

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

## Grace in the Bible

CARL R. TRUEMAN

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.

*Titus 2:11*

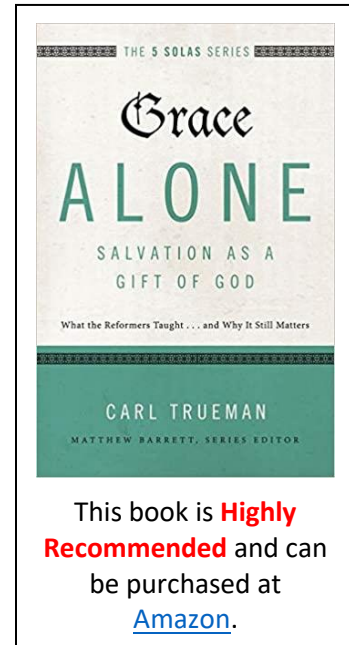
I am by calling a professor of church history and the pastor of a local church. Thus, the bulk of this book will play to what are, if not my strengths, at least the areas in which I am probably most competent: history and ecclesiology. Yet even as the subject of the book, *grace alone*, points us inevitably to matters of history and practice, above all it points us to the Scriptures. And that is appropriate. I write as a Protestant, an heir of the Reformation, and thus as one committed not simply to the principle of grace alone but also to *Scripture alone*.<sup>1</sup> All theology must therefore be normed or regulated by the teaching of Scripture. Thus, while the historical heroes of the tale I tell are

Augustine, Aquinas, and the Reformers, they were motivated by the desire to understand and to proclaim what God had taught about grace in the inspired words of his Scriptures. For this reason, it is important to start our study by addressing the issue of the Bible's own teaching about grace.

A search for the word "grace" and its cognates in the English Standard Version yields over 150 occurrences throughout the Old and New Testaments, with the vast majority in the latter. Indeed, "grace" as a specific term is a relatively rare occurrence in the Old Testament. And yet we should not allow ourselves to be misled by such a crude approach into concluding that the concept of grace does not pervade the whole of the Bible from beginning to end. A search for the term "Trinity" reveals no occurrence of the word at all, yet no orthodox Christian would deny that the concept is a vital part of the Bible's teaching. Thus it is with grace: grace permeates Scripture as one of the most important teachings about God and his relationship to his creation.

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<sup>1</sup> For a treatment of *sola Scriptura*, see Matthew Barrett, *God's Word Alone—The Authority of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016).



This book is **Highly Recommended** and can be purchased at [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com).

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In fact, as we start to look at Scripture's teaching on grace, we might characterize it at the start by saying that it has a twofold theological significance in the Bible. First, it most typically means the unmerited favor of God. Perhaps we might, with all due reverence, say that in this way grace speaks of God's attitude toward his creation and toward his people. When thinking of grace in this sense, Reformed theologians have made a further distinction between common grace, referring to God's unmerited but nonsalvific favor toward the fallen creation that restrains evil and allows human beings to flourish in this earthly realm, and special grace, referring to God's unmerited salvific favor exhibited in and through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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Second, grace can mean the active outworking of God's unmerited favor in the life of the church and of the believer. Here the language of grace refers to the work of God in those to whom he has an attitude of saving favor. He does not just save us from our sins, but he also matures us in the faith and uses us to bring glory to his name even while here on earth. Yet this too is ultimately the gracious work of God. Thus, these two meanings are intimately connected: it is because we are saved by grace that grace then works in our lives to accomplish God's purposes for us. The Christian life originates in God's grace and is lived by God's grace. And this is true of both Old and New Testaments.<sup>2</sup>

## Grace in the Old Testament

In English translations of the Old Testament, while the noun "grace" is rare, the adjective "gracious" is more common.<sup>3</sup> This is because God's grace is not an attribute of God's nature in the way that, say, omnipotence or omniscience are such. Grace is intimately connected to the fact that human beings are fallen and thus deserve the wrath and judgment of God. Grace, we might say, is a response, an application of God's character and attributes, to human rebellion. Grace is that aspect of divine action by which God blesses his rebellious creatures, whether through preservation (common grace) or salvation (special grace). It characterizes the manner in which he deals with those who through their rejection of him as their Creator and sovereign deserve nothing from him and yet whom he still chooses to bless. In salvation in particular the character of grace is manifest. A loving God, faced with the rebellion of his creatures, desires to bring them back into communion with himself. Yet his holiness cannot simply allow their sin to pass without response, for if God allows our unholy rejection of him to stand, he is

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting here that in the Roman Catholic Church grace is very closely connected to the sacraments as the means whereby grace is mediated to the individual Christian. This is very different to the notion of grace as the subjective work of the Holy Spirit that we find in Protestantism and that is not inextricably attached to the sacraments in the same manner at all.

<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew term *khen*, which is typically translated as "grace," carries the meaning of "favor," as does the verb *khanan* and its cognates.

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contradicting his own holy nature. The answer is grace: action on God's part, motivated by love and shaped by holiness, which takes account of the seriousness of sin yet brings sinners back into communion with him.

In short, if the world did not exist and had never fallen, God could not be said to be gracious. An older generation of theologians would have referred to this as a relational attribute of God, one that only exists in relation to something other than God. It describes an active disposition toward that other thing.

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When the Lord passes before Moses at Sinai in Exodus 34:6–7, he proclaims himself to be gracious:

The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and the fourth generation.

Here the Lord describes himself as gracious and merciful, two ways of saying essentially the same thing. But notice the reason he declares this. In the face of human sin and rebellion, the Lord has chosen not to exact justice, as he is entitled to do. He has chosen instead to be gracious and merciful. In other words, he has decided to show unmerited favor toward those who do not deserve it, and in his words to Moses he reminds his people of that very fact. The gracious disposition of God lies at the heart of the many biblical benedictions that have been pronounced over God's people throughout the years.<sup>4</sup>

God's merciful grace to his people pervades the Old Testament narrative, from the moment he allows Adam and Eve to live after they have sinned, through his loving preservation of his people Israel in the face of their frequent grumblings and rebellions, up to the coming of the Christ. Grace also provides the background to one of the most famous examples of prophetic petulance. When Jonah goes reluctantly to Nineveh to call the Ninevites to repentance and the Lord consequently spares the city and its inhabitants, Jonah is furious. The ground of his complaint is ironic: he claims that he knew that the Lord would do this because he understood, echoing Exodus 34:6, that God was a gracious God (Jonah 4:2). It's ironic because it was only the fact of God's graciousness that meant

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<sup>4</sup> Theologians typically make a distinction between "mercy" and "grace." They regard "grace" as the goodness of God shown to people irrespective of what they actually deserve. "Mercy" is the unmerited goodness of God toward those who have sinned and are guilty. The distinction is a fine one and perhaps not greatly significant. Mercy, we might say, is a specific form of grace.

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Jonah himself could enjoy the relationship with the Lord that he did. What Jonah took for granted he begrudged to others.

The story of Jonah is a very human one. As the great cynic Gore Vidal once said, every time he heard of the success of a friend, a little piece of him died. Vidal touches on something very true: there is a part of us as sinful human beings that hates the success of others; and to see the grace of God so gloriously displayed in the lives of the Ninevites was more than Jonah could bear. Yet Jonah's reaction is only so ugly because God's grace is so beautiful. An entire city of sleazy, corrupt, vile human beings is yet delivered from judgment and brought into joyful communion with God. The story is not so much about Jonah's bitterness of soul as it is about God's glorious grace.

4

## *Grace and Covenant*

At the heart of the Old Testament teaching on God's grace is God's covenant with his people. The covenant provides the historical revelation, thread, and structure to God's gracious dealings. The Abrahamic covenant ceremony described in Genesis 15 is both conventional and highly unusual. On the one hand, it was typical for ancient Near Eastern covenants to be ratified by the cutting in two of sacrificial animals, between which the covenanting parties would pass as a way of saying, "If we break the terms of the covenant, may we be torn in two as these creatures have been!" Yet in Genesis 15, Abram does not pass between the carcasses; only the Lord does this. In taking this action, the Lord unconditionally and unilaterally pledges himself to Abram and his descendants. As we see in the New Testament, this action prefigures the work of God in Christ on the cross at Calvary, where he takes up the penalty for our sins in the fulfillment of the covenant.

The covenant becomes the key to the administration of God's grace at several important moments in Israel's history. In 2 Kings 13, we read of how Hazael, king of Syria (whom the Lord had raised up to discipline his own people, 1 Kgs 19:15–17), had been oppressing the kingdom of Israel. We are told that the Lord decided to be gracious toward his people and to preserve them "because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (v. 23). In other words, the basis for God's gracious dealings with his people in the midst of their continual sin and rebellion was the covenant promises he had made to the patriarchs. Righteous kings such as Hezekiah realized this, and in 2 Chronicles 30 we see him citing God's gracious covenant when he called the nation to repentance. The Jews were conscious of their covenant history with God and deeply aware that these promises formed the basis of their gracious standing before him.

Given the importance of the covenant in God's gracious dealings with his people, the narrative of God's grace toward them was vital to Israel's identity. It shaped what we

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might call the liturgical life of the nation, both in the stories that it told about itself in the home and in the great declarations that it made in public before the nation and before the world. In Exodus 12 Moses points the people toward a time when their descendants will have no firsthand memory of the events of the exodus and no immediate understanding of the meaning of the Passover meal. In this context, he instructs them to recite and retell the story of God's great rescue of his people from Egypt. When a new generation asks, "Who are we?" the answer is clear: "We are God's special people whom he graciously rescued from slavery in Egypt." God's grace forms the foundation of their national identity. They are a people formed by grace and sustained by grace.

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## *Grace, Confession, and Benediction*

We also see this when we look at the foundational Jewish confession of faith in the Old Testament, the Shema of Deuteronomy 6. In reciting the words of the Shema, the people declare that God is one, followed by the command to love him and a warning not to forget the great and gracious acts of deliverance that the Lord had performed for his people. The identity of God's people is established by their history, and their history is one of God's gracious, unmerited, unilateral saving action toward them. They are, to put it simply, the people of God's grace. Grace is essential to their identity. When they recall who God is, they must necessarily remember what he has done for them. Their identity starts not in their own activities, but in the prior action of God toward them.

Israel is who she is because she is the object of divine grace, and this truth is central to the great blessing that is to be given to the people, the Aaronic benediction of Numbers 6:24–26:

The Lord bless you  
and keep you;  
the Lord make his face shine on you  
and be gracious to you;  
the Lord turn his face toward you  
and give you peace.

Even today, these words are frequently spoken at the close of worship services in Protestant churches, precisely because they remind the people of who they are—sinners who have received the free favor of God and have been made his people. The benediction points people to the grace of God, by which they approach him. When fallen, sinful creatures come before God, they need to be reminded that God is gracious toward them, that he chooses to bless them not for any merit they possess in themselves but simply because he, the Lord, has chosen to be merciful to them. God does not treat them as their

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sin and rebellion deserve. God is a God of grace, and his grace defines what it means for them to be the people of God.

The blessing of Numbers 6 was originally given to the Aaronic priesthood, and this ties it closely to the entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament. We should note this because we have a tendency today to reduce grace to a kind of divine sentiment. This reduction of grace cheapens forgiveness. We wrongly believe that apologizing will be sufficient to cover the evil of our sin. But grace is far more than a sentimental notion. Grace is connected to God's being and God's action, especially God's action in Christ. It is therefore costly and not to be treated in a light fashion as if it were something cheap.<sup>5</sup>

6

## *Grace and Sacrifice*

In contrast to cheap sentimentalism, God's grace in the Old Testament is more than a whim or a spineless capitulation to human rebellion. God does not ignore the problem of sin and pretend it does not exist. He feels a holy anger and wrath toward sin and cannot simply pardon the rejection of his rule as if it had never happened. So there is need for atoning action to deal with the transgressions of his mandates. Thus, God establishes a sacrificial system under Moses, the supreme manifestation of which is the Day of Atonement, detailed in Leviticus 16, whereby sin might be addressed. God himself creates the sacrificial system, he regulates it via his word and elect priesthood, and ultimately, it is God who chooses to accept the sacrifices presented to him.

This fact—that God is the one who establishes and regulates the sacrificial system—should not be ignored. It's significant because it teaches us that the Old Testament sacrifices were not an attempt by human beings to find something that would placate or cajole an angry God. We wrongly imagine that God was angry with his people and they somehow discovered ways to twist his arm and earn his favor despite their sin. The Scriptures teach us that it was God who took the initiative, revealing how sinful humans could relate to him. He established the content, the terms, and the results of the sacrifices because his wrath needed to be satisfied in a particular way. This initiative is further evidence of his grace and favor toward his people. This is not humanity reaching up to God but God reaching down to humanity, an action completely founded in God's unmerited favor toward his people. He establishes *by grace* the sacrifices which serve to satisfy his justice.

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<sup>5</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer memorably distinguishes between cheap grace and costly grace: "Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. We are fighting to-day for costly grace.... Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner.... [Costly grace] is *costly* because it cost God the life of his Son" (*The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller [New York: Touchstone, 1995], 43, 45).

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The gracious activity of God does not begin with the sacrificial system instituted under Moses, of course. Hints of this are found even earlier in the Old Testament. We first see God's grace on display when God confronts Adam and Eve in the garden after the fall. Adam and his wife have made themselves clothes out of leaves in an attempt to cover their shame. When God approaches, he does not accept their coverings, yet he does not immediately wipe them from the face of the earth either. Instead, he slays animals and covers Adam and Eve with the skins of the animals so that their sinful nakedness might be covered. God deals with the immediate problem of their guilt in the manner of his own choosing. In other words, he provides the solution to the problem of Adam's sin. In Genesis 3, for all his wrath at Adam's rebellion, he is revealed to be a gracious God who saves his people through animal sacrifice. These themes recur throughout the Scriptures, as we find again in Genesis 22, for example. After God has asked Abraham to sacrifice his only son to the Lord, Abraham makes the portentous statement that God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering (Gen 22:8). Again, we see God revealed as gracious because he provides for his people what they cannot provide for themselves—the sacrifice required for sin. Grace and sacrifice are inextricably linked throughout God's dealings with his Old Testament people.

It is perhaps worth pausing here for a moment and reflecting on the existential implications of the fact that sacrifice is connected to salvation and grace. Sacrifices were raw and bloody affairs. It is often said by opponents of the meat industry that more people would be vegetarians if they had to kill the animals they eat. That is probably true because slaughtering an animal is a dramatic and powerful event, especially when it is done by knife rather than by gun. It involves violence and, quite literally, blood and guts. Imagine the impact on Adam and Eve of being clothed with the raw, bloodied hides of the animals slain by God to cover them. This would have been quite a contrast to the leaves they had chosen for themselves. The Lord was signaling to them that their actions had catastrophic consequences beyond their wildest nightmares. And imagine being present at a sacrifice and seeing the lifeblood literally pour out of a lamb. It is one thing to understand the cultic and doctrinal significance of sacrifice. It is quite another to witness it firsthand.

Human alienation from God is something that affects us at the deepest level, and it is a problem of catastrophic proportions. The anodyne, coolly objective ways in which we discuss sacrifice in the lecture room, or the transformation of the cross into an item of costume jewelry, are eloquent testimonies to the way we have turned the problem of the human condition and the response of God's grace into ideas that verge on being mere abstractions. The violent nature of sacrifice stands in judgment on the inadequacy of such conceptions and reminds us of the powerful, existential dimension of human rebellion

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and divine grace. Sin is violent, lethal rebellion against God; and biblical grace is God's violent, raw, and bloody response.

## *Grace and Prayer*

Human beings are sinful and deserve nothing but justice and wrath at the hands of God. Yet as we have seen, God's gracious action is both the response to sin and that which gives Israel its basic identity. So it should not surprise us to find that grace becomes a staple of the piety of the Old Testament. Throughout the Old Testament narratives, Psalms, and in the Prophets, we find God's people crying out to the Lord in their prayers, pleading for him to be gracious.

Prayer is, of course, closely attached to the notion of sacrifice. We must not forget this, for to do so would be to detach prayer from its position in God's overall gracious action and also to lose that powerful, raw, existential aspect that we noted above in regard to the nature of sacrifice. If grace is not empty sentiment, then neither is prayer a sentimental action. How often on news reports do we see examples of human suffering with the response that people are praying for the victims? While the response is in a sense a good one, it is hard not to wonder whether phrases such as "our thoughts and prayers are with the victims" are really just another way of saying "we feel very badly for the victims and want to express our solidarity with them and their loved ones." That is not biblical prayer. Biblical prayer rests on God's grace and thus on God's character as expressed in his saving actions toward his people and as shown forth in the bloody sacrifices of the Old Testament.

This is why the primary place of prayer in the Old Testament is the tabernacle and then the temple, the places where God dwells in covenant with his people and where sacrifices are offered to him. The temple was a house of prayer (Isa 56:7; cf. Matt 21:13). It was also the place where prayers were answered. The existential confusion of the psalmist over the apparent prosperity of the wicked, for example, is resolved when he takes his questions to God's sanctuary (Ps 73:16–17). We can only speculate as to what precisely happened to him in the temple to solve his problem, but it was surely something to do with the sacrificial actions that took place there.

If sacrifice is the context of prayer, then once again we might note that it is the character of God revealed in these sacrifices that is of utmost importance. When Nehemiah (Neh 9) leads the people of Israel in a prayer of corporate confession, he recounts how God has saved them in the past despite their sin and rebellion and ascribes graciousness to him (v. 17), consciously echoing the words God has declared about himself in Exodus 34:6. Nehemiah knows that at this critical moment when Israel returns to Jerusalem a knowledge of God's grace will be vitally important for the people. They must be taught



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to remember who they are in light of what God has done for them so they can understand the significance of their actions. Nehemiah does not speak to their immediate needs; he points them back to God's great historic dealings with his people, calling them to recall how God has revealed himself to be merciful and faithful to them in the past. Nehemiah calls both the people and God himself in his prayer, asking God to be the God he has promised to be and reminding the people of who they are. And of course he is engaged in the great project of rebuilding the temple, the very place where the sacrifices that undergird prayer are to be performed.

The existential impact of grace is nowhere more apparent than in the Psalms. When we turn to these, we find them replete with references to God's graciousness as well as explicit calls for him to be gracious. Indeed, the grace of God serves as the foundation for the piety of the psalmist. It is God's grace alone that forms the basis for any salvific engagement with him. In Psalm 4 he calls on God to be gracious by hearing his prayer (v. 1). Psalm 6 asks the Lord to be gracious by not rebuking the psalmist in wrath (v. 1). Psalm 9 calls on the Lord to be gracious by saving him from persecution at the hands of his enemies (v. 13). At times, the suffering of the psalmist leads him to question whether God is still gracious (Ps 77:9), while at other times his confidence overflows with exultant declarations of how gracious God is, echoing other declarations of God's gracious character found in Exodus 34:6 (Pss 103:8; 145:8) or the Aaronic blessing (Ps 67:1). As noted earlier, the covenant is also featured as the grounds for God's graciousness. Prayer typically takes the form of calling out to God and asking him to be the gracious God he has promised to be. The psalmist does not look to his own merit but rather the character of God as he has displayed it in his dealings with his people.

What is clear from a study of prayer in the Psalms is that God's grace, his unmerited mercy in his dealings with his people, is foundational to the relationship between human beings and their Creator. Prayer is not a conversation between equals, nor is it a cooperative exercise between a servant and a king. The piety of the Psalms is decidedly one-sided, rooted in God's character and in God's response to human sin. The psalmist pleads no merit of his own but looks solely to God's grace in making his requests. As we move into the New Testament, we see this grace embodied and definitively revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ, yet even in the piety of the Old Testament we see the people turning to the grace of God. To live in the favor and grace of God has been the perennial longing of the people of God from the very start. The psalmist knows that the only answer to the deepest and most troubling questions of human existence is the grace of God.

In fact, at the heart of biblical piety as established in the Old Testament lies a cry of human desperation. The psalmists recognize that there is hope, but it is only found in God's gracious initiative. They have despaired of themselves and see no hope in a fallen

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creation. They know that if salvation is to come, it can only come from God himself and can only be rooted in his character and his actions. The reason is simple: human beings are in rebellion against God. The creation groans under the weight of human sin and the disruption in our relationship with our Creator. Human experience is tragic: life is not as it should be and ends in death, the penalty for sin. Death is an unnatural intrusion into the realm of human existence, and hope, if there is any hope, must be in God himself breaking into this creation from outside and acting toward it in mercy.

This is why, even in the darkest of the psalms (Ps 88) where there is no explicit expression of hope at all, the psalmist uses the covenant name of God. Despair is set against the larger background of God's covenant and his grace. The problem of humanity is not lack of self-fulfillment requiring personal affirmation and assistance. It is that we are rebels against God at the very core of our being and need him to be gracious toward us.

I would note at this point that this understanding is quite different from what we often find today, even among Protestant churches that claim to take the Bible and the Reformation seriously. Under the impact of cultural forces that place the consumer at the center, Christianity has become a means to an end, something that helps us to realize our own goals or potential. It is a kind of self-help therapy dressed up in an orthodox religious idiom. Yet this has nothing in common with biblical piety, a grace-based piety that understands the tragedy of the human condition and knows that only God's unmerited favor can solve the problems of the human condition.

This is further evident in the writings of the Old Testament prophets. Earlier, we noted Jonah's complaint about God's grace, knowing that Nineveh deserved destruction but "worried" that God might prefer mercy to justice. Jonah relished grace for himself but was not eager to share it with others. More positively, Joel speaks of God's grace in calling the people back to repentance (Joel 2:13), as do Amos (Amos 5:15) and Malachi (Mal 1:9). Of all the prophets, however, Isaiah is arguably the greatest prophet of God's grace. Beginning with his own crisis moment in Isaiah 6, when he is confronted by the Lord in his holiness, Isaiah is driven to despair because of his own sin, a despair cured only by God's own merciful and gracious action. This awareness of God's grace carries through his writings, into the magnificent Servant Songs, where Isaiah looks to the grace of God as the ultimate hope for the people's salvation.

Isaiah 53:4–6 famously offers a pointed and powerful statement of this grace:

Surely he took up our pain  
and bore our suffering,  
yet we considered him punished by God,  
stricken by him, and afflicted.

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But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.  
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to our own way;  
and the Lord has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.

Here we see the culmination of God's gracious action focused on the Servant. Our griefs and our sorrows have been borne by him. Our peace is bought as he is crushed and chastised. Our sins and transgressions have been laid on him by the Lord so that we might not have to bear their consequences ourselves. God is the agent in this work on our behalf. It is not a response to any good actions we have performed. Rather, it is the opposite: this is how God responds to our sinful rebellion. God's graciousness finds fulfillment in the work of the Servant. Here God's unmerited salvific favor is enacted and displayed for all to see. Isaiah's prophecies of the Servant and his gracious activity point us forward, to the fullness of God's grace revealed in Christ in the New Testament.

## Grace in the New Testament

### *Grace and Jesus Christ*

The supreme manifestation of God's grace in history is Jesus Christ. All of the elements of grace we have discussed in the Old Testament—covenant, sacrifice, prayer—find their culmination in the incarnation and life of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. In him God not only breaks into history in human form but also brings to a startling climax his promised purposes for his people.

Numerous New Testament passages show Christ as the fulfillment of God's Old Testament plan. The genealogy in Matthew 1 reveals that Jesus stands in the human line of Abraham and David, immediately rooting his significance in God's previous covenantal dealings with the Jewish people. Luke's genealogy (Luke 3) goes further, taking us all the way back to Adam. Right after the genealogy, we see Christ tempted like Adam. This time, as the second Adam, he is tried in the wilderness and successfully resists the temptation. In connecting Jesus to the first man and in the recapitulation of his action, Luke connects the Gospel narratives to the argument of Paul in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 where Adam and Christ are presented as the two archetypal human beings, counterpoints to each other. Christ's significance—our understanding of who he

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is and what he has done—is tied to Adam. Jesus represents the action of God in history in response to the failure of Adam.

Reformed theology has typically expressed this relationship in terms of covenants. As Adam was the covenant head of humanity under terms set by God in the garden of Eden before the fall, so Christ comes as the second Adam, the head of a new covenant, to bring his people back into full communion with God. Neither is merely a private individual, living and acting for himself. Both are representative in a way analogous to that in which a head of state represents the whole nation in a single person. Thus, as Adam is the source of the problem, so Christ is the solution.

Old Testament references and allusions permeate the descriptions of Christ in the Gospels. We cannot note them all, but even a cursory reading will show that Christ is the fulfillment of Isaiah's messianic prophecies (Luke 4:18–22), of Ezekiel 34 (Mark 6:30–44, esp. 34), the fulfillment of that for which Abraham was looking (John 8:56), and the one in whom Isaiah's own prophetic commission finds its culmination (Mark 4:11–12; cf. Isa 6:9–10). The references to the Old Testament continue in the New Testament letters, as Hebrews 1 makes it clear that Christ is the final, full, and definitive revelation of all of that which the earlier prophets spoke. Peter, in his letters, makes it clear that Christ's suffering was predicted by the Old Testament prophets (1 Pet 1:10–12). And Luke's Gospel tells us that Christ himself showed the disciples on the road to Emmaus how to read the Scriptures in light of him. Jesus showed them that he was prophesied in the Old Testament and even scolds them for being foolish and slow of heart to not see it (Luke 24:25–26).

Yet this fulfillment of the Old Testament was no easy thing. As mysterious as it is and as reverent as we must be in discussing it, it is clear from the Gospel narratives that Christ underwent huge mental and physical trials as he went about his ministry in Galilee and as he made his way inexorably to the cross. To borrow that distinction from Bonhoeffer, this is no cheap grace. Christ purchased this grace at a cost to which we cannot attach a price but at which we can only marvel in terrified awe.

In this context, we should note that Christ also fulfills the Old Testament connection between sacrifice and prayer. The Letter to the Hebrews is an extended reflection on the nature and significance of his status as the great high priest, and at the center of that role, as with the priests of the Old Testament, are the inseparable actions of sacrifice and intercession. The difference between Christ and the Old Testament priests and sacrifices is that Christ is both sacrificer and sacrifice, both the foundation for intercession and the one who intercedes. This is, to borrow from Newton's well-known hymn, amazing grace: that God himself in the person of the Son would take flesh, become priest, and sacrifice himself as victim on our behalf.

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Hebrews 4:14–16 elaborates on this as follows:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

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If we are ever tempted to think of grace in abstract terms, then this passage, rather like the passages on sacrifice in the Old Testament, should cure us of such. The grace of God here is not simply the fact that God set forth his own Son to be a sacrifice, if that were not in itself amazing enough. It is that the incarnate Son even now continues to intercede for us on the basis of his sacrifice and does so in a manner that takes full account of his human nature and of his incarnate life. God is terrifying and awesome in his absolute holiness; yet because of his grace manifest in Christ, we are urged to approach him *with confidence*. The grace of God in Christ incarnate is the cure for all diffidence and timidity in prayer.

Jesus fulfills the covenant promises, and he is the final, perfect sacrifice for sin. He is the grace of God embodied, the one to whom our pious prayers are directed as he intercedes on our behalf. From the numerous benedictions offered in the letters of Paul (e.g., 1 Cor 16:23; 2 Cor 13:14) to the revelation of the incarnation and the work of God through the person of Jesus in the Gospels, we encounter the climactic culmination of God’s work of grace in the New Testament. If grace is the unmerited favor of God, then the advent of the Son of God in human flesh is the greatest act of God’s grace and the fulfillment of God’s gracious purpose.

## *Grace and the New Creation*

So powerful and so remarkable is the coming of the Christ that it does not simply involve the fulfillment of the Old Testament but also in a sense represents a new beginning, something discontinuous with the past. In the Gospel narratives, this is obvious in the announcement of the virgin birth. Yes, this is a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (Isa 7:14), but it is also something in which the grace of God was especially evident in a manner that involved a break with the past. A virginal conception is a unilateral and miraculous act of the sovereign God. There is no human means of accomplishing such a thing. It represents a break with the natural order of things. God must intervene in human history to accomplish it, and he does so in a manner that emphasizes his grace. The ESV translates Luke 1:28: “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” But you could just

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ESV English Standard Version

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as accurately say “Greetings, one to whom the Lord has shown kindness/grace.” The conception of Mary’s son is connected to God’s decision to make her a special object of his grace.

This in-breaking of grace in the coming of the Christ is of such a miraculous and powerful kind that it finds an analogue only in the act of creation itself. God creates Christ in the Virgin’s womb in a manner akin to the way he created Adam from the dust of the earth. Virginal conception is a gracious conception, and the parallel between God’s work in Christ and his work in the first creation is crucial to the New Testament.

This analogy between the grace of both creation and redemption is developed by Paul in his description of Christ in Colossians 1:15–20:

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Here Paul is not, as the Arians would argue, making Christ the greatest of the creatures in creation. He is speaking of Christ as the *agent* of creation and the one in whom the whole created world finds its unity and coherence. This role in creation is parallel with his role in the new creation, in which Christ is the head of the church and the firstborn among those who rise from the dead.

“Firstborn” is not a statement of chronological priority. In the Old Testament, the term is often used to describe preeminence. Israel is described by the Lord as his “firstborn” in Exodus 4:22, and Psalm 89:27 speaks of the Messiah as being made “my firstborn” to mean that he will be given supreme authority. When Christ is called firstborn by Paul, whether of creation (Col 1:15) or from the dead (Col 1:18), Paul is speaking of Christ’s preeminence in both the original founding of the old creation and in the in-breaking of the new.

Indeed, Christ is not simply the first to rise from the dead chronologically (which would be untrue); he is the prototype for all of those who rise from the dead. In him the fullness of God dwells, and he reconciles all things to himself. The incarnation represents the

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unilateral gracious action of God in the new creation, just as Genesis 1 and 2 describe the old creation as the sovereign, unilateral act of God.

Titus 2:11 declares that “the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.” The incarnation is the embodiment of God’s grace, its supreme revelation. Christ is grace personified. And this lays the christological foundation for the New Testament’s understanding of salvation by grace, a constant theme in Paul’s letters. In Romans 1:1–5, Paul declares that the life, death, and resurrection of Christ are the culmination of God’s historic purposes and the means by which he has himself received grace. Later, Paul says that we obtain access to God’s grace only through Christ (Rom 5:1–2). He also draws a stark contrast between grace and works. We are saved by grace, by God’s free favor revealed and accomplished in Christ, not by any action we might take on our own behalf (Rom 11:6; Gal 5:4). And this leads us to the heart of the human existential problem: in our rebellion against God, we have morally and spiritually died.

## *Dead in Sins, Alive by Grace*

The contrast Paul draws between human works as a futile means of salvation and the work of Christ as God’s gracious saving act lies at the heart of Paul’s understanding of the human condition. If God’s grace is his response to the tragedy of a fallen world, then Christ embodies that response.

In the narratives of the Old Testament we learn that human beings are in bondage to sin and doomed always to fail by the standards of the law. This understanding is made even more explicit in the New Testament and is given a theological rationale by Paul, who ties Adam and Christ together as the two great representatives of humanity before God (Rom 5; 1 Cor 15) and uses language of death to refer to the impact of human sin on human nature (Eph 2:1; Col 2:12). Dead in trespasses and sins, human beings are as passive as corpses in securing their own salvation from sin. Lazarus could not raise himself from the dead, and sinful human beings are equally unable to become new creations in their own strength. As Christ called Lazarus from the tomb, Christ calls morally dead human beings to life, unites them with himself, and enables them to live in the new creation.

This human depravity does not mean that all are as bad or as wicked as they can be. There is a distinct difference between the polite atheist who lives at the corner of the street and is a good neighbor and friend, and the Adolf Hitlers and the serial killers of this world. In claiming we are dead in trespasses and sins, Paul is making a point about our relationship with God: if we are to be brought back into his favor and enjoy that holy communion with him for which we were originally designed, then God must take the initiative. We do not need spiritual healing, for that would imply we are merely in need of repair. We need spiritual resurrection. And resurrection is the unilateral act of God,

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not a cooperative exercise between the living God and the dead. That is vital for an accurate understanding of grace. Grace is not God giving wholesome advice or a helping hand. It is God raising someone from the dead, first Christ and then those who are in Christ.

Paul dramatically makes this point in his letter to the church at Ephesus. He starts the letter by pronouncing a benediction on God for blessing Christians with every spiritual blessing in Christ. This action he roots in Christology and in God's eternal decision. God's grace starts with election in Christ and aims at holiness before him and adoption as God's sons and daughters, all to the praise of his glorious grace. In the next chapter, Paul says that even though the Ephesian Christians were dead in their sins, yet God has made them alive in Christ. This act of God's grace is only grasped by faith, which itself is the gift of God.

## *Grace, Election, and the New Birth*

But how, exactly, is this grace realized in the lives of individual people? At this point, Paul looks at the gracious act of God in the work of predestination. We will take a closer look at the question of predestination and a number of ways in which it has been interpreted throughout history in subsequent chapters. Here, however, I'd like to note several key points.

First, Paul says that our election is *in Christ*. Election cannot be understood without reference to the life and work of the Lord Jesus. It is not an abstract, mechanistic, and impersonal action, a form of determinism as advocated by ancient atomists or more recent deists. God acts in history to save those who are elect *in* the Lord Jesus Christ.

Second, this election is of grace. God does not call Abram because he is a particularly impressive or influential figure. He calls him simply because he decides to choose him and not another (Gen 12:1–3; Isa 51:2). The decision to choose Abraham was not based on intrinsic merit or foreseen faith but solely on the Lord's will and his gracious plan. God often reminded Abraham's descendants that their election was an act of sovereign grace:

For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deut 7:6–8)



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The same basic idea underlies New Testament teaching on election. Romans 9 is a key passage to examine on this issue.<sup>6</sup> In addressing God's grace toward Israel, Paul underlines the sovereignty of God's choice in the matter, a choice not based on intrinsic merit but solely in God himself. To the objection that it is unjust for God to act in this way, Paul responds in Romans 9:20 with an emphatic dismissal: Who are you to answer back to God? The nuances of interpreting this passage proved to be highly contentious in the history of the church, as we shall see in later chapters. But Paul's broader point is clear to everyone: grace is wonderful and deeply mysterious. Because it originates in God himself and has no extrinsic human rationale, we should adore the merciful God it reveals.

This is an important point because, as we noted above, human beings are dead in trespasses and sins, and grace is the divine response to our human predicament. A mere pep talk or a bit of life coaching won't do; we need resurrection, and that has to come from the outside. Lazarus could not raise himself from the dead; nor could he cooperate in the process. It was only by divine intervention of the most dramatic kind that he was called back from the grave. Lazarus is a paradigm of the grace of God in action, what the New Testament calls the new birth (i.e., regeneration; cf. John 3:1–8). And all rebellious human beings are like Lazarus, dead in their rebellion (Eph 2:1) and incapable of moving toward God by themselves. If human beings are to receive spiritual life, it has to come to them as the free gift of God. Paul makes this clear when talking about the remnant in Romans 11. In that passage he draws a clear antithesis between election by grace and election on the basis of works (Rom 11:5–6).

This is where regeneration becomes significant. God's saving action is focused in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and its scope is connected to his decision in eternity to elect human beings to salvation. This is what theologians typically refer to as the history of salvation, the story of God's actions in Christ. It provides the foundation for what is called the order of salvation, which is the way in which the grand scheme of salvation comes to be appropriated by individuals. While I will address this at numerous points in subsequent chapters, the basic point is this: God in the person of the Holy Spirit unites individuals to Christ by faith in his word as it is proclaimed; and this is his action,

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<sup>6</sup> For more in-depth treatments than can be provided here, see John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1–23*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003); Robert A. Peterson, *Election and Free Will: God's Gracious Choice and Our Responsibility* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007); Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, eds., *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000); Matthew Barrett and Thomas Nettles, eds., *Whomever He Wills: A Sovereign Display of Sovereign Mercy* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders, 2012).

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not a team effort between the living God and the human dead in sins. Romans 8:10–11 testifies to this:

But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.

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Elsewhere, Paul ties this power of regeneration both to the preaching of the word and of the Spirit as they work in tandem (1 Thess 1:4–5). God regenerates through means—the word—but it is still God who regenerates by his Spirit, not human beings by their own efforts.<sup>7</sup>

It should be obvious by now that our understanding of grace is coordinate with our understanding of sin. If one thinks sin is, say, just ignorance, then a notion of grace as better teaching or more accurate knowledge will be quite adequate. If one thinks of the human condition as one of moral death, then only grace, which is a powerful, unilateral action of God, will suffice. As John Calvin expresses the matter at the start of his famous *Institutes*, the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are intimately connected. As we understand more accurately the depth of our problem, so we come more accurately to understand the power of God’s solution.

## *The Purpose of Grace*

At this point, however, we should note that grace is more than simply the unmerited favor of God displayed and enacted in Christ. Grace also has a purpose. Romans 8:29–30 unites the origin of the Christian life in predestination to its end in glorification. In Ephesians 2:10 we read that good works have been prepared by God beforehand for believers to perform. This tells us that being saved by grace is more than just a notion, a legal fiction, or a pleasing idea. The gracious work that God has done in Christ has real implications.

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, this area of election and regeneration has proved one of the most contentious matters of theology over the centuries, as will become clear in subsequent chapters. In part this is because the matters on which it touches are so close to how we understand God, ourselves, our relationship to him, and indeed our experience of the spiritual life. Often the debate is cast in terms of *monergism* (God acting sovereignly and logically prior to any human response, and thus determining the nature of that response) and *synergism* (God and human beings acting cooperatively in such a way that the human response has a decisive impact). Both monergists and synergists would argue that they believe in the importance and nonnegotiability of God’s grace. But they would assign different ultimate significance to that grace.

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The most obvious place to see this is in the structure of Paul's New Testament letters. Theologians and biblical scholars have sometimes referred to Paul's progression from indicatives (statements) to imperatives (commands). Paul roots the imperatives of the Christian faith in the indicatives of the Christian faith, making his practical applications—what believers are to do—on the basis of what God in Christ has already done. For example, Paul transitions in his letter to the Colossians from a magnificent elaboration of Christ's person and work to the identity of the Colossians as they are united to Christ. From there, he proceeds to press on them specific behaviors that should characterize that identity. They are to put to death sexual immorality, impurity, passion, and evil desires. They should be good members of their households, fulfilling their respective duties to each other. But the reason why they do these things is not because Christ is a great moral example. They are to do these things because they have been the recipients of God's grace in Christ. In Christ they have a new identity. The work of Christ has changed who they are, and their new identity should now transform how they live.

Consider an imperfect parallel. Those who are Americans are (ideally) committed to the Constitution and the laws of the land. Americans should act like Americans because there is a national identity that is formed by their history and the documents and laws that have given rise to that national identity. This is who they are. If the United States declares war on Iraq, that decision immediately changes every American's relationship to Iraq. Americans will now behave in a certain way toward Iraq (e.g., not giving its government state secrets, not fighting for the Iraqi army). They do this not because they imitate their president but because their identity is American.

In both the New Testament and the Old, practical ethics connect to God's grace because it is God's gracious action that indicatively determines the identity of his people and the imperatives of their lives. In Deuteronomy 10 the Lord declares that he is sovereign, and he reminds the people of Israel of how he chose to love their forefathers. Then he reminds them of his character:

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. (Deut 10:17–18)

These are the great indicatives. They describe who God is and speak of his gracious and merciful character. These are followed by the imperative punch line: "And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt" (v. 19).

*Because* God is who he is and has acted to make Israel his people, the people must now reflect that identity in their own dealing with the widow and the sojourner. His grace

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toward them has changed them, and now, because of the work of God in loving and saving them, they should treat others differently.

## *Grace as Transforming*

All of this points us toward a second strand of New Testament teaching on grace. Grace can also refer to the cleansing, regenerating, and transforming work of God in the lives of believers. Grace as God's unmerited favor finds practical expression as it changes believers into what God would have them be.

A good example of this is found in Paul's words about the Macedonian church in 2 Corinthians 8. In the context of the letter Paul is defending his ministry in the face of criticism among some in the congregation at Corinth. By the time he gets to chapter eight in the letter, Paul is confident that an earlier letter of rebuke that he had previously sent has had its effect and that the majority of congregants are now defending his ministry and the gospel it embodies. In chapter seven, Paul praises the Corinthians for this, but he presses them further in the following chapter. He tells them that the sign of their true repentance is not only their change in attitude to his ministry but whether or not they will complete the offering that is intended for the support of their brothers and sisters in the Jerusalem church. He points them to the example of the Macedonians, who, at the cost of personal hardship, have been keen so to do.

Here is why this is particularly interesting for our examination of grace. Paul writes: "And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity" (2 Cor 8:1-2).

Paul characterizes the actions of the Macedonians as the grace of God. As the Macedonians give out of their poverty, their actions themselves are an act of God's grace. While much of our focus this chapter has been on understanding grace as the unmerited favor of God, we need to grasp that the biblical concept is even broader. At times, believers' behavior itself is spoken of as an embodiment of God's grace. As they have received freely, so they give freely, not as law but as part of their identity. Indeed, Paul reinforces this with the christological argument of verse 9, where he says that Christ gave up his riches and became poor so that the Corinthians (and indeed all believers everywhere) might become rich. God's grace must necessarily be worked out in the life of the church, and if grace involves a movement from death to life, it is inevitable that this new life will show forth in outward ways. Thus, grace will manifest itself in giving (2 Cor 9:8) and elsewhere in the increase of thanksgiving (2 Cor 4:15).

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Grace is more than an objective concept of God's unmerited favor. It has a practical outworking in the lives of believers through the work of the Holy Spirit. In fact, the work of the Holy Spirit can itself be called "grace." For example, Paul sees his own ministry, in which he tirelessly works and labors, as work done in and by the grace of God. As he says in 1 Corinthians 15:10, "I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me." Paul's work is not really his work at all; it is the grace of God at work in and through him.

Given all this, it should not surprise us to find that grace lies at the heart of piety in the New Testament as it did in the Old. The archetypal New Testament prayer, patterned after the Lord's Prayer itself, is the prayer that Christ places in the mouth of the tax collector in the temple in the parable of Luke 18:10–14. The Pharisee presumes to stand before God and parade his own righteousness, while the tax collector stands at a distance with his head hanging low, beating his chest, calling out for the Lord to be merciful to him. The tax collector offers no basis in himself for such a plea but simply looks to God's grace. He is the one who returns to his house justified.

## *Grace and Blessing*

Finally, just as grace encompasses both the origin and the ongoing power of the Christian life, so references to grace bookend many of the New Testament letters. Paul's letters often begin with a salutation containing a reference to God's grace. The apostolic greeting, "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ," occurs in a multitude of Pauline passages (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Eph 1:2; Phil 1:2; Col 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:2; and Phlm 3). John uses a variation in Revelation 1:4. These are so common that they seem instinctive for Paul in greeting the churches. For Paul and the other apostles, to think of a church was to think of God's grace. Just as Old Testament Israel had received her identity from God's gracious action toward her and was constantly reminded of that by the Aaronic blessing, so the New Testament church lives by grace alone.

New Testament benedictions testify to the church both as the beneficiary of God's unmerited favor and as the object of the active work of his grace in the present. Thus, the writer to the Hebrews closes his letter with this:

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20–21)

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Here we see the various strands of biblical teaching on grace woven together in a remarkable blessing. The writer speaks of God's work in Christ. He draws a connection to the story of God's people in the Old Testament. He refers to the efficacy of atoning sacrifice and God's covenant commitment to his people. He mentions the active equipping of the saints by this grace to do work that is pleasing to God. In short, this simple benediction reminds us that God's grace through the history of God's people, both his work for them and his work in them, is encapsulated by grace, as expressed in this benediction.

## Conclusion

This is an admittedly brief survey of grace in the Bible, yet it reveals that the word and the concept are pervasive in Scripture. No theology that credibly claims to be biblical can avoid addressing it. From the fall of Adam and Eve and God's decision to spare them from immediate destruction, the story of God's relationship to human beings is the story of grace. It relates the historical outworking of his unmerited favor toward humanity as he restrains evil and actively works to save his people from the consequences of their sinful rebellion.

Grace is God's response to the fall, and it must always be understood in that context. This means that one's understanding of sin inevitably shapes one's understanding of grace, and one's understanding of grace will reveal what one thinks about sin. When we fully appreciate the destructive and pervasive effects of the fall, we more clearly recognize the need for grace to address our fundamental problem.

As I pointed out when we began, grace must not to be reduced to a mere sentiment on the part of God. God does not choose to overlook humanity's sin and treat men and women as if nothing has happened. The original Edenic relationship has been ruptured. In Adam, we live in condemnation and death for our rebellion. Grace involves action on God's part because sin requires atonement. A biblical understanding of grace must first recognize the context of the Old Testament system of sacrifice and its eventual fulfillment and culmination in the work of Jesus Christ. One cannot talk of grace without recognizing fallen humanity's plight and the atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In later chapters we will examine in more detail the practical implications of a biblical understanding of grace for the church and for individual Christians. Here I will simply observe that grace assumes tragedy. It is because the world is not as it should be that God is gracious. It is because after the fall we are in rebellion against him because of our sinful nature that he acts in the face of the rebellion. It is because we have chosen death that he

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sends his Son to die in our place. Grace is both divine attitude and divine action, and grace reveals the tragic circumstances into which the human race has fallen.

All of this must have a practical impact on the Christian life. Grace is not a license to do as we please. As we noted above, grace involves sacrifice and is thus a violent, bloody thing. Grace is powerful, overwhelming, transformative. It shatters our notions of autonomy, it heals our deepest wounds, and it meets the deepest longings of the human heart. And in all of church history, no one has alerted the church to this fact more clearly than the fifth-century bishop of Hippo Regius in North Africa named Augustine. To his writings we now turn.<sup>8</sup>

- Chapter 1 of *Grace Alone—Salvation as a Gift of God: What the Reformers Taught ... and Why it Still Matters*.

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<sup>8</sup> Trueman, C. R., Barrett, M., & Hughes, R. K. (2017). *Grace alone—salvation as a gift of god: what the reformers taughts...and why it still matters* (pp. 23–49). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.