

AN ATMOSPHERE OF GRACE

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July 21, 2012

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.¹ That means everybody breathes it as surely as he takes his next breath.

“Grace” is something that doesn’t exist here on this fallen earth; it has to be imported.

And the only way it can get in is through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace is loving bad people, even your enemies.

Such grace is creative in that it “creates” or produces in the person who is loved, a new heart that is responsive to grace.

It is something that we fallen humans just cannot do unless we receive grace from the Lord, and unless we open our hearts to let it stay in.

It’s something we don’t have to beg an unwilling indifferent Lord to let us have, for He is trying His best to get us to open our naturally unwilling hearts to receive it. “Let this mind be in you,” He begs us in Philippians 2:5, “which was also in Christ Jesus.” In other words, if we don’t resist receiving this grace, He will give it to us!

“Behold the Lamb of God!” says John the Baptist. “Beholding” is simply looking—the natural thing everybody in the world does when something happens, something different than usual. We all crane our necks to get a better view; it’s the natural thing to do.

Now, “behold” Jesus, says John the Baptist.

If you think the clouds and the mist are so dense, in your particular circumstances, that you can’t “see” Him clearly, remember, He is more desirous that you “behold” than you can be yourself; He loves to drive clouds and darkness and mist away so we can see clearly.

But the desire in our souls must be there like a hunger and thirst that transcends our hunger for breakfast in the morning.

And that’s a simple but proper place to start: make a choice to eat not a bite of “breakfast” until you have begun to “feed” upon the “bread of life,” which is the word of the Lord.

When I was a teenager, I went through a crisis—I knew I was not truly converted. You know how a teen in the dormitory yearns to get to breakfast in

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” *Steps to Christ*, p. 68.

the morning; well, I decided I wouldn't go . . . until I at least had a beginning of "eating" some "bread of life."

You may smile at my naiveté; but I meant business with the Lord! I was serious.

And now, even to this day many years later, . . . no breakfast until I have knelt on my knees and found some morsel of the "bread of life" first.

And you will know more about the "grace" of the Lord Jesus than the ponderous theology tomes can tell you.

The grace of God is His promise from eternity. Why is grace needed? Why is it not needed by certain ones? But strange as it may seem, Christ needed grace while on earth. We will also take note that the world was restored to favor with God by His marvelous grace, and that there is an atmosphere of grace surrounding mankind as real as the oxygen we inhale moment by moment.

Grace Given to Us in Christ Before Time Began

God in His great mercy promised grace to us and gave it to us in Christ before the beginning of time. "God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling . . . according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began" (1 Tim 1:9). This would have been included in the everlasting covenant between the Father and the Son in Their determinate counsel when Christ was "foreordained before the foundation of the world" for the purpose of redeeming us with His blood (1 Pet 1:18-20; Acts 2:23; 4:28).

Let me make two statements and you decide which of the two is closer to the truth: (1)

Justification is by faith, or (2) justification is by grace. If you are perplexed, note again what Ephesians 2:8, 9: "By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works lest any man should boast." That's true; it's impossible that our faith could even exist were it not for grace being first. Our faith is a response to God's grace. So, we are saved by grace, but the instrument, through which we receive and appreciate that grace, is our faith. And when the text says we are saved by grace, the "we" must mean the human race, because God's grace is not doled out selectively according to whether people do something good to deserve it, or not. His grace is given to all as freely as air circulates around the globe. Christ has become the second Adam, reversing the "condemnation" that the first Adam brought upon the entire human race. Thus He gives, not merely offers, His grace to everyone alike. Many despise His grace, and choose to rebel, but whenever someone believes, he is simply responding to the initiative that Christ has taken in his salvation.

Now, back to our question: are we justified by grace, just as we are saved by grace? Justification and forgiveness are the same; and we read often in the Bible that God's forgiveness has preceded our need for it. For example, when wicked people crucified the Son of God, He did not wait for them to repent first; He prayed, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" (Lk. 23:34). Before Peter denied Him Christ forgave him. In becoming the new Head of our human race, Christ took us

into Himself; He took our sin into Himself, and died to pay its penalty; and the death He died was what the Bible calls the real thing, the second death. And this is the only reason why God can treat the human race as though they had never sinned. If He were to treat us as we deserve we would die immediately. We are all subjects of grace! One wise writer has said that by His sacrifice, Christ has pronounced a “reprieve” upon us; and that is what Paul says: just as Adam brought upon us all a “judicial . . . verdict of condemnation,” so Christ has pronounced on us a “judicial . . . verdict of acquittal” (Rom. 5:15-18, NEB). All, by grace! And our faith becomes the instrument whereby we receive and appreciate this grace, so that then we are “justified by faith.” Hold your head high! You are a child of grace. Now, live so as to prove it.

Grace is Not Needed For Sinless Beings

There is no evidence that unfallen angels nor pre-fall Adam and Eve needed grace. Grace was a hidden attribute of God’s nature until sin entered the human race. Then it was revealed. The grace given in Christ in eternity was sent to take man by the hand as soon as he sinned. If this had not happened mankind would have eternally perished. By disobeying the commands of God, man fell under the condemnation of his law. This fall called for the grace of God to appear in behalf of sinners. We should never have learned the meaning of this word “grace” had we not fallen. God loves the sinless angels, who do his service, and are obedient to all his commands; but he does not give them grace. These heavenly beings know naught of

grace; they have never needed it; for they have never sinned. Grace is an attribute of God shown to undeserving human beings.

Grace Needed For Post-Fall Mankind

Grace is the unmerited favor of God toward all men and is displayed in His care for them. This care includes restraint. No man is as evil as he is capable of because of God’s grace. The Holy Spirit, apart from renewing the heart, exercises an influence on man so that sin is restrained and order is maintained in social life, and in the promotion of civil righteousness. It is through God’s grace that He sends sunshine and rain, gives food and drink, shelter and clothing. God imparts these to all men indiscriminately.

God gives sunshine and rainfall to the atheistic farmer enabling him to harvest his crop just as He does for the Christian farmer (Matt. 5:45). Paul revealed to unbelievers at Lystra that God had given them “rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:17). In Psalm 145:8–9 the psalmist states: “The Lord is gracious and merciful; slow to anger and great in lovingkindness. The Lord is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works.”

God’s mercy and grace are exhibited especially in the withholding of judgment. There is evidence of grace in the fact that God does not immediately condemn man. This fact enables man to be lead to repentance by “God’s goodness” which is exercised toward every individual (Rom 2:4).

It is because of God’s grace that sin is restrained. It is seen in relationships between people. An

example of this is observed with Laban who cheated Jacob. God restrained Laban from hurting him (Gen. 31:7). God does this with Satan, also, as is seen in the limitation God placed on Satan when He allowed him specific access to Job, beyond which would not be permitted (Job 1:12; 2:6). In Genesis 6:3 we read of God's grace when He said, "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever."

Here is an inference that God's Spirit does restrain man's sinful behavior within the limits God sets. The Holy Spirit working through Isaiah and other prophets restrained sin (Isa 1:16–20). And human government must not be overlooked. In Romans 13:1–4 Paul wrote that governments are ordained and established by God as a restraint to evil men who cannot control themselves.

There is more to grace than restraint. And further, it is much more abundant than merely in the physical and temporal realms. Because He is gracious, God has done something spiritually for all mankind. 1 Tim. 4:10 refers to Christ as "the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe."

While this verse does not teach universalism, it does reveal God's universal spiritual blessing for everyone. Since Christ is the God-Man, it follows that His death had infinite value which surrounds mankind with God's favor just as surely as earth's atmosphere encircles this planet. Christ is truly the Savior of all men. God's grace extends to every human inasmuch as the death of Christ was for every person (Heb. 2:9).

The World Was Restored To God's Favor

2 Cor. 5:19 states that "God was in Christ . . . not imputing their trespasses to them" but instead He was "reconciling and restoring the world to favor with Himself." The following statement agrees with this thought: "[Christ] took in his grasp the world over which Satan claimed to preside, and restored the human race to favor with God. And at this glorious completion of his work, songs of triumph echoed and re-echoed through the unfallen worlds. Angel and archangel, cherubim and seraphim, joined in the chorus of victory. All who choose to breathe this life-giving atmosphere will live and grow up to the stature of men and women in Christ Jesus.

Grace Convicts of Sin

God's grace is seen also in convicting man of sin. While it is not effective in everyone, the convicting work of the Holy Spirit is revealed in John 16:8-11. He "will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment" (v. 8). The word "convict" is a legal term that means "to cross-examine for the purpose of convincing or refuting an opponent (the word being specially used of legal proceedings)."

This decisive judgment and punitive authority is based on indisputable truth set before those who are judged in such a way that they see and acknowledge it is God's mercy and justice. Those who reject truth seeing it through the eye of conscience do so at their own peril.

Grace is necessary because of sin. Wherever sin abounds, in that very place God's grace does much more abound (Rom. 5:20). In Eph. 2:1 Paul states

the condition of that person who is in an unsaved and, thus, a lost condition: “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins.” Since the unbeliever is dead, he cannot make the initial step toward, nor respond to, God. God must and does make the first move. He initiates. Always. Hence, God through His grace calls to life the ones who are dead in trespasses and sin.

Christ’s Need of Grace

John wrote that in the incarnation Jesus was “full of grace” (John 1:14). This means of the inside, in His inmost heart and soul and character He was filled with grace. Luke adds that “the grace of God was upon Him” (Luke 2:40) as well as the filling of grace of which John wrote. Luke also penned these words concerning Christ in His youth: “Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor (grace) with God and men” (Luke 2:52). It was grace that kept Him from sinning. It was grace that enabled Jesus to teach. It was by grace that He led people into His own saving grace (Isa. 50:4- 9). In Isa. 49:8-9 we read of God’s promise to “preserve” Jesus, His Servant for Salvation. Similar language is found in Isa. 42:6-7 where it is written that God would “keep” Him.

The following is comfort par excellence for those who are consecrated to God and who realize that Jesus sought and received “fresh supplies of needed grace”:

To the consecrated worker there is wonderful consolation in the knowledge that even Christ during His life on earth sought His Father daily for fresh supplies of needed grace; and from this

communion with God He went forth to strengthen and bless others. Behold the Son of God bowed in prayer to His Father! Though He is the Son of God, He strengthens His faith by prayer, and by communion with heaven gathers to Himself power to resist evil and to minister to the needs of men. As the Elder Brother of our race He knows the necessities of those who, compassed with infirmity and living in a world of sin and temptation, still desire to serve Him.

He knows that the messengers whom He sees fit to send are weak, erring men; but to all who give themselves wholly to His service He promises divine aid. His own example is an assurance that earnest, persevering supplication to God in faith—faith that leads to entire dependence upon God, and unreserved consecration to His work--will avail to bring to men the Holy Spirit’s aid in the battle against sin.

Again, “His soul and His lips were anointed with grace.” The fact that super-abounding grace was given to Jesus, as our Redeemer, is assurance to us that God will continue to surround us with His grace. More than this. He will impart His grace to us enabling us to resist and to overcome sin. And He will give us the very words to speak to those who are weary and heavy laden with the burden of sin.

Grace Especially for the Believer

All who respond to God’s grace become believers. That grace then becomes a power in the life of those who accept Christ as Savior. This power causes spiritual growth. Grace changes the heart and makes a person willing to yield obedience to

the will of God. "All who choose to breathe this life-giving atmosphere [of grace] will live and grow up to the stature of men and women in Christ Jesus."

In Summary, Conclusion, And Final Thought

The following brief summary about God's grace, as covered in this article, is to help give a preliminary understanding concerning it:

Grace is not given to sinless beings. They do not need it.

Grace is needed because of sin.

Christ needed grace to keep Himself from sinning and for blessing mankind.

Although grace is given to everyone to surround, to bless and to protect them, it is placed within the believer only. The result of this placement is observed in 1 Cor. 1:24-30.

God's grace cooperates with man's will. God never forces His will upon anyone. Grace involves the drawing power of God (John 6:44). No one could or would come to God unless he is first drawn and enabled to do so by the grace of God.

The work of the Holy Spirit is involved with grace. Before a person responds to God's work of grace, the Holy Spirit must first convict him or her of the sin of unbelief and, positively, of Christ's righteousness. The Holy Spirit is the One who, by grace, makes effective personal faith justification within the believer (Titus 3:5-7).

Grace must also involve the word of God. Faith comes by hearing the gospel of grace (Rom. 10:17). Faith must have content and knowledge of truth to be believed. Grace in the life is not given apart from biblical truth. God's word of truth is living

and full of His power. God's word is applied to the heart of the believer by the Holy Spirit (Heb. 4:12).

The application of imparted grace is to individual believers, not to groups, nor to the church as a whole. Only the ones who hear, listen and respond to God's invitation will come and receive grace (Rev. 22:16).

Grace enables the believer to endure hardship. Its power is always sufficient (2 Cor. 12:9).

Grace! grace! marvelous grace! The gift from eternity. While the application of grace takes place in time, its plan was divinely calculated in that eternal counsel of the Godhead, in the everlasting covenant, and determined there to overcome every obstacle.

The Final Thought

The growth of every Christian is from within, not from without. It is only as the Spirit of Christ dwells in the heart by faith that we can grow in grace and the knowledge of Christ. Only through the grace daily drawn from Jesus can the heart be kept. There can be no safety in extolling self; we must hide self in Jesus. Christ abiding within, is the life of the soul. And we are to receive Christ through his word. It is the truth that sanctifies the soul. We should study the Scriptures, even upon our knees, with earnestness and sincerity. The love of Jesus in the heart will create a love for the searching of his word.