

AN ATMOSPHERE OF GRACE

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On September 26, 1991, eight human beings began an amazing experiment. Wearing NASA-like blue jumpsuits, they marched proudly into Biosphere 2, the 3.15 acre self-sustaining ecosystem that they hoped to live in for three years, hermetically sealed off from the outside world.

Biosphere 2 is an enormous structure of steel and glass in the Arizona desert, and its 3.15 acres were to be an entirely self-enclosed, self-regulating and self-sustaining world, complete with a "Rainforest, with sixty foot trees, a mountain and a thundering waterfall. Team members spent 250 millions dollars.

A wise writer said that God has encircled the world with an atmosphere of grace as real as the air we breathe (*Steps to Christ*, 68). That means everybody breathes it as surely as he takes his next breath.

Someone asked a serious question: "Does grace program you to do good things? Does it control you? Where does volition come into the picture?" God is Almighty, but there is something He cannot do: He cannot force us to believe and obey. But He reveals His grace to every human being.

What is grace? It is God *treating* every human being as though he were righteous when in fact he is not. He has done that since the world began, all because Christ became our second Adam, the new head of the human race, and just as we are all by

nature "in Adam," having a common sinful nature, so now since Christ gave Himself for us, the Father generously, graciously *treats* us all as His own Son, "in His name," because He adopted us "in Him," as though we had never sinned. This is His grace—totally undeserved, unmerited favor.

But this "amazing grace" does not force us to be good; we are free to reject it. We can choose to despise it as Esau chose "to despise his birthright" (Gen. 25:34; Heb. 12:16, 17). Those who do so will discover in the Judgment day that they have "trodden underfoot the Son of God and have counted the blood of the covenant, whereby [they were] sanctified, an unholy thing, and [have] done despite unto the Spirit of grace" (Heb. 10:29).

That "Spirit of grace" was *given* to every one of them; God is no respecter of persons. They were *given*, not merely *offered*, "the birthright." God *gave* them, not merely *offered* them, "the Spirit of grace." That is an important point to grasp: God's grace is *given* to "every man," it's as real as the atmosphere that encircles the globe that "every man" has breathed.

]The Lord's Supper teaches that "every man" enjoys physical life because in eating his daily food he is nourished by the body and blood of the Son of God. No lost person will accuse God at the end; "You didn't *give* me as much as you gave the people who are saved!" Every child of Adam was equally *given* the "birthright" to eternal life, "in Christ." You cherish it, love it, clasp it to your heart; *or* you "despise" it, cast it away. If you cherish and love it, then you "believe." And when you believe,

that faith begins to work immediately. But not without your consent. You have something to do—you *choose* to receive the atonement (Rom. 5:8, 9). “The grace of God, that brings salvation to all men, has appeared. It teaches us to say “No!!!!” to all of Satan’s temptations (compare Titus 2:11, NIV). No, grace does not force or program you; but it *teaches you*. Make a choice to learn!

Wherever the Bad News is, there is also some Good News. And the Good News is better than the Bad News. How do I know this? Read Romans 5:20: “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.”

Consider how this wicked world is repeating the history of the world before the Flood of Noah: (1) The earth was filled with violence (Gen. 6:11); (2) the earth was corrupt (vs. 12); (3) the people were given to sexual license, and “took them wives of all they chose” (vs. 2); (4) they were given to sinful pleasure and debauchery (vs. 5), and (5) the wickedness of humanity in general was “great in the earth” (vs. 5).

Jesus said that just before His return, again that wickedness would be repeated in the earth: “as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, and . . . knew not until the flood came and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be” (Mt. 24:38, 39).

Striking similarities! While much of the world starves for protein, Americans spent \$3 billion a year on gourmet food for cats and dogs, even employing dog psychiatrists—we don’t read that

they did that before the Flood. Selfish depravity is everywhere. But now, where’s the Good News?

In Noah’s day, there was an ark provided where anybody who believed the Good News could enter in and be safe. So today, the Lord God has an ark of safety where anybody who believes the Good News can find a refuge. That ark is the fellowship of God’s people in His church. You are not left alone; open your eyes of faith—there are others who share your faith in Jesus, who also love the Bible, who respond to God’s call to repent; yes, you will find fellowship if your heart humbly seeks the Lord.

A young pastor just out of the theological seminary, sincere and earnest, interested in preaching the gospel as Good News to his congregation had questions and a concern: is there a danger in preaching too much about the cross, and the grace of Christ, and His love, and not balance that by preaching also enough about the law, and obedience, and duty? He doesn’t want to be pastor of a lazy congregation who take advantage of “cheap grace” and clothe their religion with a thin veneer of love and grace which covers hypocrisy.

He was encouraged to believe what the Bible says: (1) “where sin abounded, grace did much more abound” (Rom. 5:20); “cheap grace” is a counterfeit message, a detour around the atonement of Christ; you can’t preach too much about the genuine grace that “abounds much more” than all the sin the devil can heap upon a congregation. (2) If what Paul says is “the preaching of the cross” (1 Cor. 1:18) is clearly

presented to a congregation, sin and hypocrisy cannot flourish among them because that grace conquers sin and eradicates it.

The “power” is in the gospel itself, not in the law (see Rom. 1:16). And Paul says, Don’t doubt, pastor! “Sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under the law, but under grace. Shall we sin because we are not under the law, but under grace?” Says Paul: “That’s impossible!” (See Rom. 6:14, 15).

Being “under grace” is different than many superficial people imagine: it means you are under a new motivation imposed upon you by a deep heart-appreciation of what it cost the Son of God to save you from hell itself. There is where you see the length, breadth, depth, and height of the love of Christ at His cross (Eph. 3:18). That motivation is far stronger than all the fear-motivation you can use to assail your congregation.

(3) The pure, true gospel is not a perfect so-called “balance” between faith *and* works; it is a message of faith *which* works. How many “good works”? Infinitely more than legalism can ever produce! Don’t be afraid to preach salvation by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8, 9).

Bad news comes at us almost everywhere you turn. NBC morning news this week had a segment on the growing problem of curse words being used by Americans of all ages, including females. Indecent words, crude sexual words, in the lips of young girls; and it’s the “in” thing now. A Michigan law 103 years old was recently invoked to try to curb the cursing, and the country prosecutor hopes

the case will stick as an attempt to do something to clean up the dirty speech that has become so popular. Are we “slouching Towards Gomorrah”? Yes!

At Pentecost, Peter pleaded with the people, “Save yourselves from this perverse generation!” (Acts 2:40). God-fearing parents are rightly concerned about the future of their children growing up in a generation that is on a slippery slope, meeting alluring temptations they never faced when they were young. Even the U.S. president has taught a generation of children lessons in degrading sex, and rejoices in his phenomenal popularity.

Another translation of Acts 2:40 renders it, “Be saved from this perverse generation.” That’s clearer; we can’t “save ourselves,” but we can let a Saviour save us. Even Christian people are in danger of being deceived now, says Jesus, He warns us that temptations will be so severe today that “if it were possible, they shall deceive even the very elect” (Mt. 24:24).

One of the most dangerous deceptions is the temptation to believe that Bad News is winning out over Good News, that Satan has more power than the Holy Spirit has. That precisely is what Satan wants Christian people to believe! If they do believe it, he has them in his trap.

The truth is that Good News is stronger than Bad News, for “where sin abounded, grace did much more abound” (Rom. 5:20). Rightly understood, the message of the cross of Christ has more power than all the allurements of the world (see Gal. 6:14). If you doubt this, take another look at the cross;

perhaps you have never really appreciated what happened there! Many who think they are spiritually “rich and increased with goods” haven’t looked.

Studying about “the Origin of Sin,” there’s not much Good News there; but studying about the “eradication of sin,”—that is Good News. The very first page of the NT declares that Jesus came to “save His people *from* their sins” (not *in* them; Mt. 1:21).

God cannot eradicate sin from His universe until first He eradicates it from human hearts. That is where sin has taken root; the human heart is the last lair where the dragon of sin lurks. Sin’s roots go down to our toes. Can sin be overcome, eradicated? The outcome of the great controversy between Christ and Satan depends on the answer.

Some say that sin itself will never be conquered until Christ comes the second time, zaps His saints and gives them holy flesh, removing temptation from them, the implication being that as long as you and I have our “sinful flesh,” sin will still win out. But the Bible is clear: (1) Rom. 6:13, 14, even though we still have sinful flesh or sinful nature, “sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace.”

(2) Rom. 5:20, “grace did much more abound” than “sin abounded.” In other words, the idea is clear: grace is stronger than sin. If that is not true, the great controversy must end in defeat for God.

(3) 2 Cor. 5:14, 15, this grace of God operates through the revelation of the love of God (*agape*). Therefore, “the *agape* of Christ constraineth us . . .

henceforth” to live not unto self, but “unto Him” who died for us and rose again.

The love of self is the very essence of sin, its quintessential element that filled Lucifer’s heart in the beginning and which here at the every end of time forces the “church of the Laodiceans” to be lukewarm in heart.

(4) Jn. 12:31-33, not only did Christ conquer the problem of sin by His sinless life and His sacrifice on the cross. In order for the great controversy to come to an end, He must have a people whose faith demonstrates that such *agape* will “constrain” them also to “overcome even as [He] overcame” (Rev. 3:21).

(5) The bright picture at the end of the Bible is Heaven’s spotlight on a group who stand on “a sea of glass mingled with fire” who have “gotten the victory” over sin, “having the harps of God.” That wasn’t accomplished by zapping them with sinless flesh, but by giving them grace to “overcome” in sinful flesh.

Who is stronger—Christ or the angel who fell from heaven—Satan?

Which is stronger, light or darkness?

Which is stronger, love (*agape*), or hatred? Which is stronger, that “much more abounding grace of the Lord Jesus” (Rom. 5:20, 21), or the power of our evil appetites and habits and obsessions and addictions?

Which is stronger: the power of death (that held Jesus Christ captive in Joseph’s tomb), or the resurrection power of the Father that raised Him up after three days?

We can't say it often enough: that much more abounding grace is stronger than all the power of sin the devil can invent. In fact, there is in that grace "much more" power! "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound."

Let's not try to serve God with anything less than that full power of that much more abounding grace that is revealed in Christ. That grace of Christ is the enemy of sin; it condemns it, defeats it, conquers it, annihilates it, so that we might be free indeed.

Then the grace of God will be manifested in us in "newness of life" (6:4). That grace "reigns through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord."

Then we discover something precious: it is easy to be saved and it is hard to be lost, when we begin to appreciate that much more abounding grace! We must not conclude that the upward path is the "hard path" and the downward path is the "easy one;" it's the opposite. All the way that leads to hell there are impediments and obstacles to hinder us in that way; God is constantly trying to tell us this.

It's like we are driving on the freeway, you're at the wheel (because you are the boss), but the Holy Spirit is sitting beside you in the front seat. He is saying, Don't stay on this freeway to hell; take this exit to the kingdom of God! That's what Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would do when He gave Him the name "Parakletos," the One called to sit down beside you and never leave you (John 16:7, 8; "*para*" = beside you; *kletos* = called).

Don't misunderstand: you *do* have something to do: it's to make the constant choice to let the Spirit

guide you. But please remember, you are not your Savior yourself: you let the Lord save you. It is you who turns the wheel on to the blessed Exit coming up that leads to eternal life. But He guided you to do it; and you praise the Lord for ever and ever.

There is comfort almost buried (at least many have not seen it!) in Isaiah 61:1, 2. It's Jesus speaking in prophecy of Himself:

"The Spirit of the Lord *God* is upon Me; because the Lord hath anointed me to . . . bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound: to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God . . ."

Note: the abundant time of the loving acceptance of the Lord toward repentant sinners is as an entire year of 365 days, compared with only one day of His punishing "vengeance."

Paul says that "where sin abounded, [the Lord's] grace did much more abound" (Rom. 5:20). The "grace" wins out.

What saves us is not craven fear of punishment, although for millennia people have assumed that the only way to control wickedness is the terror of threatened punishment.

There is a wonderful passage in Paul's letters that on the surface at first seems to suggest that: "Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men . . ." (2 Cor. 5:11). But look a wee bit further:

"The love of Christ constraineth us: because we thus judge, that if One died for all, then were all dead [all would be dead if He had not died for "all"];

and that He died for all, that they who live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him who died for them . . .” (vss. 14, 15).

When your sinful heart contemplates, judges, comprehends that “grace,” suddenly the bands of wickedness are broken, you are set free, and “henceforth” you are “constrained” to “live unto Him who died for you” your second death; now nothing can stop you from giving yourself, heart and soul, to the Savior who died for you—yes, died your second death, entered hell to find you there and save you!

There was a Vacation Bible School and scores of kids from all kinds of homes were crowding in. someone had the privilege of bringing them a brief message of “Good News” each day. Looking in the faces of these children, one ponders what will they be when they grow up? Can something be said to them that will stick in their minds and hearts, something that will grip them while they’re young that they will never forget?

That has to be possible because Paul says clearly that “where sin abounded, grace did much more abound” (Romans 5:20). If that’s true, then it follows logically that it is not necessary that we lose so many young people! One could scare give them terrible warnings. Today’s kids are used to being scared, whether it’s scary rides at Disneyworld or dinosaur movies or cheap videos. To them, it’s fun to be scared, to have your hair stand on end.

But there’s something that doesn’t come through at Disneyland or on the videos—“ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through

His poverty might be rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). Such “grace” is almost totally unknown in the world these kids are growing up in.

Dr. Laura Schlessinger is stirring America with her call to “get real,” be moral, be honest, stop this “me-first” philosophy, get your moral act together, “grow up” ethically, be sensible.

All that is OK; but can it be an effective bulwark against the moral rot that is permeating modern society? At best, it is preaching of the law. And the law is good. But face it: there’s no power in the law to change human hearts!

Not until that “grace” is revealed in a Saviour who didn’t try to climb up the ladder, but climbed down the ladder to find us in the lowest hell, only then can sinful human hearts be changed.

This one verse with special attention: “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

Here is the Gospel in clarity: (1) Every blessing the world has ever known comes through that “grace of our Lord.” Don’t ever suggest that such grace comes only to those who deserve it! And don’t suggest that only a little grace comes to those who don’t deserve it!

All of the grace of Christ is given to *all people*, even those who don’t deserve it—which really means, no one deserves it. A wise writer said that God has encircled the world with an atmosphere of grace as real as the air we breathe (*Steps to Christ*,

68).¹ That means everybody breathes it as surely as he takes his next breath. If it wasn't for that grace, we'd be in hell itself.

In ch. 6:1 Paul begs us not to receive that grace "in vain." In other words, everybody receives it; but only a few appreciate it and say "Thank You!" for it.

(2) Christ was once upon a time "rich," but He made Himself to be poor. That doesn't mean that He temporarily laid aside His wealth, like a millionaire who has emptied his pockets temporarily and can't buy a newspaper. It was for eternity that Christ emptied His heavenly savings account. He became so "poor" that on the cross He "was made to be sin for us, who knew no sin" (2 Cor. 5:21).

(3) All this self-denial was so we could "become rich"—not bye-and-bye; it doesn't say "become rich in the far distant future." Put on your seat-belt as you contemplate this: THE WEALTH OF HEAVEN IS DEPOSITED AS A CREDIT IN YOUR ACCOUNT. You can write a check on the whole of it.

"Then why don't I possess it now?" you ask. The answer: because you could never *enjoy* its possession until first of all you share the experience of Moses who "esteemed the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt" (Heb. 11:26). There's a new song you have to learn to sing: "the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb"

(Rev. 15:3). But while you learn to sing it, that full credit is in your name. It's time to be happy—and thankful.

¹ "In the matchless gift of His Son, God has encircled the whole world with an atmosphere of grace as real as the air which circulates around the globe. All who choose to breathe this life-giving atmosphere will live and grow up to the stature of men and women in Christ Jesus." SC 68.