

Grace

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Grace [T] [E]

The word "grace" in biblical parlance can, like forgiveness, repentance, regeneration, and salvation, mean something as broad as describing the whole of God's activity toward man or as narrow as describing one segment of that activity. An accurate, common definition describes grace as the unmerited favor of God toward man. In the Old Testament, the term that most often is translated "grace," is *hen* [ej]; in the New Testament, it is *charis* [cavri"].

The Old Testament. The word *hen* [ej] occurs around sixty times in the Old Testament. There are examples of man's favor to man, but the theological concept of importance to us is the grace of God demonstrated toward man. The term occurs most often in the phrase favor "in your (i.e., God's) sight" or "in the eyes of the Lord." This assumes the notion of God as a watchful master or king, with the one who is finding favor, a servant, an employee, or perhaps a soldier.

The concept first occurs in Genesis 6:8. Noah finds "favor in the eyes of the Lord." The context is that the Lord was grieved at "how great man's wickedness on the earth had become" ([Gen 6:5](#)). This statement about the Lord's antipathy toward man is followed by his promise that he will wipe humankind from the face of the earth, that is, completely destroy him, because of his anger at their condition. Noah is then described as having found favor in the eyes of the Lord. The themes of judgment and salvation, in which the vast majority of humankind are condemned to destruction, while God finds favor on a few (Noah and his family), reoccurs often in connection with the idea of grace. Hence, concepts of election, salvation, mercy, and forgiveness are all linked in this first illustration of grace in the Old Testament. Interestingly, the rest of the references to favor in Genesis all describe favor in the eyes of man (e.g., Jacob begging Esau's favor, [32:5](#) ; [Genesis 33:8](#) [Genesis 33:10](#) [Genesis 33:15](#)).

Crucial among the Old Testament passages on the unmerited favor of God is the conversation between Moses and God recorded in Exodus 33. There, in the space of six verses, Moses is said to have found favor with God five times, *hen* [ej] being translated either "find favor" or "be pleased with." At the beginning of the chapter, Moses goes into the tent of meeting, while the pillar of cloud stands at the entrance to the tent, and the people of Israel stay outside, worshipping (v. 10). The Lord speaks to Moses "face to face, s a man speaks with his friend." In the passage, the conversation between Moses and the Lord has to do specifically with the favor that God shows to Moses, and Moses requests that God demonstrate that favor toward him. Moses begins by reminding God that he has called Moses to lead these people, but that God has not let him know whom he will send with Moses. The statement echoes the original conversation between Moses and God at the burning bush in chapter 3, where God promises to send Aaron with Moses to help him get the people out of Egypt. Here, the Lord promises only that his "Presence" will go with Moses, and that he will give him rest (v. 14). Moses has just stated that he knows God's name (another echo of chap. 3), and that he has found favor with God; he requests that God teach him his ways, so that he may "know you and continue to find favor with you" (v. 13). Moses demonstrates his humble dependence upon the grace of God by affirming that if God's Presence does not go up with them, he does not want to be sent, because he knows they will fail (v. 15). But he asks the reasonable question, "How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us?" (v. 16). God promises to go with him in the next verse because "I am pleased with you and I know you by name" (v. 17).

Moses then makes one of the most remarkable requests of God ever made in Scripture, asking God to "show me your glory." Just as remarkable is that God answers his request positively. He promised to "cause all my goodness to pass in front of you" and that he will proclaim his name "Yahweh" in Moses' presence. He then makes a statement that is connected with grace throughout Scripture, one that Paul will quote in the context of election in Romans 9: "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." This is a remarkable example of the unconditional and full character of the grace of God. God holds very little back, only telling Moses that he "cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." Even this is an act of unconditional and full grace in that God has withheld from Moses what would destroy him. The passage closes with the strange instruction that God will cause his "glory" to pass by, Moses being hid in a cleft in a rock and covered with the hand of God until the glory has passed by. Then God will remove his hand and allow Moses to see the back of his glory, but not his face. Again, this protective, gracious act of God emphasizes the extent to which God is willing to go with his faithful servant to show his favor toward him.

Moses again speaks of finding favor with the Lord in Numbers 11:4-17. When the people of Israel complain at having only manna and not any meat, Moses cries out to the Lord in an apparently sincere state of vexation at the

burden of judging this entire people by himself: "I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, put me to death right now if I have found favor in your eyes and do not let me face my own ruin" (vv. 14-15). Without questioning his integrity or his strength of character, God immediately gives Moses a solution to his problem by appointing seventy of the elders of Israel to help him carry the burden of the people, "so that you will not have to carry it alone" (v. 17).

At the same time, God even answers the question that Moses has not asked: What about meat for the complaining people? God instructs Moses that he will give them meat for the month, though he will give them more meat than they want, as the story makes clear. The fact that the Lord brings judgment upon the people, however, does not vitiate the point of God's favor toward Moses in this passage. He still Acts as a sovereign who gives complete, unmerited favor to his servant.

God's favor sometimes extends to the fact that he will wait upon man as if he were his servant. Gideon, when called by God to lead Israel against Midian, asks God to wait while he goes to get his offering to set before him ([Judges 6:17](#)). As with Moses, the statement is in the context of the promise of the Lord to be "with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together" ([Judges 6:16](#)). When Gideon actually brings the offering that he has prepared, God shows his grace beyond what Gideon has asked by giving him instructions on where to place it and how to arrange it, then creating a supernatural fire that consumes the meat and the bread. After he disappears, Gideon realizes that he has seen the "angel of the Lord" and, interestingly, makes reference to the fact that he has seen him "face to face," recalling the passage in Exodus. God shows his grace one more time by assuring Gideon that although he is afraid since he has seen the angel of the Lord face to face, he is not going to die ([Judges 6:23](#)).

Samuel, too, finds favor in the eyes of the Lord ([1 Sam 2:26](#)). Here, the boy Samuel is described as growing in stature and in favor, not only with the Lord, but also with men. This verse is quoted, of course, in the New Testament, using the heavily theologically weighted term *charis* [*cavri*] in relation to Jesus ([Luke 2:52](#)). It is significant because it is a description of the growth of a child in the favor of God. The child cannot earn that favor since he is merely a child. Thus, God's grace toward those whom he loves grows in its extensiveness, as the child grows. This is perhaps no less important because of Samuel's unique relationship to salvation history. He is the last of the judges and is the transitional figure between the period of the judges and the period of the kings in Israel's history, as John the Baptist is in the New Testament between the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament evangelists.

Remarkably, the life of David is devoid of references to finding favor in the eyes of the Lord, though often he finds favor in the eyes of men, or requests such favor ([1 Sam 16:22](#) ; [1 Samuel 20:3](#) [1 Samuel 20:29](#) , etc.). One reference, however, is striking, especially in light of the dearth of references elsewhere. As David flees the city of Jerusalem after hearing that Absalom has been crowned king in Hebron, he takes the ark with him. A particularly faithful servant named Ittai, the Gittite, has declared his faithfulness to David, even though David has given him leave to go back and spare himself potential death by association with David. The procession continues into the desert, where it stops so that they can offer sacrifices with the ark in their midst. Then the king tells Zadok the priest to take the ark back into the city because he knows it belongs in the temple of the Lord. In a remarkable display of trust in God and in his sovereignty, David says that if he finds favor in the Lord's eyes, then God will bring him back. But if he does not, then David is ready; as he puts it, "Let him do to me whatever seems good to him" ([2 Sam 15:26](#)). David recognizes that the unmerited favor of God has to do with God's choice, not his. Grace in the Old Testament is just as much an act of the sovereign will of God as is grace in the New Testament.

The last prominent example of grace in the Old Testament is found in the Book of Esther. Of course, the book does not speak of *God's* favor at all, but Esther's humility in seeking the favor of the king has always been understood as a pointer toward human responsibility to humbly accept the grace of God. Esther finds favor in the eyes of the king and is rewarded with the freedom of her people ([5:1-8](#) ; [7:3](#) ; [8:5-8](#)).

Only a few references close out the notion of grace in the Old Testament, but they are significant. Ezra in his notable prayer to God when he finds that the people have intermarried with foreigners against God's will (Ezra 9), states that God has been gracious to the people of Israel "for a brief moment," in doing two things. The first is that he has left the people of Israel a remnant. The remnant is a sign that God's gracious favor bestowed upon Israel in the covenant continues on even in times of great disobedience and/or destruction among the Israelites, though this is the only reference to the remnant in the context in which *hen* [*ej*] is used in the Old Testament.

God has also given them "a firm place in his sanctuary, and so our God gives light to our eyes and a little relief in our bondage" ([Ezr 9:8](#)). Here is a reference to the grace that is shown the people in the giving of the temple and the light that it brings to Israel. But in the context of the Book of Ezra, this may also be a reference to the grace shown by God in giving Israel the Law, since the reading of the Law and the confession of the sin of the people on the basis of that reading is so important to this book.

Another crucial reference is found in Jeremiah 31. The famous passage about the new covenant (vv. 31-34) is

enough of a statement about the grace of God on its own, but it is linked to the *hen* [ej] of God by the occurrence of that word in 31:2. Introducing the same passage with the phrase "at that time," an echo of the beginning of the covenant passage in 31:31, God says that "the people who survive the sword will find grace in the desert; I will come to give rest to Israel." Here is a promise of the grace of God given to the people when they are given the new covenant. The new covenant, of course, is a promise that God will be their God, and they will be his people, with the Law written upon their hearts and present in their minds, and the gracious promise that all God's people will know him. From the least of them to the greatest, they will be forgiven their wickedness, and God will remember their sins no more.

The New Testament. Grace in the New Testament is largely encompassed by the use of the word *charis* [cavri]. While the idea of unmerited favor is found in some other places, the concept may be fairly restricted within the bounds of this article to the use of that term. It is worth noting that, though Jesus is never quoted as using the word *charis* [cavri], his teaching is full of the unmerited favor of God. Perhaps the parable of the prodigal son is the most obvious example. In that parable grace is extended to one who has no basis upon which to be shown that grace, other than the fact that he has asked in humility and repentance to be shown it. Other parables demonstrate grace in the teaching of Jesus, perhaps most notably the parable of the laborers in the vineyard ([Matt 20:1-16](#)) and the parable of the great supper ([Luke 14:16-24](#)).

While the idea of grace can be said to be largely a Pauline one, there are references to it in John and Luke as well. John describes Jesus as "full of grace and truth" and speaks of his people receiving grace upon grace from the fullness of his grace ([John 1:16](#)). In one of the most important theological statements about grace in Scripture, John says that the Law, a good thing, was given through Moses; the better things of grace and truth came through Jesus Christ ([John 1:17](#)).

When we turn to the writings of Luke, we find that Jesus is described as having the grace of God upon him ([Luke 2:40](#)) and as growing in grace with God and man ([Luke 2:52](#)). Many more references to grace are found in the Book of Acts. Luke makes a strong association between grace and power, especially in the early chapters ([4:33](#) ; [6:8](#) ; [11:23](#)). Grace is found without qualifier ([18:27](#)) and in the phrases "message of his grace" ([14:3](#)), "grace of God" ([14:26](#)), "grace of our Lord Jesus" ([15:11](#)), "grace of the Lord" ([15:40](#)). The distinction between these phrases does not seem acute, and therefore the basic synonymity between them points to an intention on Luke's part to make a statement about the deity of Christ. Again, these phrases often seemed to be linked with the power of God to create spiritual life and to sustain Christians. This grace is, as in the Old Testament passages, an unmerited favor, but now a new aspect of power in the Spirit has been added to it.

The concept of grace is most prominently found in the New Testament in the epistles of Paul. The standard greeting in the Greek ancient world generally involved the verb *charein*. Paul's greeting, however, was unique, combining the Hebrew greeting, *shalom* [l/v] (eirene in Greek) with the word *charis* [cavri]. This in itself is enough to note that Paul is thinking and not simply reacting as he writes his greeting.

The fact that he sometimes uses grace in his benedictions as well, which clearly are intentional, indicates that his greetings are to be taken with some seriousness. For instance, the benediction in 1 Corinthians 16:23, coming just after his dramatic plea to the Lord to come, demonstrates a strong belief in the grace of God. In the salutation of the letter ([1:3](#)), one gets a greeting that follows on from a strongly worded theological statement about sanctification and calling ([1:2](#)) and that leads into a statement about grace in 1:4 demonstrating the theological import Paul intends. A similar seriousness could be argued about the other salutations in Paul's letters.

Overwhelmingly in the letters of Paul God is the subject of grace. He gives it freely and without merit. Hence the many different phrases connected with grace: the grace of God ([Rom 5:15](#)), the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ ([2 Cor 13:14](#)), and the like. Sometimes this is explicitly stated, as in Ephesians 4:7: "to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it."

Interestingly, Paul sometimes mentions the gift of grace from God using alongside it language that speaks of human responsibility. So in Romans 15:16, Paul speaks of "the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God." Grace, then, is the power with which the human being then performs his or her gifted task. This is even more clearly seen in Paul's self-defense in Galatians. In one of the most truly dialectic passages in Scripture, Paul proclaims that he has died, yet lives, yet not he but Christ lives, yet he lives in the body by faith. He then argues that in living "by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me," that he is not "setting aside the grace of God" ([2:20-21](#)). Only an argument that Paul was too dependent upon works in his life would create the argument that he was not setting aside the grace of God in his understanding of the sanctified Christian life.

Grace can be such a forceful thought for Paul that he sometimes anthropomorphizes it. Hence, in 1 Corinthians 15:10, in the midst of an emotional defense of his apostleship despite the fact that he had persecuted the church of God, Paul says that he is what he is by the grace of God. He then goes on to compare himself to others who had

worked among the community, the other apostles, and declares that he worked harder than all of them. In order that this statement might not seem boastful, Paul follows it up by saying "yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me." Though this grace is said to be God's grace, it nevertheless is said to be "with him," and working harder than the other apostles, and is tantamount to equating the grace of God with the Holy Spirit.

In Ephesians 1:6 Paul speaks of the "glorious grace" of God, which should garner our praise. Of course, once again, Paul is not expecting us to praise an abstract comment, but he is thinking of the grace of God working so mightily in his life that it becomes a metonymy for God. The highly rhetorical character of the passage in which this verse is found ([1:3-14](#)) helps explain the power of this statement. The point is that Paul was so saturated with the notion of grace in his writing that he thought of it as an essential, if not *the* essential attribute of God.

Grace is most often associated in Paul with other terms having to do with salvation. We see it related to election ([Eph 1:3-6](#)), to the gospel ([2 Col 4:15](#) ; [Col 1:5-6](#)), explicitly to justification (Romans passim, esp. [3:23-26](#) ; [Eph 2:8-9](#)), and most often to sanctification ([Romans 5:2](#) [Romans 5:21](#) ; [Romans 6:1](#) [Romans 6:14](#) [Romans 6:15](#) ; [2 Cor 12:9](#) ; [Eph 2:10](#) ; [Titus 2:11-14](#)). It is even used with the human subject in speaking of the collection for Jerusalem as a work of grace.

In connecting grace to election Paul sees God as electing us before the creation of the world for the purpose of holiness and blamelessness ([Eph 1:4](#)). He predestined us to be adopted as sons into the family of God ([Eph 1:5](#)). All of this elective work is so that we might "praise his glorious grace." In other words, election and grace go hand in hand because of their free character. We can do nothing to deserve them.

This is the essential connection also with the gospel. In one of Paul's passages about the suffering that a minister of Christ undergoes, he speaks of faith and continuing in ministry "because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence" ([2 Cor 4:14](#)). Paul sees this as the benefit of not only the Corinthians but also all who receive his ministry, so that "the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. Therefore we do not lose heart" (vv. 15-16). Grace thus renews Paul's inward spirit and assures him of glory in the afterlife (vv. 16-17). Hence, Paul's ministry is not one that he always does joyfully or motivated by his own power, but rather motivated by faith that God is working in the present and will reward him in the eschaton.

In the same way, he links the grace of God with the gospel in Colossians 1:5-6. The word of truth, the gospel, is bearing fruit and growing at the present time "just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth" (v. 6). The parallel descriptions of "gospel" and "grace" as "truth" link the two as synonyms in the passage. This grace is therefore the "hope that is stored up for [them] in heaven" (v. 5), presumably something God is doing in heaven for them, and hence free from merit.

Perhaps the most dominant metaphor with which grace is associated is the legal metaphor of justification. We see the two linked in two very important passages in which grace is used in Paul. Romans 3:23-24 states quite clearly that all have fallen short of the glory of God and are "justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." Here, while the language of the slave market may be implied in the use of the word "redemption," and that of the cultus in the use of the phrase "sacrifice of atonement" in the next verse, the strongest linking with grace in this passage is with the word "justified" in verse 24. Hence the unmerited favor of God buys us legal freedom from our sin and cancels the sentence of guilt the judge has had to declare in order "to be just and the one who justified those who have faith in Jesus" (v. 26). It is interesting to note that the next thought of Paul is: "where, then, is boasting? It is excluded" (v. 27), again emphasizing that grace is free and not the work of man.

In Ephesians 2:8-9 Paul states the free character of grace perhaps even more explicitly, now not using the language of justification but simply of salvation. We are told that we have been saved "by grace" but "through faith." Grace is seen here as the means by which we are saved, a free gift; faith is seen as the mechanism by which that salvation or grace is appropriated. Paul must then go on to argue that even faith is "not by works so that no one can boast" (v. 9).

This does not mean that Paul keeps grace separate from works in sanctification, for he goes right on to speak of us being God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works (v. 10). Similarly, grace is seen as being in the midst of our present Christian life. In Romans 5:2 Paul speaks of gaining "access by faith into this grace in which we now stand" and in 5:21 of grace reigning "through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." While all of this is in the context of the grace of God as a gift versus the Law of God as a work, nevertheless grace is viewed as reigning even as we live the life we are supposed to live in Christ. Hence the argument of Romans 6 that we are not to go on sinning so that grace may increase, but we are to "count [ourselves] dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus for sin shall not be [our] master, because [we] are not under law, but under grace" (vv. 11-14). The key metaphor used in this chapter to describe this "work" of sanctification is "offer." Hence we are not to "offer the parts of [our] body to sin as instruments of wickedness,"

but rather offer ourselves to God, "as those who have been brought from death to life" (v. 13). This is done as slaves, offering ourselves in obedience to him (v. 16).

Even the suffering of the present Christian life is linked to the grace that God gives us. In Paul's famous statement about the thorn in his flesh ([2 Cor 12:7-10](#)), he speaks of asking three times that this thorn be taken from him, only to receive the answer "my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Here grace is equated with the power to live the Christian life and to do ministry in the name of Christ. So Paul delights even in the hardships of that ministry. In a similar way, the whole of the Christian life is linked to grace in tit 2:11-14. This grace "teaches us to say No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope." Here we see both the ethic of the Christian life (saying no and living uprightly) and the thought of the Christian life (the blessed hope) combined under the reign of grace.

Finally, grace is associated strongly with the gifts of the Spirit. This is true of the list of gifts in Ephesians 4:3-11 corporately to the church and the gifts given to individuals within the church for its edification ([Rom 12:4-8](#) ; [1 Cor 12](#)). In all of the work of grace about which Paul speaks, the Spirit has been implicit if not directly explicit. Hence, even though grace is not specifically mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12, we find that the Spirit gives to each one a gift "as he determines" (v. 11). The simple mention of these attributes as "gifts" throughout the chapter implies that they are a work of grace as well, but the connection with grace is explicit in the parallel passage of Romans 12:3-8. Here Paul states we have different gifts "according to the grace given us" (v. 6), and he has opened the passage by proclaiming that the source of his statement about thinking of others more than you think of yourself by saying that it comes through grace (v. 3). The somewhat different list in Ephesians 4 is similarly controlled by the notion of grace. Paul states in verse 7 "to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it." As he then describes this grace that has been given, it comes in the form of apostles, evangelists, and pastors/teachers in order "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (v. 11).

The notion of grace as connected to the Spirit of God is continued by the author of Hebrews in such a way that even mentions "the Spirit of grace" ([10:29](#)). Hebrews also emphasizes the connection of grace to salvation ([2:9](#)), sanctification ([4:16](#) ; [12:15](#) ; [13:9](#)), and the final blessing of God ([13:25](#)).

The other literature in the New Testament also emphasizes the free character of grace. The one reference in James links it to God's gift ([4:6](#)). Peter, who also includes it in his greeting, quotes the same Old Testament verse as James ([1 Peter 5:5](#)) and speaks of us as stewards of the grace of God ([4:10](#)). Peter also closes his second epistle with a benediction in joining us to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." The Book of Revelation also begins with a salutation and closes with a benediction that includes grace ([1:4](#) ; [22:21](#)), the only two references to grace in the entire book.

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See also [Favor](#); [Paul the Apostle](#)

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