GRACE: WHAT IS IT?

Acts 20:24

It is my assigned task to give a Biblical definition of Grace. My role is basic to that of foundational work. My task at hand is foundational and deals with the understructure. As with all foundational work, it is tedious, technical, laborious, and sometimes boring, but it is the most important segment of the building project. If the foundation is not plumb, straight, and solid, the building may grow crooked like the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and collapse under its own weight. So if you will join me, I ask you put on your hard hats of concentration, your work shoes of activity and your work gloves to handle the task before us.

Grace is perhaps the most precious word in the Christian vocabulary. There is not a more dynamic word in all the theology of redemption. Of it - the Christian sings, in it - he hopes, for it - he prays, and upon it - he depends. He contrasts the religion of law and the religion of Grace. He divides the scheme of salvation into the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace. Out of the one comes death and hell, out of the other comes life and heaven. Every Christian is in full agreement with Paul, when he exclaimed, "By the grace of God, I am what I am."

What is Grace? All construction sites must first be cleared of clutter and improper building materials before a foundation is poured. We live in a time in which everybody and his dog believes in grace. But confusion reigns as to what it is and how it works. Much rubbish has been dumped upon the issue by the enemies of grace, and many warped supporting beams have been nailed to the question by the friends of grace. It would be so easy in a conference such as this for me to get up and say that grace merely means "unmerited favor" and then sit down believing my job was finished. To do so would bring insult to the Holy Spirit who inspired the holy words of Scripture. For the diligent student soon discovers that the word has many shades of meaning in both Biblical and secular usage.

Noah Webster, a devout Christian and a Calvinist by creed, lists twenty various shades of meanings of the word grace in its noun form alone, and four in its form as a verb. The first listing he gives for its usage as a noun is "favor; goodwill; kindness; disposition to oblige another." In the English N.T., the word "grace" is always a translation of the Greek word, "charis," a word that occurs in the Greek text approximately 170 times. In secular Greek, of all periods, it is a very common word, and in both Biblical and secular Greek it is used with far more meanings than can be represented by any one term in English. Primarily, the word means (a) a "pleasant, charming, becoming appearance that attracts a favorable notice. It is attractiveness either in appearance, speech, or manner." (For example: the speaker delivered his message with grace). (b) As a mental attribute, charis may be translated as "graciousness," or when directed toward a particular person or persons, by the word "favor". So in Luke 2:52 "Jesus advanced. . .in favor with God and men." (c) It may also describe an emotion excited in the person who has received a favor. This emotion is expressed as "gratitude" and thankfulness; hence, some ten times in the N.T. "charis" is translated "thanks". (Examples: Romans 6:17 and Corinthians 9:15.)

There are yet several other meanings of the word as it is used in the N.T. that time will not permit us to discover. Sometimes these various meanings tend to blend into each other, and in certain cases it is difficult to fix the precise meaning that the writer meant for the word to convey, a confusion that occurs in both the N.T. and the secular Greek. Also in secular Greek the word has a still larger variety of meanings that do not concern the student of the Bible.

Quite naturally, the various meanings of the word were simply taken over from ordinary language by the N.T. writers. And so it is quite illegitimate, on the basis of all the occurrences of the word, to try to construct a single doctrine that will account for all the various usages. Most of the discussions of the Biblical doctrine of grace have been faulty due to the narrowing of the meaning of grace to some special sense, and then forcing this special sense on all the Biblical passages. For instance, Roman Catholic teachers take one meaning of the word as it is used in II Corinthians 12:9 and proceed to make what Paul says in Romans 3:24 to mean that men are justified in the sight of God by the
infusion of a divine power or holiness into them, which is an interpretation that utterly ruins Paul's argument in Romans 3:24 (Read passages)

This is a warped beam inserted into the foundational meaning of grace. On the other hand, Protestant extremists have at times, reversed the process, and have argued that grace cannot mean anything except the unmerited favor found in the attitude of God, and the results of such a position are equally disastrous from the exegetical standpoint. The Catholic error equates the justification of the person's being before God as that expressed in the sanctification of his moral character. And the Protestant error equates the sanctification of the person's moral character as being expressed by the justification of his person before God. This introduces gross confusion and needless controversy upon the scene.

What we have occurring is this: one set of teachers brings a wheelbarrow of selected texts to our construction site. Another set of teachers brings another wheelbarrow full of their selected texts, and both groups dump them out at the site of our foundation. They then proceed to get into a heated argument over which set of materials comprise the true materials that are to be used in laying the foundation of Biblical grace. But the problem lies not in the materials themselves, but in the skills, or lack of skills, found in the workers. Paul says to us "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." (II Timothy 2:15). If either set of teachers is allowed to use their own selected materials, the result will be warped supporting beams of the foundation, thus the resulting beauty of the subsequent building will be diminished.

I have before me a pencil possessing a nature that is rigid and stiff. I also have a rubber band that is elastic and flexible. The etymology of the word "grace" is elastic and flexible much like cement when it is first mixed. Whenever the word "grace" is used by the Biblical writers to mean "favor" in a common sense, nothing at all may be implied as to whether the favor is deserved or undeserved. But whenever the Biblical writers wish to set forth a doctrine that relates a holy God to sinful men, they attach a meaning that becomes rigid and stiff like cement that has set up, and this meaning cannot be watered down and softened by secular and common usages of the word. Hence, those who are unfamiliar with Christian doctrine cannot understand God's plan of salvation, or God's way of saving sinners, by bringing their own common and secular understanding of grace, and reading the scriptures therewith.

We have now dug out the trenches and are ready to pour the foundation of Biblical grace as it specially relates a holy God to sinful men, thereby issuing in salvation. If we view the goodness of God as a generic attitude of heart toward His created order, there are several special varieties of His goodness. "Benevolence" is His good or kind favor terminating upon created objects. "Love" is His good favor terminating upon rational and personal beings. "Mercy" is His good favor terminating upon miserable beings. "Grace" is His good favor terminating upon sinful beings.

Every book needs a preface to introduce its contents to the reader. Every artist needs a background upon which to accentuate his paintings. Every diamond needs a setting to bring out its beauty and accentuate its loveliness. So grace needs its preface, its background, its setting, and that is found in the sinfulness of mankind. He who is not a sinner is not a proper subject of grace! So before we can analyze the jewel of grace, we must examine the nature of sinfulness.

When a chemist analyzes water, he discovers two basic elements comprising two parts of hydrogen and one part of oxygen. When a Bible student analyzes the nature of sin, he also discovers two basic elements comprising one part "guilt" and the other part "pollution". Guilt is objective, and pollution is subjective. Guilt affects man's legal status or standing before God, and pollution affects his moral character. Guilt makes him punishable by God and pollution makes him offensive to God. Guilt makes him obnoxious to the justice of God, while pollution makes him obnoxious to the holiness of God. Grace, to be effective, must provide a double remedy to remove both of sin's components. It must remove the guilt of sin and give man a new status before God; and it must clean away the stain of sin and give him a new nature. The task of grace is to give to the sinner both a new standing and a new heart. You see, I have, as a sinner, a twofold problem. I have a bad record in heaven, and a bad heart here on earth. I need a dual change. But such a double change cannot be accomplished by kindness, or love, or mercy. It can be done only by grace. "Be of sin the double cure, save from wrath and make me pure!"
You see then that if we try to press the two components of sin into one, we will inevitably come up with a flawed remedy. If one set of teachers say that all that is needed, is for man's standing to be changed from condemnation to justification, then you end up with a justified man still in love with his polluted character. If the other set of teachers say that all that is needed, is for man's polluted character to be sanctified into that of holiness, you end up with a man loving righteousness but still condemned as guilty for his past debt of sin. In either case, you have a warped foundation upon which the scheme of redemption must rest. No, we must have a double cure, and that cure is found in the grace of God - mediated through Jesus Christ.

After examining the nature of sin, and seeing it as twofold in nature, we are now ready to examine the properties that comprise the nature of grace as it relates a holy God to sinful men. As it is used in this sense, Biblical grace is comprised of three components. In the Christian Scriptures, grace is used in three senses to relate a holy God to sinful men. (1) As an attribute or attitude of God. (2) As a power from God. (3) As an effect produced by God. So we may say that grace is one part attitude, one part power, and one part effect. It is the same idea from three different points of view.

First, as an attribute, it denotes that attitude in the being of God from which proceeds the whole program for the redemption of sinful men. It is the fountainhead from which flows the saving stream. II Timothy 1:9 states, "Who has saved us, and called us with an holy calling not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began." This passage takes us back into eternity and focuses on God and His purposes and not on man's standing as a being, or on some moral conduct of his character. Thus the cause of grace is not to be found in the nature of the sinner, but in the nature of God.

The Bible at this point gives us a rigid definition of grace. In Romans 11:5,6 we read, "Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then it is no more of works, otherwise grace is no more grace." Grace, in this sense, is an attitude on God's part that proceeds entirely from within Himself, and that is conditioned in no way by anything in the objects of His favor. cf. also Romans 4:4 "Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt." If salvation is given on the basis of what a man is, or what he does in his moral acts, then salvation is given by God as the payment of a debt. But when a righteous standing is imputed to an ungodly, guilty condemned sinner, then there is no rightful claim on man's part to it, and he receives as a free gift something that he does not deserve or earn. This ushers in a saving remedy to remove man's guilt and condemnation by the act of free or unconditional justification. "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifies." (Rom. 8:33). "being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 3:24). Compare also John 15:25 where Jesus says "They hated me without a cause." This is the same Greek word translated freely in Romans 3:24. Just as there was no deserving cause to be found in Jesus for the hatred and disfavor shown him by his enemies, there is no deserving cause to be found in the sinner for the favor bestowed by God. Hence, grace is the free unmerited favor of God shown to guilty, condemned sinners who have merited the disfavor of God's justice.

Second, grace is a power or energy force flowing from the being of God that is infused into the nature of man's moral character that makes the plan of salvation efficient in the life and conscious experience of sinful men. God told Paul in II Corinthians 12:9, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness." Also, I Corinthians 15:10, "But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me." Grace is something that labors, or an energizing force that produces results. It is this aspect of grace that solves the sinner's problem of a polluted moral character that loves its sin. This power that flows to the sinner initiating spiritual life is known as regeneration. This transforms his moral character giving him a love for God, and a grief over his sin. It is likened in scripture to a resurrection from the dead. In Ephesians 2:5,6, we read, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus." Notice the parenthetical expression in verse five affirming that spiritual life is initiated by the power of God's grace, and is not conditioned upon some conditional act of the sinner before it is applied.
We have now seen how the nature of grace as an attitude and a power serve to remedy the twofold nature of man's sin, which was guilt and pollution. However marvelous as it may be, there is more to grace than just saving man from his judicial destruction in hell, and from the self-destruction of his moral nature. Yes, God will not only redeem and reclaim ruined sinners, but He will produce beings which are both useful and attractive.

Third, as an effect, grace stands for some change produced in the state and life of its subjects. We now draw the analogy of a manufacturer and his factory. Every manufacturer has two objects in view, at which he aims, and can never be content until they are attained. (1) His product must be useful. (2) His product must be attractive or beautiful. The useful and the beautiful are the twin objects of human aspiration. At the center of a woman's heart is the love of the beautiful. At the bottom of a man's soul is the love of the useful. A woman admires a dress and a man appreciates a lawn mower. God made man in His own image, and He too loves the useful and the beautiful. It is the task of divine grace to take the worthless sinner as a ruined piece of clay and make out of him a useful servant of God who shall satisfy God's love of the useful, and an ornamental character that shall satisfy God's love of the beautiful.

God is the manufacturer. The church is a factory. Grace is its power. The word and prayer are its tools and machinery. Preachers and workers are its employees, and Christians are its product or output. The product of this factory is given different names at different stages of the manufacturing process. In potential design in the mind of God they are known as the "elect". In the hand of Christ as alive, they are "believers." In the hand of the Spirit to be perfected they are the "called." In heaven as finished and perfected they are the saints. The persons are the same; the designated titles vary from the different views of the manufacturing process.

The first purpose of God in producing a Christian, is so that the Christian may be useful to God as a tool in God's hand to bring glory and honor to God's skill and workmanship. (Read Ephesians 2:8-10).

But it is not enough that the Christian experience should be industrious and productive, it must also be beautiful. Usefulness must be clothed with attractiveness. The Scripture calls upon us to "adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things" (Titus 2:10). The ornaments of the Christian are the "Graces of the Spirit." They are to be set like sparkling gems in Christian character and worn like ornaments in Christian conduct.

As the jeweler displays his hand-selected tray of gleaming gems, take a careful look into the jewel-room of Scripture at the tray of Christian graces. What do you see? "Love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance." (Galatians 5:22). Every one has been hand-crafted and selected by the genius and taste of the Holy Spirit and assembled by His grace. The finished product is fitted to outshine the stars of heaven in beauty through all eternity.

"As the heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork," (Psalm 19:1), so the grace of God is designed to "make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who creates all things by Jesus Christ: to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Ephesians 3:9-11).

Oh, "blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: according as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love; having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved; in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace." (Ephesians 1:3-7).
Can you join me in saying,

Thank you Lord for saving my soul,
Thank you Lord for making me whole,
Thank you Lord for giving to me
Thy great salvation so rich and free.

Marvelous grace of our loving Lord,
Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt,
Yonder on Calvary’s Mount outpoured,
There where the blood of the Lamb was spilt.

Dark is the stain that we cannot hide,
What can avail to wash it away?
Look! there is flowing a crimson tide;
Whiter than snow you may be today.

Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace,
Freely bestowed on all who believe;
All who are longing to see his face,
Will you this moment his grace receive?

Grace, grace, God’s grace,
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within;
Grace, grace. God’s grace,
Grace that is greater than all our sin.

Jesus, lover of my soul, Let me to thy bosom fly,
While the nearer waters role, while the tempest still is high.
Hide me, O my Saviour, hide, Till the storm of life is past;
Save into the haven guide; O receive my soul at last.

Other refuge have I none; Hangs my helpless soul on thee;
Leave, O leave me not alone, Still support and comfort me;
All my trust on thee is stayed, all my help from thee I bring;
Cover my defenseless head with the shadow of thy wing.

Thou, O Christ, art all I want; More than all in thee I find;
Raise the fallen, cheer the faint, Heal the sick and lead the blind:
Just and holy is thy name, I am all unrighteousness;
False and full of sin I am, Thou art full of truth and grace.

Plenteous grace with thee is found, Grace to cover all my sin,
Let the healing streams abound; Make and keep me pure within:
Thou of life the fountain art, Freely let me take of thee;
Spring thou up within my heart, Rise to all eternity.
We have laid the foundation wherein the full circle of God’s grace is seen. Originating as an attitude in the eternal character of God, it flows forth as powerful stream when and where it wills, working in man both to will and to do of His good pleasure, which in turn reciprocates itself unto God as a life of devotion, praise, and thanksgiving both now and forever more.

Well, the whistle has blown and our shift is over. It is time to leave the construction site for awhile, take off our boots and work clothes, take a hot shower, and put on some clean clothing to prepare for the next crew to come and add to the foundation which has been poured. Thank you for your toil and sweat, as you labored with me in the gospel of our lovely Lord.