

LIVING BY THE GRACE OF GOD¹

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If you have made a mistake (which, God forbid!) . . . King David made one, in fact two—adultery and the sin of murder to cover it up; he feared that he had committed the unpardonable sin and heaven was closed to him forever, because he cried out in near despair, “Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me” (Psalm 51:11).

But if you have indeed made a mistake, your heavenly Father does not cast you off as worthless or hopeless.

He is deeply wounded and sorry, but He redeems and re-builds broken, ruined souls.

How does He do it?

He gives the most precious gift of repentance.

No one can repent on his own; you have to open your guilty heart to receive it from Him: “Him [Jesus of Nazareth] hath God exalted with His right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:31).

The realization of God’s forgiveness: it’s the most exhilarating experience we humans can know. It’s the nearest to the overwhelming joy that Jesus must have known when after His resurrection He declared in triumph, “I am He that liveth, and was dead; and behold, I am alive for evermore!” And then that earth-and-heaven-shaking, “AMEN!” (Rev. 1:18).

¹ Eph. 2:8, 9. 240, 469.

You just want to shout for all the universe to hear you, “Behold! I am forgiven!” You’ve been carrying a burden that weighed a ton; now at last you are free.

Such forgiveness is God’s gift. It’s not the empty, supercilious “pardon” that means nothing; it’s a freeing from the burden of sin, the gift of a new hatred of sin, and the gift of a new love for righteousness.

You are born again. No more arrogance; you are like King Ahab, the murder-guilty king, when he was finally converted, we read that forever after he “walked softly” (1 Kings 21:27); he took a humble place from then on, and so will you. There will be no arrogant people strutting around in God’s New Jerusalem.

No one can honor the Lord Jesus Christ and at the same time be proud of himself/herself.

Surely at sometime in your life you have worked for wages. You may even know what it is to toil all day long in the hot sun, until every muscle and bone in your body aches with tiredness. And all the while you kept thinking about the wage your employer had promised to pay you. You knew you deserved every cent, and probably more.

The point is this: what your employer paid you was not a gift, but a debt. A wage is something that is *paid* since you earned it. This simple observation unlocks one of the most profound truths of the Bible. God says He is not an employer; He pays no one wages: “There is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace.

But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work” (Rom. 11:5, 6).

So we see that *grace* is just the opposite of works. Suppose that you do not work for your employer at all. He owes you not one cent. And suppose, that in addition to the fact that you have done nothing to deserve anything from him, you have actually wronged him, perhaps stolen from him. He could be angry with you if he chooses. But then suppose that he shows kindness to you by freely giving you a new Mercedes, in spite of all the evil you have done to him. *Such a gift would be grace.*

Now let us suppose we think of Christ as our employer. Does He award salvation and eternal life as *wages* to those who work hard to earn them? Or does He *give* salvation freely as grace to people who don't deserve it at all? And if He does do that, how can He be fair if He doesn't save everybody alike?

And, further, if He does save people by grace alone, what is the point of anyone needing a change of heart? People asked that same question in Paul's day, “Why not say, ‘Let us do evil, that good may come?’” (Rom. 3:8). These are some of the problems that we would like to find answers to.

If good people can earn salvation, do they not have every right to be proud of themselves? And if nobody can earn it, why should anyone even want to be good?

The “father” of all who have faith

About 1900 B.C. the Lord called a man out of Ur of the Chaldees to become an example of salvation by grace. Paul calls Abraham “the father of all who

have faith.” In other words, all who believe in Christ are Abraham's spiritual “children.” When the apostle Paul “turned the world upside down” with his teaching, it was Abraham whom he put forward as proof of his gospel. Abraham's experience in finding salvation is a perfect example of how we too may find it. Did he *earn* it? Or was he simply saved by the *grace* of God?

Paul asks, “What shall we say, then, of Abraham, the father of our race? What was his experience? If he was put right with God by the things he did, he would have something to boast about—but not in God's sight. The Scripture says, ‘Abraham believed God, and because of his faith God accepted him as righteous.’ A person who works is paid his wages, but they are not regarded as a gift; they are something that he has earned. But the person who depends on his faith, not on his deeds, and who believes in the God who declares the guilty to be innocent, it is his faith that God takes into account in order to put him right with himself” (Rom. 4:1-5, GNB).

“By the free gift of God's grace all are put right with him through Christ Jesus, who sets them free” (Rom. 3:24, GNB).

If God saved Abraham simply by His grace, because Abraham *believed*, then it follows that you and I are saved in exactly the same way. Shocking as it may seem to us who think our age is especially enlightened, the gospel was preached to Abraham just as it is preached to us today (see Gal. 3:8). God requires no more from us today than He required from Abraham. He has always had only

one way of saving the lost—through the same kind of faith that Abraham exercised.

This is still a new idea to mankind, nearly 4000 years later! You don't see "grace" in the business or political world today, unless somebody happens to have learned it from Jesus Christ. You don't get anything for free, whether a house, a farm, or a car. Nobody even brings you food for free. You have to earn everything you put into your mouth. The world operates strictly on the principle of "works." You get what you earn, and what you don't work for you don't get.

So completely are people given over to the idea of "works" that they naturally imagine that God operates on the same plan. They suppose they must do something in order to earn salvation from Him. They must give Him something. They treat God as though He were a business owner. You never feel ashamed of yourself when you go into a retailer to buy something. You have your money, you pay it, and take what you have bought and you walk out proud and happy. You may even feel you have done the business person a favor, for you know he has made at least some profit on what he sold you.

But when someone gives you something freely as an act of grace, you don't know how you ought to feel. He has done you a favor, and it makes you feel humble. In some way you sense a debt to him.

"You owe me, big time!" You use this phrase to point out that you're doing something nice for someone that will have to be "paid back" later. Family members, close friends, or colleagues who

are friendly with each other think about favors in this way with each other. You do something nice for your friend and say, "You owe me one." Later, when you want to ask your friend to do something that he doesn't want to do, you can remind him: "Remember that time I covered your shift on a Sunday when you wanted to go to the beach?"

It's our nature to think that God keeps a store and "sells" salvation to those who will pay Him with their goodness. They like to bargain with Him, to feel like they have something they can give to God—their works, their sacrifice, their devotion. It makes them feel a little proud. They consider themselves somewhat on a level with Him; they give Him something, and they receive something from Him.

If Abraham had "worked" for his salvation, he would have felt the same way. This is the feeling that Satan wanted Adam and Eve to have: "Ye shall be as gods," he promised, or "as God" (see Gen. 3:5). Oh, how the proud heart of man has ever wanted to feel that way! It either elevates us to the level of God Himself, or drags Him to our level. Either way we end up the Big Man.

But God pays no wages whatever. All He gives is by grace, a free gift. The reason is that there is really nothing we can do to earn salvation, anymore than a baby can earn the food his parents provide him. They feed their baby "by grace." They love him, that is all. And that is the reason God saves us. "It is by grace you are saved, . . . it is not your own doing. It is God's gift, not a reward for work done. There is nothing for anyone to boast of" (Eph. 2:8, 9 NEB).

One would think that all the world would receive this news with joy. But most people reject it. Why? They are too proud to come to God humbly and to hold out both hands in faith to receive from Him. To receive the “grace of God,” we must humble our hearts, and acknowledge that we are nothing, that we have nothing, and that we deserve nothing, and that He gives everything.

Jesus says, “Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow and reap and store in barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them” (Matt. 6:26 NEB). They live by the grace of God, yet people mock the idea of grace, saying, “That’s for the birds!”

Does the Lord hold a court session every day to find out which of the birds deserve His grace? Does He ask each one, “Have you been a good bird today? If so, I’ll feed you; if not, I won’t”?

God does not inquire if a person has been good before He gives her grace. Jesus said, “Your Father which is in heaven . . . makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt. 5:45). That is grace! All of us receive it. A thoughtful writer has said, “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.”²

If the Lord has surrounded us with grace as abundant as the air we breathe, surely there is enough for us all! He says, “My grace is sufficient for you” (2 Cor. 12:9). Can you imagine a little mouse in the corn silo fearing it might die of

famine? The owner could say, “Cheer up, little mouse; my corn is sufficient for you.” Or can you imagine a man standing on a mountain height afraid to fill his lungs with the wonderful air for fear there won’t be enough? The mountain would say, “Breathe your fill, man; my air is sufficient for you!”

There are many people living in this world who in their hearts want to be right with God. But they have been taught to believe an idea that separates them from God. They have been taught to believe that God loves only good people, and that He restricts His grace to those who think they find it *easy* to obey Him. But many know that they have an evil heart that loves to do wrong; so they imagine that God is angry with them, or has turned away from them.

But if the sunshine and the rain fall alike on the evil and the good, surely anyone can see that God’s grace comes likewise to every man, woman, and child on the earth. Have you done bad things? Do you feel yourself unworthy of the kindness of God? You are the very person to whom He gives His wonderful grace!

There is nothing you can do to earn it any more than you can earn sunshine or rain. You simply receive it with thankfulness. And this thankful receiving is what the Bible calls “faith.” If a person refuses to receive it or is not thankful for it, then he is guilty of the sin of “unbelief,” which is, literally, “non-faith,” or more pointedly, active disbelief.

The New Testament is full of the story of God’s grace, mentioning it 150 times. To think that God loves bad people and blesses undeserving

² Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 68.

sinner—this was an idea that “turned the world upside down” in the days of the apostles (see Acts 17:6). They showed how men have lived in rebellion and hatred of God (Rom. 5:10), twisted and perverted God’s truth (Rom. 1:18, 21), worshipped beasts and idols (vss. 18, 25), defiled the image of God in their own bodies by sexual sin (vss. 24-17), blasphemed the holy name of God (Rom. 2:24), even despised Him for His patience and kindness (vs. 4), and went so far as to slay His Son on a cross. Yet God gives them His grace, and calls them to repentance. He does not wait for the lost sinners to go in search of Him for He knows they could never find Him. So He goes in search of them. *That is grace.*

We are “*called*. . . by His grace” (Gal. 1:15). We have “*believed* through His grace—it enables us to believe (Acts 18:27). We are *justified* by His grace (Titus 3:7). We are *saved* by His grace (Eph. 2:5, 8). We know that we are sons of God, members of the royal family, because we *stand in grace* (Rom. 5:2). And having begun to believe, we “*grow in grace*” (2 Pet. 3:18).

How has this gift come to us? “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). Ask any rich man what frightens him the most, and he will tell you it is his fear of becoming poor. But Jesus voluntarily chose to become poor for our sakes. *That is grace.*

True religion is easily contrasted with false religion

To appreciate this grace of God revealed in Christ is true religion. But there also is a false religion that has deceived almost the whole world. It could even bear the label of “Christian.” It teaches that men are naturally good, that they can save themselves, or at least help a lot towards that end. It is the kind of religion that includes the idea of bargaining with God, that puts man on a level with God. Whether it professes to be Christian or not, this kind of religion has its roots intertwined with heathenism because it is salvation by works.

Both of these religions, the true one and the counterfeit, had their beginning in the Garden of Eden. When our first parents sinned, they lost their beautiful clothing of holiness that had covered them. For the first time they felt naked, and of course were ashamed. They immediately thought they could do something about it themselves—here is the beginning of the religion of salvation by works. They “sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves coverings” (Gen. 3:7). This was the first attempt ever made to atone for sin by man’s own works of righteousness! All our attempts to keep God’s law by our own works of righteousness are just like those “coverings” of fig leaves. “We are all a unclean thing,” and “all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6).

Could God accept those fig leaves? No, He must Himself clothe the nakedness of poor Adam and Eve. “As for Adam and his wife the Lord God made tunics [coats] of skin, and clothed them” (Gen. 3:21). Have you ever wondered where the Lord found those skins? There was only one way. He

had to slay an innocent animal, whose death pointed forward to the death of the great Lamb of God on His cross yet to come. And those garments were the work of God Himself, not man. Only *He* can clothe us! The garments are those of Christ's righteousness, and they cost the blood of His Son. "Without shedding of blood there is no remission" (Heb. 9:22).

Shall ye then "do evil, that good may come"?

What is the purpose of this gift of God's grace? Is it to excuse us to go on in a life of sin and selfishness? No; see what the grace of God does for us:

"The grace of God has dawned upon the world with *healing* for all mankind; and by it we are disciplined to renounce godless ways and worldly desires, and to live a life of temperance, honesty, and godliness in the present age, looking forward to the happy fulfillment of our hopes when the splendor of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ will appear. He it is who sacrificed Himself for us, to *set us free from all wickedness and to make us pure people marked out for His own, eager to do good*" (Titus 2:11-14, NEB).

This is the work that grace accomplishes in every heart that believes! "To set us free from all wickedness, and to make us pure . . ." The grace has "dawned" upon all alike, and the changed heart is the experience of those who "believe."

The grace of God never permits a person to transgress the holy law of God. Paul says, "Sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under the law but under grace" (Rom. 6:14). To be

"under the law" means to be under the "dominion" of self, to be ruled by fear, and driven to evil thoughts and deeds. But that "dominion" is ended by the coming of grace. Now we are "under" a new "dominion"—an obligation imposed by deep heartfelt thankfulness for the grace of God revealed at the cross.

"Shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? Certainly not!" (vs. 15). To be "under the law" is the same as being under "the curse of the law" (Gal. 3:10, 13). The "curse of the law" is the dominion of sin which is a life of habitual, captive disobedience to the law. A man may want to obey, but he finds he cannot, because he is a slave under the "dominion" of a life of habitual disobedience. "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, Cursed is every one who hangs on a tree" (vs. 13). What Christ has redeemed us from is disobedience to the law. This is made plain by verse 10: "Cursed is every one who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them." There is never any "curse" on the one who obeys the law. Obedience always brings a blessing instead.

Christ redeems us to a new life of true, happy obedience "under grace." But Satan wants to make people think that "under grace" gives permission for living a life of sin. Did He die as my substitute for sins so that I can go on sinning? In other words, did He keep the commandments so that I don't have to keep the law? Did He keep the seventh day Sabbath so that I don't have to keep it? This is the

implication of an Evangelical understanding of the gospel. Did Jesus not commit adultery so that I can? “I’m saved—glory, hallelujah—now I can continue sinning!” What a lie!

“God forbid,” says Paul: “Emancipated from sin, [you] have become slaves of righteousness. . . . As once you yielded your bodies to the service of impurity and lawlessness, so now you must yield them to the service of righteousness, making for a holy life” (Rom. 6:18, 19, NEB).

Sin actually loses its “dominion” when grace is appreciated, for grace is the stronger master. It “emancipates” us more effectively than Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation freed the slaves.

At the age of 38, Frances Havergal paid a five-day visit to a family in London, all of whom were either unconverted or unhappy. She prayed that she might help them find Christ. When it came time for her to leave, she rejoiced that the Lord had answered her prayer, and in her gratitude she wrote her poem, “Take My Life and Let It Be Consecrated, Lord, to Thee” (SDA Hymnal #330).

Four years later she re-read the poem and was struck by the lines, “Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold.” She wrote a friend that this “now means shipping off all my ornaments to the Church Missionary House (including a jewel cabinet that is really fit for a countess).”

Frances never knew anything about the heavenly Day of Atonement, but the love (*agape*) of Christ motivated her to give up her jewelry. Can we who know the truth do less?

“When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride.”
—*Isaac Watts*.