perhaps, when anyone shows us favor but that the God of heaven should show us favor. That when the Scripture says he cannot behold sin it is amazing that he should come and bear sin, that he should show us favor, that the one that we offend by our nature and our very works and our very thoughts, is the one that should come and take our sin and show grace to us. There is every reason under heaven why he should not save us, but there is a reason, if you like, outside of this earth that he should, in that he determined that he would do so. That is amazing grace. To think that he should shower us with grace with the very life of his only begotten Son.

It is grace that sets apart the true Gospel from the man-made religions and different systems of religion of the world. In the last census people were able to put down what religion they were and I there were so many. It’s amazing what people think as to how than can be right with who or what they call is God. And the great difference between the true Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ as set down so clearly in Scripture and all other man-made ways to attain unto their deity, the great difference is the difference of works and grace. Any false religion, any way different to the Bible of trying to reach God, you will find there are elements of works in it.

Verse 9 of Ephesians 2 just tells us so clearly, doesn’t it? “It is not of works lest any man should boast.” And the danger for us is that we tend to think of works in the terms of perhaps different things and we look at some things that are, we might call, religious and we say, “Well, that’s right and proper.” But, in fact, it can become one of the works that the Scripture speaks of and we have to be careful that we don’t depend on religious things for our salvation when, in fact, God calls those religious things our works and we can’t be saved by those religious things.

When we see the need for most things in life, we save for it. Maybe we draw money out of the bank, we may borrow money, we will do whatever is necessary and we arrive at the place of purchase or the transaction on the computer, wherever we’re going to do this and we pay our money or maybe you’re going to work for it, you’re going to work the week or so for whatever you’re going to acquire, we do that and the transaction is done. We have to rethink that in respect of our salvation. One hymn writer summing up the words of the Lord Jesus in one place, said, “Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small.” We have nothing to put on the table for our soul’s good. We cannot say to the Lord, “Look, I’ve got all of this. Now, forgive me of my sin, receive me into heaven.”

Not only do we not have anything to put on the table that is positive but in fact, anything that we have to put on the table is a debt. We are in debt to God. Our goodness, our righteousness, the Scripture says, the best we can muster when we put all the good things together, he says, they're actually like filthy rags. They're really absolutely obnoxious.

And yet there's something about our old nature that resists grace. You might think that's strange, but it is true. There is something about us that says, "If I'm going to be right with God, then I need to do something. I've got to play my part." And sometimes that's just a subconscious thing but it's something that goes on in our hearts and minds.

We sometimes see in church magazines and booklets, etc. such words as "we were welcomed into the church by baptism." You see, baptism is a great thing. We can turn the pages of Scripture and we can see that the Lord Jesus was baptized. We can see the example of early believers that were baptized so we say, "Well, that must be a good thing, mustn't it? Isn't that lovely to come into the church in that way?" You see, that's not what the Bible says. The Bible says we're saved by grace, not by baptism. But you say, "Well, when does baptism come in?" Well, baptism is a good thing and we have to use it in the way that God wants us to use it so what God says is, "When you've been saved by grace, then as a demonstration, an illustration to people around, come into the water and be baptized and that is an illustration to other people of what's already happened to you. It's something that follows on." There is no changing grace, there's no change in the state of our souls when we're baptized. Indeed, if we're baptized before we come to know the Lord Jesus Christ, it is indeed as nothing.

So, there's a classic example of something that we might say is good when in fact the Bible says, "Now hang on a minute. If you think that you're contributing to your forgiveness, to your relationship with God, to getting into heaven by being baptized, that for you is a work and you're not saved by works lest any man should boast." We can't say, "I'm going to heaven. I've been baptized." That is a work. It's something being done. You know someone saying that you're welcomed into the church doesn't make it so. Only what Christ has done can get us into the things of God, into his church.

Then there are those, of course, that would say, "But I've been to this church," whatever church it is and there'll be all sorts of different names over the doors, and they say, "Well, there's a lot of procedures in that church and I've been through all of those. I've done what the Minister's told. There may be a lot of traditions in the church where they are and some of them may be good and some of them may not, I'm not picking out any particular. There are sacraments and all sorts of things that belong to the churches that they go to and it could even have "Baptist" over the door. We are in the same danger as other people although some may be more so. And people say, "Well, because I've done all that I have been told to do by my Minister, and he says that I am a member of the church." And so, we find ourselves depending on what the Minister says or the particular decrees of that church – we are not depending on the grace of God. We're not depending on what Christ has done. It is not what I've done, it's what Christ has done and when we add our own works to what Christ has done, we're polluting it. You can't do that. You

can't pick and mix in these things. It is in Christ alone that we find these things and that's what grace is.

Some people would depend on really being decent people; they don't go around murdering people, that don't steal things and you know these people, what we might call, wholesome people in human terms. And many of those people may attend a place of worship. They may even engage in spiritual activities but, again, we cannot depend on activities and things that we do and places that we go for our soul's good. It is only in what Christ has done and the application of what he's done to our souls.

We could give many examples of the different religions of the world, but the examples I've quoted, they're not theory. There are millions and millions of people who genuinely and sincerely are following the beliefs of their particular group who have undergone some spiritual experience or ritual or whatever term you want to give it, and are really depending on that for their soul's good. We need to strip away from that. It is by grace that ye are saved. It is the undeserved favor of God that's poured upon you in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is to be able to see in Christ and Christ alone that he lived the life I could not live. That he died the death I could not die and that on the cross he took my sins and there is no other way to deal with my sin than to see Jesus Christ wash it away on the cross and to see that he rose again for me. And to be able to come to that position and it is a God-given position, where we come and say, "I believe all of that but I believe it for my soul and I cast my all upon him. I turn from that which I know is wrong in my life, I turn from my sin and I grieve for it and I grieve to such an extent that I want to be rid of it. I see how it is offensive to God and I see what he's done for me, the pure holy Son of God has come and taken my sin and I cast my all on him." One hymn writer says, "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling." And that's it, we let go of our works and we see the only works I want are the works of Jesus Christ. And that's grace because we don't deserve any of that. And, my friend, that's the only way that we may attain to glory.

But I want to move on this morning.

3 Sustaining grace.

When we come to know the Lord Jesus Christ, it's not an easy life. There are difficulties. We need strength for the day, we need grace for the day, we need that which strengthens us on our journey to glory and it's something that the Lord gives us. We read in that little book of James, those few verses, it says there that he gives us more grace. Grace for daily living. Grace for when things are difficult, when we're despondent, when we're going through a trial of life. And even some times when we cope well with things and we get a bit ahead of ourselves and we get a bit proud and we need grace for those days, to bring us back down again.

In chapter 4 of James, there were in particular three things that he warned the church about: quarrelsomeness, prayerlessness and worldliness. And we can easily slip into any of those and we do not have sufficient strength in ourselves but he says he gives us grace that we might be able to keep away from those things. Things that are incompatible with

a divine nature. You see, the Lord hasn't left us to stumble alone. He hasn't just saved us and said, "Now, get on with that and I'll meet you at the other end in glory." He's with us every step of the way.

We read in James, "God resists the proud but he gives grace to the humble." He doesn't like pride. He resists the proud. The word there for "resist" is a military term such as to arrange troops against it. That's how the Lord feels when we are proud and we think we've done something, he's going to resist that. We need to walk humbly before him.

Writing to the church at Corinth, Paul says there speaking of the things of God, "My grace is sufficient for thee." It's what he found. He had great difficulty in his life in many places and Paul knew whatever day it was, he knew that the grace of God was going to be sufficient for him. And the God of grace ensures there is sufficient grace for all his people and the God of grace continually showers upon us his grace particularly when we're in trouble. And Paul was writing about trouble; he was writing about his infirmities. I'm not sure what the problem was, we know he had problems with his eyes, it may have been related to that but we don't know. But there's other clues there. He talks there about having a thorn in the flesh. Again, if we look to how it was written in the original, we think of a thorn as a small thing - we pull it out and there's a bit of an ouch and that's it. But actually, in the text here, it was a stake in the flesh. It was something more than a little thorn, it was something that really aggravated him. It was something that went straight to his heart and it looks there that it may be something that the evil one was stirring up. It seems that if we read the words carefully, it speaks about an agent of Satan that was enabled to cause conflict in the church and that hurt Paul a great deal.

Whatever it was, we notice that Paul speaks in those verses in 2 Corinthians, about being buffeted with these things. You know, sometimes we think something goes wrong in our life, "Oh dear, I just can't cope with that," and then something else comes along, we're buffeted. And the word that the Holy Spirit uses there is an interesting phrase, it's the words we might use for having our ears boxed. A repeated, annoying, experience. One that is painful to the heart and that's how Paul speaks here. He says, "When I'm having my ears boxed, as it were, from all these various problems and trials," he says, "your grace is sufficient for me."

In one place Paul says that his trial had been given to him, he says, "It has been given to me." Sometimes we're in a trial and a difficulty and we find we feel we're left there for a little while. It is only when we're in that situation that we come to know afresh that his grace is sufficient for us. And when the Lord allows these things to come into our lives, it is sometimes that we might experience his grace. We're promised grace, aren't we? We're promised that he will supply our need. In Philippians 4, it says there that "our God will supply all our needs according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus."

But there's a little bit more here. Do you know grace leads to power. Trials can lead to power. Those verse in 1 Corinthians 12:9 Paul says, "Therefore I will rather glory in my infirmities." Why? "That the power of Christ may rest upon me." When he was dependant or using another verse he says, "When I am weak, then I am strong." It is

when we are in infirmities and that it is given to us, in other words, the Lord has given us that situation, then he says, “the power of Christ may rest upon me,” because when Paul was doing okay, then everyone would look at him and say, “Paul’s doing okay.” When he was down, when he was in his difficulties, when he was under trial and the Lord blessed him and enabled him to preach the Word and live as he did, people would say, “That’s the grace of God.”

He rested in these things, “The power of Christ may rest upon me.” And that word “rest” is translated elsewhere as “tabernacle” which means “to abide with.” “Therefore I would rather glory in my infirmities, my troubles, that the power of Christ may abide with me, may tabernacle with me.” Paul is thanking God that he is found in his infirmities. It’s a challenge, isn’t it? That we might be as grateful as Paul when we are in a difficulty. See, the truth of this, when we look at Christians that are under pressure, so many of those today in prison they’re in a difficulty and I would suggest to you that they are finding that his grace is sufficient for them and they are knowing something of the power and presence of the Living God.

You say, “Well, that’s alright. I don’t know how I’d cope with that.” But you see, it’s grace for the day. You don’t need grace today to be in prison. You might do it in a little while, we don’t know. I read of a Pastor by the name of George Orjih. He was a Pastor in Nigeria who was beheaded by Islamic militants because he would not convert to Islam. It’s not spiritually possible to do that. You know, if you’re a Christian, you’re a Christian. You can’t say, “Well, ok, I’ll convert to something else.” It’s not like belonging to the AA and saying, “Okay I’ll join the RAC now.” It doesn’t work like that. Thank God that once we’re in Christ, we’re in Christ forever. We’re changed. We’re new people and as much as you shout and threaten a Christian to do whatever, that Christian is not capable of converting, not that he’d want to do that. So, he was beheaded. Before he died, he turned to another believer and said, “If you survive, tell my brothers that I died well and I’m living with Christ.” And if we all die we know that we die in the Lord. They are great words, aren’t they? Could I say that? I hope I could because I have grace for the day. Maybe I couldn’t say it today, but as your day so your strength shall be.

That’s why the Lord said in Matthew, don’t worry about tomorrow because you have grace for today and you’ll have grace for tomorrow and when you get to tomorrow and look at the next day, you’ll have grace for that day as well, because the verse is written in the continuous tense. There will always be grace for you in that particular day. It’s a bit like the cruse of oil in Elijah’s day. She poured and it kept coming and filling every vessel until it was no longer required. The God of all grace.

We’ve looked at three things this morning. First of all, we’ve seen what grace is. In simplistic terms, it’s God’s unmerited favor upon the undeserving and how this is very much a part of the nature of God. Then we’ve had a look at what it is to know of saving grace. And then we’ve just looked at something of sustaining or sufficient grace.

So, what can we do with these things. Well, my friends, let’s rejoice in that God’s grace is toward us. Wouldn’t it be an awful thing if we learned about the God of grace and then

found that it's not for you. Ah, but it is. If the grace of God was sufficient for Paul, why not for you? Who are we to say anything different. Let's rest in these words, whatever trial and difficulty we find ourselves in, we can say, "No, I have sufficient grace for today and if I'm worrying about tomorrow, I'll have grace sufficient on that day." Keep these things in mind for the day of trial. It's easy now to say, "That's a good text, isn't it. I believe that to be true." But when trouble comes, it's quite easy to revert and say, "Well, I don't know what I'm going to do in this situation." We can get ourselves in a bit of a stew. You know, we can ask the Lord, "Lord, help me that this text might rise in my experience, Lord, when I find I have that need." Remember that it is in the day of weakness that you know power and that's a principle, isn't it? We go back to those well-know words in Isaiah where it speaks there about it is those that speak the Lord, it is those that grow weary, that actually know strength. And Paul has the same experience here.

When we have times of trial and weakness, there are times that we may know the power and presence and strength of God. We sometimes spend a lot of time asking the Lord to deliver us from our difficulty, and not enough time thanking the Lord for the trial that has come and the grace that he's giving to maintain ourselves in it. That takes a bit of courage, doesn't it? "Lord, thank you for this difficulty. Thank you, Lord, for the grace that you've given day by day and for being with me in this particular difficulty." And that helps us understand a little bit more where we read those verses, "Count it all joy when you fall into various trials and difficulties." How can I count it joyful when there's a problem and a difficulty? I don't want problems and difficulties. But the Lord says, "No they're there because in them, you will know my sustaining grace. In them, you will glorify my name. In them, you will become stronger and I will be with you in those."

"When through fiery trials thy pathways shall lie,
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply.
The flames shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine."

Finally this morning, this continuing grace, indeed, is sufficient but you need to know his saving grace because that's sufficient also. There is sufficient grace to save the worst sinner, the biggest sinner and you might think yourself a little sinner. Well, we're all sinners and it's sufficient to take us to a lost eternity. It's sufficient to take us into hell, isn't it? To go to judgment is an awful thing. And that's why Christ came. Why did God have such a painful way of salvation? Because it was the only way necessary. The only way possible whereby we might know his saving grace, that we might know the forgiveness of our sins, that we might be made fit for heaven in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The grace of Christ, then, brings us salvation to deal not only with our sins but to deal with our very nature that causes sin. So, ask yourself the question this morning, On what, or on who am I depending for my eternal salvation? If we could be whisked, as it were, to the very gates of heaven and to be asked there, "Why should you come into heaven?" What would our answer be? "Well, I did this and I did that and I followed what he said, and...I have a baptismal certificate. I have all sorts of things here." No, none of those

things will do. How will we get into heaven? One hymn writer sums it up ‘Jesus thy blood and righteousness. We may only enter Heaven because Jesus Christ has made it possible. That Jesus has lived and Jesus Christ has died and he has taken my sin and he’s risen again. It’s all in him. I cast my all upon him,” and that’s grace that he might enable us to do that.

So, ask yourself this morning, and if you find you’re not depending on Christ alone but are depending on people and things and works and merits or whatever it is, then let those go and seek to know him. Seek to turn from those things and seek to know the Lord Jesus Christ because the Bible does give us that promise that when we seek him with all our hearts, then we indeed shall find him.

Well, my friends, there it is. For those of us who are Christians, one says it’s in the grace of Christ we stand and it is in the grace of Christ we have every reason to rejoice today and every day until we see him. By the God of grace who has called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus. Amen.