

THEISM

The Grace of God

A person may be said to be gracious who extends undeserved favors, gifts or kindnesses to others. No one is more gracious than God in extending loving kindness to those who are undeserving. In the Old Testament, God's graciousness toward humanity was declared and demonstrated many times. Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD (Genesis 6:8). When Esau came to meet Jacob after Jacob had spent many years in Padan Aram, Jacob acknowledged to Esau that God had graciously given him his children and much provisions (Genesis 33:5, 11). Once, when talking to Moses, God indicated that he understood himself to be gracious (Exodus 22:27; 33:19; 34:6). The idea that God is gracious was included in the benediction the priests were to give the Israelites, "The LORD bless you and keep you; The LORD make His face shine upon you, And be gracious to you; The LORD lift up His countenance upon you, And give you peace" (Numbers 6:24-26). When Hazael, king of Syria, oppressed Israel while Jehoahaz was king of Israel, God was gracious to Israel and would not let Hazael destroy Israel because God had made a covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (2 Kings 13:22-23). Jonah knew that God is gracious (Jonah 4:2). Ezra realized that God was gracious to allow a remnant to escape from Babylonian captivity and revive them in the midst of their bondage (Ezra 9:7-9). Nehemiah reflected on the fact that God had been gracious to the Israelites when they had wandered in the wilderness (Nehemiah 9:17). The Psalmist emphatically declared that God is gracious (Psalm 84:11; 86:15; 103:8; 111:4; 112:4; 116:5; 119:29; 145:8, 17). God "scorns the scornful, but gives grace to the humble" (Proverbs 3:34). Old Testament prophets acknowledged the graciousness of God and on that basis exhorted people to return to him (2 Chronicles 30:9; Nehemiah 9:17, 31; Isaiah 30:18-19; Hosea 14:2; Joel 2:13; Amos 5:15; Jonah 4:2; Malachi 1:9).

The New Testament also declares the graciousness of God toward persons and events. When Jesus was a child, he "grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him" (Luke 2:40). The Apostle Paul believed that "by the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Corinthians 15:10). Moreover, he considered himself "a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power" (Ephesians 3:7). The Apostle Peter refers to God as "the God of all grace" (1 Peter 5:10).

However, the major teaching of scripture regarding God's graciousness relates not to God's loving kindnesses toward individuals within temporal circumstances but to his gift of salvation from sin through Jesus Christ. Although humanity does not deserve eternal fellowship with God because beginning with Adam (Genesis 3) "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), God determined before the foundation of the world that he would save mankind from sin (Ephesians 3:9; Colossians 1:26). God made promises to Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:15), to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:5; 17:1-4; 22:15-18), to Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15, 18), to David (2 Samuel 7:1-16), etc. that a savior would come to redeem humanity to himself. Although prophets also declared the coming of a savior (Micah 5:2; Isaiah 40:3-5; 53; 61:1; Malachi 3:1, etc.) and with angels desired to know more (1 Peter 1:10-12), God's gracious plan of redemption remained a mystery until it was fully revealed through the church (Ephesians 3:10) by the apostles (Romans 16:25; 1 Corinthians 2:7; Ephesians 3:3-5; 6:19).

God's great gift of grace is through Jesus Christ (Acts 15:11; 1 Corinthians 1:3-4; 2 Corinthians 8:9, Ephesians 2:5) who gave his life to redeem humanity from sin (John 3:16-17; Romans 3:24; 1 Corinthians 15:3; Ephesians 1:6-7; Titus 2:11; Hebrews 2:9). Jesus himself said that he came "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). God's gracious gift of

salvation is not because humanity is righteous. Rather, God demonstrated “his own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). Paul contrasted the role of Christ in giving life to the role of Adam by whose offense “many died” (Romans 5:15), saying “if by the one man’s offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:17). By the grace of God, Christ died on the cross, tasting death for everyone (Hebrews 2:9). Therefore, “to the praise of the glory of [God’s] grace” we are accepted in Christ and “have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace” (Ephesians 1:6-7). To Christians at Ephesus, Paul wrote that God “raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in his kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:6-7). In Christ, we who “were dead in trespasses” have been “made alive together with Christ,” (Ephesians 2:5) because we have been justified by God’s grace and have “become heirs of eternal life” (Titus 3:7). “Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:13).

Because God’s grace is sometimes misunderstood, some clarifications seem appropriate. *First, God’s saving grace does not give us license to sin.* To those who thought so, Paul wrote “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? . . . Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts” (Romans 6:1-2, 12). Paul also wrote, “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age” (Titus 2:11-12 see also 2 Peter 3:11, 13, 17). *Second, God’s saving grace does not permit us to trust our own deeds or works of law.* To Jewish teachers who taught that Gentiles must be circumcised and live by the Law of Moses, Peter asked, “why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?” Then he said, “we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 15:10-11). Paul wrote that “you are not under law but under grace” (Romans 6:14). Moreover, he said, “knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified (Galatians 2:16; see also Galatians 3:21-22; Ephesians 2:9). *Third, God’s saving grace is conditional.* God saves only those who trust him. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8). Without faith, God cannot be pleased (Hebrews 11:6). The faith that saves is a working faith, as illustrated by James (James 2:14-26) and by the author of Hebrews (Hebrews 11). Jesus said, ‘Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven’ (Matthew 7:21). Moreover, God takes away his grace from those who turn away from him, that is, from those who become unfaithful (Galatians 5:1-4; see also 1 Chronicles 28:9; 2 Chronicles 15:2). “Since you know *this* beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:17-18; see also Hebrews 3:12; 1 Corinthians 10:12).

Thanks be to God for his great graciousness.