

# The Grace of God

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I have some questions about the grace of God:

1. Is “unmerited favor” a good definition of grace?
2. Is grace an attribute of God?
3. Is there a difference between the Old and New Testaments when it comes to the grace of God?
4. What is the role of grace in salvation?

## 1. Is “Unmerited Favor” a Good Definition of Grace?

In the Bible, **grace** is a big deal. The NASB uses the word *grace* 319 times. They are mostly translations of the Old Testament Hebrew word חֵן (*chen*) and the New Testament Greek word χάρις (*charis*).

Most Christians, who define grace, focus on the grace of God involved in salvation. That usually amounts to reading the doctrine of salvation back in to the word grace. This nullifies the contribution of the word itself, making it equivalent to other words for salvation, like love, joy, peace, and forgiveness. Take, for example, Bill Gothard’s definition, “Grace gives us the desire and the power that God gives us to do His will.” Does not the love of God, the joy of God, the peace of God, and the forgiveness of God also give us the desire and power to do His will? In order to get a more precise definition, we will look at the use of grace throughout the Bible and see how it is being defined, in general.

## Defining the Grace of God in the Old Testament

### *Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD*

The first use of the word grace in the Bible describes Noah’s relationship with God in contrast to those who were destroyed by the Flood.

*Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. The LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart... But Noah found **grace** in the eyes of the LORD (Genesis 6:5-8).*

Clearly, grace is the favor of God. But is it unmerited? Noah seems to receive grace in contrast to those whose *wickedness...was great on the earth*, those whom the Lord *was sorry that He had made*. The grace of God that Noah received was not earned by works, but neither was it given indiscriminately, arbitrarily, or universally. God was only gracious to Noah and his family.

### *Lot found grace in Sodom*

[Lot said] *Now behold, your servant has found **grace** in your sight, and you have magnified your lovingkindness, which you have shown me by saving my life (Genesis 19:19).*

The grace Lot received from the angels of God resulted in a lovingkindness which saved his life. The reason Lot received it was because he was not a homosexual, like the other men of Sodom. Peter tells us *He rescued **righteous Lot**, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men (2 Peter 2:7)*. So, like Noah, the grace of God saved his life, and it was not given indiscriminately, arbitrarily, or universally.

### *Joseph found grace in Potipher’s sight*

So Joseph found **grace** in his [Potiphar's] sight and became his personal servant; and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he owned he put in his charge (Genesis 39:4). Potiphar put Joseph over all he owned because *Joseph found grace in his sight*. But that was because Joseph *became a successful man* (verse 2). So the grace of Potiphar was because of the success of Joseph. It was a favor, but it does not seem to be unmerited. Joseph somehow distinguished himself as one to whom Potiphar considered it appropriate to favor.

### **Ruth found grace in the sight of Boaz**

*Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground and said to him, "Why have I found **grace** in your sight that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?" Boaz replied to her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband has been fully reported to me...May the LORD reward your work, and your wages be full from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge (Ruth 2:10-12).*

When Ruth asked Boaz, *Why have I found **grace** in your sight?* Boaz responded with reasons for the grace. He pointed out (1) *All that you have done for your mother-in-law* and (2) that she had placed herself *under the wings of the Lord, the God of Israel*. Once again, the grace of Boaz was clearly a favor upon Ruth, whom he singled out from all the other women who had come to glean. The grace of Boaz was not given indiscriminately, arbitrarily or universally.

### **Esther found grace with the king**

*The king loved Esther more than all the women, and she found **favor** and kindness with him more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti (Esther 2:17).*

Esther found grace in the eyes of the king because of her physical beauty. Nonetheless, this tells us that the word grace was connected to (1) receiving a benefit, (2) being pleasing to the grace giver, and (3) being selected.

### **In Psalms and Proverbs, grace is connected to certain virtues**

Psalm 84:11, *For the LORD God is a sun and shield;  
The LORD gives **grace** and glory;  
No good thing does He withhold from those who  
**walk uprightly**.*

Proverbs 3:3, *Do not let **kindness and truth** leave you;  
Bind them around your neck,  
Write them on the tablet of your heart.*

Proverbs 3:4, *So you will find **grace** and good repute  
In the sight of God and man.*

Proverbs 3:33, *The curse of the LORD is on the house  
of the wicked, But He blesses the dwelling of the  
**righteous**.*

Proverbs 3:34, *Though He scoffs at the scoffers,  
Yet He gives **grace** to the **afflicted**.*

It seems that those who receive the grace of God

- *Walk uprightly*
- *Live in **kindness***
- *Speak the **truth***
- *Dwell in **righteousness**, or*
- *Are unjustly **afflicted***

*Uprightness, kindness, truth, and righteousness* are words that describe living consistent with the character of God. Being *afflicted* is a position of humility.

## **Defining the Grace of God in the New Testament**

### **Mary found grace with God**

*The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found **grace** with God (Luke 1:30).*

From Mary's response and the "Magnificat" prayer that follows, it seems that Mary *found grace with God* for the same reason Noah, Abraham, and Lot did, because of her godly character. Grace was not earned, but neither was it given indiscriminately, arbitrarily, or universally.

### **The apostles had *grace with all the people***

[The apostles were] *praising God and having grace with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved* (Acts 2:47).

The people were being saved and added to the church because they favored the message of the apostles over that of the Jews who denied Christ. This was not an unmerited favor. It was a selective favor from the people based on the message of the apostles.

### **A remnant of Jews received the grace of God**

*In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace* (Romans 11:5-6).

Here, God's grace was God's *choice* that favored a *remnant* who, in the context of Romans 11, are the Jews who became believers. They were a chosen remnant because of their faith in Christ rather than the works of Judaism, otherwise grace would no longer be a favor.

### **Jesus received the grace of God**

- *But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone* (Hebrews 2:9).
- *And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor [grace] with God and men* (Luke 2:52).

Hebrews 2 tells us that the **selective favor** of God toward Jesus meant that He tasted death for everyone, so that He would also be *crowned with glory and honor*. Luke 2 tells us that, as Jesus grew up, He increased in the grace of God. The example of Jesus receiving grace dismisses the idea of grace being "unmerited favor." Jesus received grace in the sense that He was selectively favored to be born, grow, die, and be *crowned with glory and honor* because He pleased God the Father.

### **Paul warns us about the danger of *falling from grace***

- *I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly* (Galatians 2:21).
- *You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace* (Galatians 5:4).
- *See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled* (Hebrews 12:15).

We cannot conclude that saved people can lose their salvation because that would question the sovereignty of God. But these passages indicate that we can desert, nullify, fall from, and come short of the grace of God. Therefore, it is inappropriate to call grace "unmerited."

### **God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble**

- *But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, "GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE"* (James 4:6).
- *You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE* (1 Peter 5:5).

This is probably the clearest denial of the idea that grace is unmerited. God's grace is clearly selective, and there is a basic criteria involved in the selection. The extension of grace is often kept from those who expect it (Matthew 7:21-23) and given to those who do not expect it (Matthew 25:34-40). It is kept from the proud and given to the humble.

These passages tell us that grace is only extended to those whose thoughts, motives, and actions are pleasing to the giver of grace. For example, suppose you saw a man holding a sign, saying, "Homeless, three children, will work for food," and you give him some money. That was a gift of grace. You chose to show selective favor to that person because he was destitute and trying to feed his children. But suppose you then learned that the man lived by himself in an expensive apartment. Would you still give him money? Would you still show him grace, a selected favor? Maybe not. Why? Because he no longer fits your criteria for grace giving. You no longer approve of his morality. He is not afflicted with poverty, as you assumed, he is a liar, working a scam. If you decide to give him some money anyway, it may be out of love or forgiveness or some other motive, but not grace.

You might give money to an enemy because Jesus said to love our enemies. But that's love, not grace. You might forgive someone who has wronged you, even though you don't think the person is sincere, because Jesus forgave those who crucified Him, even though they were unrepentant. But that's forgiveness, not grace. Grace is a favor, which is extended to those of whom we approve.

## Common Grace

Common grace is common to the Reformed branches of Christianity. In the words of Reformed scholar Louis Berkhof,

"[Common grace] curbs the destructive power of sin, maintains in a measure the moral order of the universe, thus making an orderly life possible, distributes in varying degrees gifts and talents among men, promotes the development of science and art, and showers untold blessings upon the children of men" [theopedia.com].

There is no evidence in the Bible for "common grace." The Bible talks about *the common good, a common confession, a common faith, a common salvation, and a common purpose*, but there is no "common grace." Of course, God does many things for everyone, and those things are a favor from God, but *grace* does not seem to be an appropriate word to describe those things.

## Conclusion, Ten Aspects of Grace

[Some of these overlap for a more complete definition.]

- 1. Grace is not the same as love.** Both grace and love are a (a) a favor and (b) involve giving. But:
  - (1) Love can be done for the whole world. Grace is always a selective.
  - (2) Love is not necessarily received, and it does not necessarily effect a change. Grace always results in some benefit (salvation, spiritual gifts, marriage, deliverance from danger, eternal rewards, etc.).
  - (3) Love does not require an approved context. It can be extended to our enemies. Grace is a favor given within the criteria approved by, or pleasing to, the giver of the grace.
- 2. Grace is not the same as forgiveness.** (1) Jesus received the grace of God, and He certainly did not need to be forgiven of anything. (2) Forgiveness is when the one who is wronged willingly receives, takes upon themselves, the consequences of another's sin. Grace has nothing to do with receiving anything good or bad. (3) Forgiveness may be unconditional, grace is always conditional.



3. **Grace is not universal.** The basic definitive word for grace is “favor.” But the qualifying word is “selective.” For example, *the gospel of the grace of God* and *the word of his grace* (the Bible) are only grace to those who believe them (Acts 20:24, 32). The Bible and the gospel, though they are objectively true, are not good news to anyone who does not believe them. Both are available to everyone, but the grace (selected favor) of God is only upon those who choose to believe them.
4. **Grace is not indiscriminate.** Grace is a favor that always discriminates between the ones who are favored and the ones who are not. Gracious favor is “an act of...approval or preference.” If I approve of you, then there is someone I also disapprove of. If I prefer you, I do not prefer everyone. Approval and preference assume discrimination.
5. **Grace is not merited, in the sense that you cannot work to achieve it.** Grace is an unmerited favor in the sense that it is not the offer of some standard, which then can be achieved or obtained by effort. That would create a context of pride. Grace is something given, not something achieved.
6. **Grace is not without merit, in the sense that it is not extended indiscriminately.** If grace were extended indiscriminately, then why did Noah receive it instead of all those who drowned? Why did Lot receive it instead of all the homosexuals in Sodom? Why is not the name of everyone written in the “Book of Life”? Grace follows the discrimination of the grace-giver.
7. **Grace is a favor.** That does not mean every favor is an act of grace. **Favor** is a “good turn, good deed, kindness, act of kindness, [or] courtesy.” **Grace** is a favor, which is “an act of approval or preference” (“New Oxford American Dictionary”). I may do you a favor and mow your lawn, just because you are my neighbor. I might do that for any neighbor. But grace is a selected favor. If I mow your lawn because I observe that you are a nice person confined to a wheelchair, that’s grace.
8. **Grace is selective.** In every instance of grace in the Bible, some selection is involved. Therefore, selectivity is foundational to grace. Grace assumes preference.
9. **Grace is conditional.** Grace will always be in line with the approval of the giver. Calvinism erroneously asserts that God’s grace is bestowed unconditionally by His sovereign will. But that negates the idea of a free will and eliminates all morality. Morality requires choice, and one’s choices make him proud or humble, hence qualifying him, or disqualifying him, from the grace of God. Unconditional grace makes both God and the recipient of grace into robots.
10. **Grace is not something offered, but an offer can be an invitation to be selectively favored.** Grace is never offered. But one can make offers that, when received, result in grace (like the Gospel and the Word of God, or a offer to mow your lawn). These are essentially invitations to be selectively favored, where the giver makes his approved preferences known. It is possible to make offers that are obtained by mechanical achievement (as with any law), in which case it is easily disconnected from the approval of the giver. When we offer the opportunity for medals, reward, grades, or promotions, we are not offering grace.

Grace is connected to what the giver takes pleasure in. Isaiah wrote,

*“What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?” Says the LORD. “I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams And the fat of fed cattle; And I take no **pleasure** in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats...Cease to do evil, Learn to do good; Seek justice, Reprove the ruthless, Defend the orphan, Plead for the widow (Isaiah 1:11&17).*

## A Formal Definition

*Grace is Selective Favor.* Grace is the *selective favor* of an individual (who is in some way capable of giving a favor) which benefits another individual (who is in some way needy), when the thoughts, motives, and actions of the receiver are approved by or pleasing to the giver.

## 2. Is Grace an Attribute of God?

### Seven Attributes of Man

1. Body
2. Intellect
3. Emotion
4. Will
5. Morality
6. Purpose/Destiny
7. Creativity

First, some definitions. An attribute is “a quality or feature regarded as a characteristic or inherent part of someone or something” (“New Oxford American Dictionary”). A being is never without its attributes. Without one of the attributes of humanity, a human being is not human. Without one of His attributes, God would not be God.

### Twelve Attributes of God

1. Omnipresence
2. Omnipotence
3. Omniscience
4. Justice
5. Eternality
6. Sovereignty
7. Unity/Trinity
8. Infinity
9. Truth
10. Holiness
11. Immutability (unchangeable)

The question before us has to do with whether or not God is **always** gracious. Certainly God is gracious.

- *You are a God of forgiveness, Gracious and compassionate, Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness* (Nehemiah 9:17).
- *I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and One who relents concerning calamity* (Jonah 4:2).

But is grace a part of God’s essential character? Is He ever not gracious? There seems to be a time when the grace of God is not granted. But if grace is an attribute of God, then the grace must always be a part of God. So how is it is sometimes not granted?

*So I will hurl you out of this land into the land which you have not known, neither you nor your fathers; and there you will serve other gods day and night, for **I will grant you no grace*** (Jeremiah 16:13).

On the other hand, there are several passages where missionaries who are sent, and the brethren who remain, are turned over to the grace of God. That seems to indicate that the grace of God is always available.

- *From there they sailed to Antioch, from which they had been commended to the **grace** of God for the work that they had accomplished* (Acts 14:26).
- *But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the **grace** of the Lord* (Acts 15:40).

Also, the book of Hebrews describes the Holy Spirit as *the Spirit of **grace*** (Hebrews 10:29). So it seems that grace is identified with the Holy Spirit. Since the Spirit is one of the persons of the godhead, we must conclude that grace is inseparably connected to God.

Ephesians 2 tells us that we were children of the **wrath** of God and now we are saved by the **grace** of God. If grace is an attribute of God, it would seem like wrath is also an attribute of God (John 3:36; Romans 1:18; 5:9; 12:19). God does not always pour out wrath, nor does He always extend grace, yet both seem to always be available.

*Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of **wrath**, even as the rest. But God, being rich in **mercy**, because of His great **love** with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by **grace** you have been saved)* (Ephesians 2:3-5).

## Conclusions About Grace as an Attribute of God

If grace is an attribute of God, and maybe it is, it needs to be stated differently from attributes like omniscience, sovereignty or love. Categorically speaking, the grace of God is much like the wrath of God. If you say that *grace* is an attribute of God, then should you also say that *wrath* is an attribute of God. I suggest (without any entomological reason) that we use the word **attribute** to describe the regular attributes of God that are always in play all the time, and the word **characteristic** to describe those aspects of God's nature which are always present but not always exercised. In that case **grace would be characteristic of God.**

### 3. Is There a Difference between the Old and the New Testament when It Comes to the Grace of God?

#### God's Grace Does Not Change

First of all, we need to remember that God does not change. It's called immutability.

- *Jesus Christ is **the same yesterday and today and forever*** (Hebrews 13:8).
- *Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is **no variation or shifting shadow*** (James 1:17).

Since God does not change, His grace does not change.

#### The Knowledge of God's Grace Is Realized Through Jesus Christ

*And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of **grace** and truth ... For of His fullness we have all received, and **grace upon grace**. For the Law was given through Moses; **grace** and truth were realized through Jesus Christ* (John 1:14, 16-17).

In the New Testament, we learn that, for this age, the grace of God comes, not through the Law which was an example of the truth of God applied to the formation of Israel as a nation, but through the truth itself. That truth was made known to us, not through a new law but through a divine Person.

### 4. What Is the Role of Grace in Salvation?

#### Ten Aspects of Grace Applied to Salvation

1. **Saving grace is not the same as love.** The payment for the sins of the world and the gospel message, the offer of salvation to the world, are a function of the **love** of God (John 3:16; Romans 5:8; Ephesians 2:4; 2 Thessalonians 2:16; 1 John 4:10; Revelation 1:5), not the **grace** of God. With the Gospel, the love of God is offered to the world. The grace of God is never offered to the world. Confusing love and grace can lead to false teaching like universalism, grace without repentance, or what has been called "cheap grace." The love of God offers salvation to everyone, just as they are. The grace of God gives salvation selectively based upon criteria that are pleasing to God (such as humility, repentance, and faith in Christ).
2. **Saving grace is not the same as forgiveness.** The best proof of this is that Jesus received the grace of God, and He certainly did not need to be forgiven of anything. Also, the forgiveness of our sins is God taking upon Himself the grief our sin has caused Him, not erasing the consequences of those sins. God's grace is about granting a selected favor, the righteousness and justification that cleanses us from sin (Roman 5:16-17; 1 John 1:7).
3. **Saving grace is not universal.** Salvation offers the forgiveness of God and the love of God to everyone. The Gospel is an universal appeal (Acts 20:24). But the Gospel does not benefit any-



one who does not believe it. The love of God does not get us saved if we don't receive it. The forgiveness of God does not erase the consequences of our sin until He applies it.

- It is only by the grace of God that we are saved, *for by **grace** you have been **saved*** (Ephesians 2:8).
  - It is only by the grace of God that we are made righteous, *those who receive the abundance of **grace** and of the gift of **righteousness** will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ* (Romans 5:17).
  - It is only by the grace of God that we are justified, *being **justified** by His **grace** we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life* (Titus 3:7).
  - The Gospel of God (the Good News about the offer of salvation) is universal, the grace of God is not.
4. **Saving grace discriminates.** Since grace is a selected favor, it always discriminates between the ones who are favored and the ones who are not. The saving grace of God discriminates between the believer and the unbeliever.
  5. **Saving grace is not merited, in the sense that you cannot work to achieve it.** Saving grace is unmerited, in the sense that it is not the offer of some standard that can be achieved by effort and therefore deserved. Saving grace is based on the approval of God (like repentance and faith in Christ, based in humility) but not on works (achievements, based in pride).
  6. **Saving grace is not without merit, in the sense that it is not extended indiscriminately.** Saving grace discriminates between those who humbly repent and believe in Christ, and those who don't.
  7. **Saving grace is a favor.** Saving grace is a favor (act of kindness) from God. That does not mean every favor from God is an act of saving grace. Blessings, eternal rewards, love, rain, sunshine, air to breath, and all the good things which come from God (James 1:17) are favors, but not selective favors based upon His approval.
  8. **Saving grace is selective.** Saving grace selects the one who repents and believes the Gospel.
  9. **Saving grace is conditional.** Saving grace is conditioned upon repentance and faith in Christ.
  10. **Saving grace is not offered.** Salvation is offered as an invitation to be selectively favored.

## A Few Questions about Saving Grace

1. **Is the offer of salvation an act of the grace of God?**
2. **Is salvation an act of the grace of God?**
3. **Why can you not work to obtain salvation?**
4. **Can you do anything to obtain salvation?**
5. **Why are repentance and faith not “good works” that obtain salvation?**
6. **Are we saved by the love of God?**
7. **Are we saved by the forgiveness of God?**

### Answers:

1. No, it is a favor of God but not a selective one. And grace is never an offer.
2. Yes. It is God's selective favor upon those who repent and receive Christ.
3. That would assume salvation can be accomplished independent from God, in which case it would not be by grace, a selective favor from God.
4. Yes. You can repent and receive Christ as your God and Savior.
5. Repentance and faith are different from “good works” in that they are an act of humility rather than pride. They are done on your knees begging for mercy, rather than pointing to achievements or looking for credit (like awards, trophies, decorations, or “at-a-boys”).
6. No. We are made savable by the love of God, but we are only saved by grace.
7. No. It's like the story of the suicidal guy who jumps off a 20-story building and asks God to forgive him. God said, “Consider yourself forgiven,” as the man falls past the 10<sup>th</sup> floor. Forgiveness is a favor which accepts the grief caused by someone, but being grieved does not accomplish salvation. Forgiveness makes salvation possible, but only grace saves.