

A Short Essay On Grace

First, a disclaimer: I do not have the credentials of a theological scholar, and this is hardly a complete treatment of the doctrine of grace. I also confess I believe in Christ, and that the theology I hold to is that of Bible churches, specifically those identifying themselves as orthodox, premillennial, pretribulationist, and dispensational. Now, perhaps, you know approximately the belief system from which I babble.

That said, the first order of business may be to state that a theology is an abstraction, a framework, to help men to organize knowledge. In a sense, it is like a theory in science, which is an explanation believed to be consistent with a number of observations, and hoped suitable to predict future observations. Now, a theory sometimes must be discarded or modified when new observations show flaws. It is a guide, or a map, to the facts, but it has no authority over the facts. So it is with a theology - it is to help us navigate knowledge new to us about God and about the Bible as we learn, to assemble it into a structure. But it does not control God, nor the meanings He has placed in the Bible; it is subject to them. If our theology is found inconsistent with the Word in any point, the theology is to be modified to be consistent with the Word - by no means the reverse, which would be to misrepresent God.

Now, grace is a term used differently among Christians. You will find among Catholics the terms "sanctifying grace" and "actual grace". Among Reformed communions, a term sometimes used is "irresistible grace". A discussion of what these terms, and others, mean to various communions might produce more heat than light, so instead, I'll put it as simply as I can: grace means unmerited favor. *For 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. Ephesians 2:8-9* (I digress a moment: having given this definition, it seems appropriate to mention the related, but hardly identical, concept of mercy, and to give the distinction: mercy is where you **do not** receive a penalty or consequence you **do** deserve, while grace is where you **do** receive a benefit or blessing you **do not** deserve.)

The doctrine of grace quickly becomes tied up with the doctrine of salvation. All true Christians believe we need God's grace to be saved. But then there are the further questions.

- How are we saved by grace? Are there mechanisms we must understand?
- Do we have a part in it? Or is it all God, working from outside?
- Can we fall from grace?
- Are there really different kinds of grace?
- Is grace (or one or another kind of it) a quantifiable property, like gas in a car's tank?

And so on.

Having defined grace as unmerited favor, it may be helpful to note that the definition is broad, and that we may tend sometimes in one context or another to conflate that meaning with the meaning of the thing given in grace. Whazzat mean? Suppose my rich uncle, recognizing and yet disregarding my absolute lack of merit for the same, gives me a fine meal in a fancy restaurant, just out of his avuncular affection for me. We may all agree that I don't deserve it, but I receive it, I enjoy it, and I am grateful. I am the recipient of my uncle's grace, and, therein, am the recipient of a fine meal. Of course, tomorrow I am hungry again; a meal lasts so long as a meal lasts. Now my gracious uncle knows I earn enough for my own PB&J, and may not bestow another such meal for a long while - but he sees I am lonely and, though I continue to deserve nothing from him, he gives me a fine, healthy, purebred puppy. This is yet another operation of my uncle's grace, I receive the dog with gladness and gratitude, and enjoy his company for the 15 years of his life (he outlives my uncle). By grace, then, I've received an impermanent meal, and an impermanent (though much more permanent, if you will) canine companion. Indeed, my gracious uncle may also have left me, still undeserving, a pile of money in his will. I suppose I should point out that, no matter which gift, nor how much it is, the gift is permanent in respect of its property as a gift (my uncle never reclaims the meal, nor the dog, nor the money), but quite impermanent in respect of its own nature.

Now, it's similarly true that, when God, by grace, provides something to us, the nature of the thing given is one thing, and the nature of His action in giving is a different thing. So when, by His providence, God provides me with a job, the job is full of its own good and bad qualities, but it is by His grace that I know of the job, have the abilities it requires, and the opportunity offered to me to work at it and receive the pay thereof. It remains an earthly blessing, but comes to me (if I'm honest, I must admit) by God's hand. But surely, you say, I must have some part in this: I prepared so much as I did, I accept the job, I show up, I work, and I do not lightly quit. All true. My will is active, and, in the nature of the thing we're discussing, my effort, my work is relevant.

But if the gift we're discussing is not a job, but eternal life, it is still from God's hand by His grace, for I deserve it not at all - but the nature of the thing given is that it is exceedingly permanent, and, further, that no work I can do is in any way relevant. My only participation is to receive the gift offered.

Going a bit further, we may see that the concept of salvation marries mercy and grace: we are saved FROM the justly deserved penalty of our sins, which is God's mercy, and we are saved TO undeserved eternal life, which is His grace. But, indeed, the whole business is also subsumed under grace, for it is clearly an operation of God's unmerited favor towards us that He makes any such provision for us at all.

So, how are we saved by grace? Are there mechanisms we must understand?

Let's go back to that place in Scripture:

For 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. Ephesians 2:8-9

The answer is right there - we are saved by grace, through faith. OK, what's faith?

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. Hebrews 11:1

Essentially, faith is the substance of believing God for things He has said but which we can't see. It is taking Him at his word. In a number of places we are told to believe (not work). Just a few:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. John 3:16

And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house. Acts 16:31

And, quite explicitly:

Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent. John 6:29

But note: faith itself is something we can't produce ourselves - it must be given (even as we note in the passage above from Ephesians). Isn't that something?

Do we have a part in it? Or is it all God, working from outside?

Well, now, what do YOU think? If God says, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved," do you suppose He gave you the condition of your salvation in the form of a command for nothing? It seems obvious that there is indeed participation by us in receiving salvation - but note: the ability to participate is a gift; there is no work, nor merit, of ours in it. It is the choice which is ours, to receive or not receive.

Can we fall from grace?

I think this concept is a result of the conflation mentioned earlier. If God's unmerited favor towards us results in an offer of eternal life, how eternal would that life be if it could be lost? It would be essentially no life at all. God gives better gifts than that. The issue is whether one receives the gift in the first place.

Now (one might ask parenthetically), what about apostasy? I think that on the face of it, those whom we see as apostates are manifestly among those who do NOT believe into the Son of God. It is not that they were believers and became unbelievers, it is that they remain unbelievers, regardless of what appearance they formerly presented. Can they be saved? Jude seems to say that some can, which is the same as can be said for unbelievers generally. *And of some have compassion, making a difference: and others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh. Jude 22-23* We don't know a man's heart whether he will finally be a scoffer and gainsayer or whether, like Paul, he is in strenuous opposition one day and converted the next.

But when the Scripture warns us about apostates, it is not enjoining us to judge their hearts, but instead to see their appearance and behavior and to beware: we should give them neither heed nor place, most particularly in our churches. They are untrustworthy guides, and must be regarded as not merely misguided, but actively hostile to Christ, the church, and the Gospel. They look, and act, thus. So do not give them office, nor position, in your church; do not listen to them, nor follow them, but contend for the faith; oppose them. Compassion, yes; credence, no. And we are not required by their apparent reversal of belief to modify the doctrine of the security of the believer.

Are there really different kinds of grace?

Sure. There would be God's grace, and there would be what passes for grace among men, wherein we may act graciously towards one another. (I won't be drawn into trying to define various forms of "grace" as those of some other religion or communion may wish to use as technical terms, but I may say I think they miss the point.)

Is grace (or one or another kind of it) a quantifiable property, like gas in a car's tank?

When we talk about God's grace - what do you think? I think it makes better sense to regard God's grace as sufficient for salvation and for all our needs. Knowing His disposition to those who trust Him, it makes sense to apply for the help we know we need and the help we know we may need but can't identify, and trust Him for provision, all the while obeying His revealed will as we presently know and understand it.

Is grace irresistible?

Yes. And No. This question is very close to the doctrine of election and the discussion of "limited atonement". And here, we want to be careful to agree with Scripture, and to say, "Where stands it written?" when confronted by a position one way or the other.

Do some people resist God's grace? Manifestly, some do. Are some people apparently overcome, apparently almost against their will, by grace, to be "dragged kicking and screaming" into heaven? You may know someone like that. Can we make theology from such empirical observations? No, we can't. Can we explain the true inner workings of another man's heart? Shoot, we can't know our own.

But let's keep this in mind: a fractious child may play too close to the fire and, quite against his will at the time, be hauled away by a loving father who has his better interests at heart. I'm told my dad did this when I was quite young (too young to remember), and dislocated my wrist in the process. Do I presently disagree with what my faithful father did then? Uh-uh. Was his action irresistible? Yep. This is a case of Dad doing what he knew Son would prefer if Son had good sense. God is sovereign. He can do such things according to His will

Does that prove a doctrine of irresistible grace? I don't think so. Rather, I think it begins to show an issue with the very question. What are we really asking, and why? Do we want grace to be irresistible because we also believe it to be offered to fewer than all men, to only those who are elect? Because, perhaps, we wish to believe in a limited atonement? Does it even make sense to ask? Can we have a quality "irresistible unmerited favor"?

If we phrase it that way, it's perfectly obvious that unmerited favor is by definition irresistible, in that it is the willing disposition of one party towards another, dependent in no way upon its object. But the gift offered by grace may yet be refused by the will of the object. And I think this gets to the point: God loves and cares for even those of His creatures who will not have Him. He mourns the loss of Lucifer, son of the morning, while at the same time judging him for his manifest rejection and rebellion, and the harmful outworking of the same against other creatures God also loves. We cannot make a doctrine of grace bear more meaning than the word can carry.