

# What Is Grace?

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P U B L I S H I N G  
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Dedicated to Dr. George W. Robertson, senior minister at the First Presbyterian Church in Augusta, Georgia; preacher, model, lover of God's grace, friend.

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▣ **Grace is one of those words** that people use with little understanding of what it means. I remember watching the ABC news coverage of former president Ronald Reagan's funeral. As his casket was wheeled onto the patio at his presidential library in Simi Valley, California, the Marine band began to play the hymn "Amazing Grace." News anchor Peter Jennings commented, "This song is so fitting for Reagan because it speaks of someone who was quite low and ends up achieving a great victory." For Jennings, *grace* meant the power and ability to succeed against the odds.

There are other examples of the way people misunderstand what grace is. On the Dave Matthews Band album *Big Whiskey and the GrooGrux King*, Matthews reflected his desire for New Orleans to recover from Hurricane Katrina by asking for grace and wondering when grace would return. Yet in published interviews he fully admitted that he didn't believe in God, going so far to claim that the idea of God is dead.<sup>1</sup> So the band's telling separated God from grace, which raised questions about the nature of this grace for which they pled.

For others, instead of separating God from grace, they simply believe that grace is about spiritual enlightenment, going with the fabric of the universe, or somehow having a

general spirituality or religious sensibility. For example, the 1970s folk singer Judy Collins viewed grace this way: “We’re always in the path of this power and my own feeling is that agnostics, atheists, spiritual people, and devoted churchgoers alike all have the same experience of grace because it is talking about forces unseen which are always around us.”<sup>2</sup>

Such conceptions of grace—whether grace as moral uplift, grace apart from God, or grace as general spiritual enlightenment—are a long way from the biblical understanding. One of the key biblical statements on grace is found in Ephesians 2:1–10:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not 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, that we should walk in them.

Twice in this text, the apostle Paul declares that “by grace you have been saved” (Eph. 2:5, 8). Notice that this is not moral uplift; Paul says that it is by grace you *have been* (passive, something has happened to you) saved. Nor is it general spiritual enlightenment; this grace is specific activity directed toward particular people. In fact, according to the Bible, grace is more than good works or good karma, enlightenment or effort. It is more than that boost we need in order to do what we already know we ought to do.

Rather, the Bible declares that grace overturns a condition that is desperate. Ours is a condition of great bankruptcy, great ruin. Grace overturns our ruined condition in such a way that we are forced to confess that everything we have, everything that we are, every single blessing we’ve received, whether the reality of forgiveness and cleansing, hope and joy, worship and service—all of it is the result of God’s grace.

Many of us think that grace is something we receive at the beginning of our spiritual journey. We start with grace, which saved “a wretch like me,”<sup>3</sup> but we move on in the Christian life by the strength of our own performance. However, what the apostle Paul wants us to understand, under the direction and guidance of the Holy Spirit, is that we are saved by grace, we are sanctified by grace, and we are glorified by grace. From beginning to end, it is all the result of the undeserved and uncoerced favor of God. As the eighteenth-century Welsh preacher, Thomas Charles of Bala, put it: “Not only is the foundation laid in mere grace, but the top-stone will be brought forth with shouting, ‘Grace, grace!’ ”<sup>4</sup>