

## LESSON 1

*Growing in Grace*

## THE GRACE OF GOD

*“Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 3:18)*

It is sad to see jaded responses by Christians to the persistent call to grow in knowledge of the scriptures. Such responses are countered by continued warnings concerning the danger of ignorance. The scripture is replete with examples of neglecting spiritual growth, and the damaging effects of such negligence. While the fact that people will be destroyed for their ignorance (cf. Hosea 4:6) is cause for sorrow, it is just as sad to know what true joy and fulfillment they opt out of by their indifference.

Peter’s final plea to the brethren in his second epistle was not simply to grow in knowledge, but in **grace** (2 Peter 3:18). It is this writer’s opinion that the misunderstanding of God’s grace has led some in the church to believe growth in knowledge is not an urgent matter. Some might say, “We need to focus less on ourselves, what we are doing or not doing, and more on Jesus.” These thoughts take away from the very thing Jesus is seeking to accomplish via His death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and revelation of His will. He is calling all to follow Him; to imitate Him. And He has done what was necessary to free us from the bondage of sin for us to be able to follow Him (cf. 1 John 3:7-9; Hebrews 9:14). So, to take our focus away from self – in the sense of not being concerned with what we are doing, and how we are doing – and claim to be focused fully on Christ is to deceive self.

One cannot truly look to the cross without considering himself. One cannot fully appreciate what Jesus has done until he realizes the dramatic change it has wrought within himself. Yet, according to the gospel, this change can only come through introspection, and patterning oneself according to Christ and His will. The true grace (cf. 1 Peter 5:12) of the gospel message is not something we passively observe, but actively receive and participate in. For this reason, Peter instructs the brethren to grow in the grace of Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Peter 3:18).

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But what does it mean to “grow in the grace...of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?” (2 Peter 3:18) “Grace” is a translation of the Greek word *charis*. Thayer defines the word as, “good-will, loving-kindness, favor.” However, the word is used in several different contexts and in several different ways. A consideration of the term will allow us to appreciate that God’s grace is not something we passively benefit from, but actively receive and participate in – something we can grow in.

The “Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature” (BDAG) gives several definitions of *charis* according to the various contexts in which it is used in the New Testament. These clarify the many facets of grace, and how it relates to us.

## GRACE IS GOD’S DISPOSITION OF FAVOR TOWARD US

“a beneficent disposition toward someone, favor, grace, gracious care/help, goodwill” (BDAG)

Several times in Acts, Luke records those on missionary journeys as being “*commended to the grace of God*” (Acts 14:26; 15:40). BDAG notes, “Esp. of the beneficent intention of God.” I.e. as they go about preaching, the brethren who sent them on their way have committed them to God’s divine favor and care which He means to direct toward them. It is not that anything specific was in mind concerning the need for God’s beneficence, but that God has a disposition of goodwill toward His people, and they knew He intended to bestow upon them anything they needed on their journey.

The gifts of God’s grace which we can identify and experience are products of His expressed attitude of beneficence. The Word incarnate is noted to be “*full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14). This is expressed in the fact that “*the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost*” (Luke 19:10). God is “*not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance*” (2 Peter 3:9). He “*desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*” (1 Timothy 2:4). These are descriptions of His “beneficent disposition.”

There is a “beneficent intention of God” concerning all His children. This is especially manifested in the gift of His Son but is furthermore expressed in His efforts to bring us into participation with the divine nature (cf. 2 Peter 1:4) by the transformative power of the gospel. It is important to understand that He accomplishes this, not merely by this abstract attitude toward us, but through practical means enumerated in His gospel.

## GRACE IS GOD’S GIFT OF FAVOR FOR US

“practical application of goodwill, (a sign of) favor, gracious deed/gift, benefaction” (BDAG)

GOD IS A BEING OF ACTION. IF HE INTENDS THE WELFARE OF HIS CREATURES, THEN HE ACTS.

That God can look down on His rebellious creation fully intending their well-being is sufficiently impressive. However, God is a being of action. If He intends the welfare of His creatures, then He acts. Peter noted that He is the “*God of all grace*” (1 Peter 5:10). I.e. He is the storehouse of all favor. Any benefit or favor ultimately originates with Him. James noted, “*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights*” (James 1:17). While it is important to note the practical application of His goodwill in that “*He did good, gave*

*us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:17), the greatest demonstrations of His grace are seen in the spiritual provisions.*

Paul spoke of God’s grace that is the practical application of goodwill in the gift of Jesus – *“being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith” (Romans 3:24-25a).* Justification comes by God’s grace – i.e. His unmerited favor expressed with benefaction. Specifically, the practical application of His goodwill was in providing Jesus as *“a propitiation by His blood.”* Such is where our justification comes from – by God’s grace, the gift of His Son. Later, Paul spoke of it as *“the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:15).* But this application of God’s beneficent intention is conditional – *“through faith.”* The blessedness of God’s gift of Jesus and its results are received by means of faith – *“through whom [our Lord Jesus Christ] also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand” (Romans 5:2).* The gift of Christ’s death is the practical application of God’s favor toward man, which allows man to stand in God’s favor of justification, by faith.

Similarly, in the eighth chapter of Romans, Paul demonstrated that the *“law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death” (Romans 8:2).* The gospel frees from sin and death, but it is *“in Christ Jesus”* that this is accomplished. The *“message of the cross” (1 Corinthians 1:18)* administers the benefits of the cross by God’s grace. This message, then, is no less a practical application of God’s grace. In fact, the grace of God is said to teach us to live a transformed life (cf. Titus 2:11-14).

So, God’s character is such that He is inclined to ensure the goodwill of His creation, that He has acted in supplying what is needed by grace and continues to do so in order that His creation is dramatically changed by His grace.

## GOD’S GRACE IS THE EFFECT PRODUCED BY HIS FAVOR

*“exceptional effect produced by generosity, favor.” (BDAG)*

The grace of God is intended to change its recipient. Those who are beneficiaries of God’s grace are dramatically different than they were before it came to them. A case in point can be observed when the gospel reached even the Hellenists in Antioch. When the church in Jerusalem heard of this, they sent the great encourager, Barnabas, to aid them in their new walk of faith. Luke records, *“When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord” (Acts 11:23).* How had he *“seen the grace of God?”* It is because God’s grace is not merely an abstract concept in our lives that is unidentifiable, but it leads those who are directed by it to an extremely specific way of life. They were now part of *“the Way” (Acts 9:2).* They were *“called Christians” (Acts 11:26).*

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There are immediate effects of the reception of God's grace – release from sin and death (Romans 8:1-2), justification (Romans 5:1, 9), reconciliation (Romans 5:10-11), adoption as God's child

(Romans 8:15-17). However, it is clear from the words of Barnabas to those new converts in Antioch – “[he] encouraged them all that...they should continue with the Lord” – that God's grace is meant to continually produce exceptional qualities and characteristics in those who yield to its power.

This is especially what Peter meant when he prayed that grace would be multiplied to the brethren in the knowledge of the Lord (2 Peter 1:2), and that they should grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord (2 Peter 3:18). *Charis* is further detailed in BDAG:

“[There are] a number of passages in which *charis* (grace) is evidently to be understood in a very concrete sense. It is hardly to be differentiated from *dynamis* (power) or from *gnosis* (knowledge) or *doxa* (glory).”

When Paul's thorn in the flesh brought him to his knees, the Lord responded, “My grace (*charis*) is sufficient for you, for My strength (*dynamis*) is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Paul's response was to accept the grace of God in his weakness “that the power (*dynamis*) of Christ may rest upon me” (ibid.). When Paul encouraged the Corinthians to follow through with their benevolent work they began a year prior, his ground of appeal for them to complete the work was their abounding in everything, “in faith, in speech, in knowledge (*gnosis*), in all diligence, and in your love for us – see that you abound in this grace (*charis*) also” (2 Corinthians 8:7). Knowledge (*gnosis*) is described as a grace (*charis*). In defense of his ministry of the gospel against Judaizing teachers, Paul spoke of how the gospel was changing him even more dramatically than the glory which shone on Moses' face – “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory (*doxa*) to glory (*doxa*), just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Corinthians 3:18). As he noted earlier in his ministry, this was accomplished by God's grace – “But by the grace (*charis*) of God I am what I am, and His grace (*charis*) toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace (*charis*) of God which was with me” (1 Corinthians 15:10).

God's grace is not to be approached passively. It is to be actively participated in. We are to grow in the grace of God (2 Peter 3:18). We are to allow His power to make us what we ought to be, grow in the knowledge of His will, and be transformed into the glorious image of His Son. All of this is by grace, and to neglect such growth is to receive God's grace in vain (cf. 2 Corinthians 6:1).

LESSON 1 QUESTIONS

1. How might a misunderstanding of God's grace lead to the neglect of growth in knowledge?
2. What is the proper response to the grace of God? Is it passive, or active? Explain.
3. Describe and explain the four uses of *charis* according to BDAG in this lesson.
4. What does it mean to be "*commended to the grace of God*" (Acts 14:26; 15:50)?
5. What follows God's beneficent intentions?
6. What are some examples of God's practical application of His goodwill toward us?
7. Are God's gifts of favor (grace) conditional, or unconditional? Explain.
8. Explain how Barnabas had "*seen the grace of God*" (Acts 11:23) among those who had obeyed the gospel in Antioch.
9. Is God's grace intended to continue to have an effect after the initial point of conversion?
10. Beyond the initial blessings connected directly with our baptism, what are some effects of God's grace in our lives as Christians?

