The Glory of Grace

Sue Bohlin explores God's marvelous grace as the unending flow of His power, presence and favor in our lives.

I bet you recognize "grace" as a theology word. Many of us are quick to say, "Oh yeah, I know what that is. We're saved by grace through faith." Or we know of churches with the word "grace" in their name. But many of us don't have a real handle on it. Often that's because we haven't seen it modeled in our families, our churches, or our communities. We're too focused on trying to prove ourselves good enough, too busy trying to keep God from getting mad at us.



But this misunderstood blessing of grace is *hugely* important. It's one of the big things that sets Christianity apart from all other religions! Any other world religion involves performance-based works. Biblical Christianity says, "We're messed-up broken people before a holy God, and there's nothing we can do to earn His approval. But He loves us and delights in us despite the fact that we don't deserve it." With all other religions, the emphasis is on "do." Because of grace, in Christianity the emphasis is on "done."{1}

One of the most powerful elements of grace is simply *acceptance.* The book of Romans assures us that we are accepted by both the Father (Romans 14:3) and the Son (Romans 15:7). We can do nothing to earn Their acceptance; it's a gift. The Father says, "I accept you just the way you are, but I love you too much to leave you that way. Come to Me: My arms and My heart are open to you because of what My Son did in His incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. I have always loved you, My precious child. I chose you before the foundation of the world, to adopt you into My family."{2} I love to think of God stamping our foreheads with an invisible tattoo that says, "Accepted in the Beloved" (Ephesians 1:6,

KJV).

Pastor Mark Driscoll has an especially great definition of grace. Instead of the one we've heard for years, "God's undeserved favor," Mark calls it "ill-deserved" favor.{3} But my all-time favorite definition comes from John Ortberg: "Grace is the offer of God's ceaseless presence and irrational love that cannot be stopped. It's the flow of God's power and presence and favor in your life from one moment to the next that enables you to do whatever it is God has for you to do."{4} I want to focus on God's power, presence, and favor, as well as giving some real-life examples of what grace looks like.

Power

A little boy was playing in his sandbox one Saturday morning when he discovered a large rock in the middle of it. The boy dug around the rock, managing to dislodge it from the dirt. With a little bit of struggle, he pushed and nudged the rock across the sandbox. But then he found that he couldn't roll it up and over the little wall. The boy shoved, pushed, and pried, but every time he thought he had made some progress, the rock tipped and then fell back into the sandbox.

All this time the boy's father watched from his window as the drama unfolded and his son burst into tears of frustration.

As the tears fell, a large shadow fell across the boy and the sandbox. It was the boy's father. He asked, "Son, why didn't you use all the strength that you had available?"

The boy sobbed, "But I did, Daddy, I did! I used all the strength that I had!"

The father corrected kindly, "No, son, you didn't use all the strength you had. You didn't ask me." With that, the father reached down, picked up the rock and removed it from the

sandbox.

Experiencing God grace means depending on Him to provide the power for our lives, whether it's dislodging a big ol' rock in our sandbox or simply making it through the day.

I like to think of the power of God's grace as electricity that is available twenty-four hours, seven days a week. God's grace is always available to us at every moment of our life, and because of His goodness and faithfulness, we never have to fear a power shortage of God's grace.

The key to experiencing the flow of God's power is what Jesus called *abiding,* choosing to remain in a state of trustful dependence on God. Jesus said in John 15:5, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for *apart from Me you can do nothing*."

I love to illustrate this by turning on a shop light that's plugged into an electrical outlet. When I press the switch, the light goes off, even though the power is still flowing and available. We can shut off the expression of grace, the flow of God's power, by quenching the Spirit—by actively disobeying God, or by passively ignoring Him. But His power can shine in our lives again as soon as we open ourselves up to Him, asking for His help, intentionally depending on His power and not our own. Grace is the flow of God's power in our lives.

Presence

One morning, as I swam laps in the health club pool, I was meditating on these three aspects of grace. I said, "Lord, what do You want me to know about Your presence?" At that very second, I "just happened" to see a large sign on the wall right in front of me: "WARNING: NO LIFEGUARD ON DUTY." I literally laughed out loud, realizing that this was code for "You're on your own, buddy." God's grace means we never have to fear that there's no lifeguard on duty, that we're on our

own, because He has promised to never leave us or forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6, Hebrews 13:5). The Lord Jesus' last promise was, "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20).

My favorite illustration of grace as God's presence is the building of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. Dwight Edwards relates that during its initial stages of construction, "Twenty-three workers fell to their deaths. Finally, halfway through the project, a large net was put in place beneath the bridge. From then on, only ten men actually fell—all caught by the net. Plus, the workers' productivity was raised by twenty-five percent. Assured that their safety was no longer in question, they pursued their work with far greater freedom and effectiveness than before. This is exactly what God has done for us. Stretched wide beneath us, extending from eternity past to eternity future, is God's perfect grace, assuring every believer that we can never fall from His favor. No matter how badly we falter or fail, we can never plunge past the grace of God."{5}

Think of grace as the hand of God ready to catch you when you fall. Because God is good and He is sovereign, that means nothing can happen that He cannot redeem. There is no such thing as an unrecoverable disaster. Even when we sin deliberately and stupidly, we cannot jump beyond the bounds of His grace. Now, His grace usually involves painful discipline, because God disciplines those He loves (Hebrews 12:6), but we cannot out-sin God's love and grace.

Recently, a friend of mine was anguishing, "Why did God allow me to wreck my marriage and family? I wouldn't let my children run out into the street and be hit by a car, why did He let *me* go that far?" As I turned to the Lord for an answer, He whispered, "I'm always protecting My children, but you don't see the disasters I avert." Part of God's grace is the safety of His protecting presence.

Favor

One important element of grace is favor. One dictionary defines favor as “an attitude of approval or liking.”

Five-year-old Matt got up from his nap one day and said, “Guess what, mommy, I just had a dream about Jesus!” The mommy asked, “Well, what did Jesus say to you?” “Nothing.” “Well, what was Jesus doing?” “Nothing.” “Now Matthew, you just said you had a dream about Jesus, he MUST have said or done *something*!” Matt was quiet for a moment, and then with a wiggle and grin he looked up and said shyly, “He just stood there and *liked* me.”

When somebody likes you, their eyes light up when they see you. Did you know God’s whole face lights up when He looks at *you*? The Bible talks about His face shining on us.{6} God doesn’t only love us, He *likes* us! Experiencing God’s grace means He showers not only love but *like* on us, and His face reflects His heart of favor toward us.

Every child needs to receive the “3 A’s” of favor from his daddy: attention, affection, and approval. The Father poured out the 3 A’s on the Lord Jesus at His baptism when He said, “You are My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.”{7} Those words are like gold, and we can receive them into our own hearts as well.

I love the way one daddy blogger expresses grace toward his daughter. He writes,

> I love you. I love the way your hair rolls into ringlets and falls into your eyes. I love the way you read yourself books, even though you can’t read. I love the way you dance and twirl around the kitchen. I love the way you wave at cars that pass on our walks. I love the way you scream “Dad” in the middle of the night. I love the way you say “do it again” when we do something fun. I even love the permanent

> marker custom design you put on my new Mac. But as much as I love you, Jesus loves you more. I sacrifice a lot because I love you, but Jesus sacrificed everything because he loves you. So if somewhere along the way you fail a test or love a boy who does not love you back or have a mastectomy or develop Alzheimer's or gain some weight or lose a job, you will still hold infinite value because Jesus loves you. No matter what. You are loved exactly as you are. Always.{8}

Oh yeah. That's the beauty of grace.

What Grace Looks Like

I want to share some examples of what grace looks like, both the way God showers grace on us, and the way people share His grace with others.

God has poured grace on me in a huge way when traveling internationally. Because of a schedule change, I found myself flying back to Dallas from Germany just in time to speak at a weekend women's retreat. I arrived home from the airport with just enough time to repack my bags and pick up my speaking notes and props. I then drove two hours to the retreat facility, arriving while the women were still singing. I literally got out of the car with my notebook in hand, walked in the door and up to the stage to start speaking. With the time difference, my body felt like it was five o'clock in the morning and I'd been awake for twenty-two hours. But God not only kept me alert, He filled me with His energy, and the women couldn't tell any difference.

When we've received God's grace, we are able to turn around and give it to others.

Grace means responding with patience when someone forgets they already told you something, or that you told *them* something, and just going with the flow. Grace means lifting off the burden of needless "shoulds" that weigh people down. One

grace-filled speaker invited people to respond in song at the end of her message, saying, “If you’d like to sing, great! Join us! If you need a rest, feel free to just listen.” She removed any pressure to perform. At our church, a couple of pastors managed to deliver a message on giving and stewardship without even a hint of shame, or condemnation, or pressure. That’s what grace looks like.

When my friend’s mother contracted Alzheimer’s, she told her daughter early in the progression of the disease, “If I get to the point where I don’t recognize you, don’t take it personally.” She was expressing grace in being more concerned about her daughter’s hurt than her own loss of memory.

Another friend needed eye surgery to keep her from losing her sight. Her friend Angela, who has been blind for a number of years, told our friend, “Don’t be concerned about talking about your vision to me—I am so over that!” That’s what grace looks like.

One of my favorite stories happened one night to my dear friend who was starting to realize what monsters her abusive parents were. She had always patterned herself after her mother, and suddenly realized she had even chosen the same dishes as her mother’s when they got married. Suddenly she couldn’t abide the thought of keeping them in the house a moment longer. She grabbed a plate out of the cupboard and hurled it to the floor, smashing it to pieces. Her husband heard the noise and came to see what was going on. When she explained the connection between their dishes and her mother, her husband calmly said, “Have at it. Tomorrow morning I’ll take you to get new dishes.” Not only did he clean up the mess when she was done, but all those shards damaged their kitchen floor—and he never once mentioned it. That’s grace.

Notes

1. See, for example, John 15:5; 19:30; Colossians 3:4;

Ephesians 2:8-9.
2. Ephesians 1:4-5
3. marshill.com/media/religionsaves/grace
4. This quote came from a sermon preached at Pastor Ortberg's church, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in Menlo Park, California, 2003. When I emailed him asking for a specific citation, his answer was, "I have no idea, Sue."
5. Dwight Edwards, *Experiencing Christ Within Workbook: Passionately Embracing God's Provisions for Supernatural Living* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2002), p. 105.
6. Numbers 6:25
7. Matthew 3:17
8. jeffdlawrence.com/2011/12/23/some-thoughts-on-how-to-talk-to-little-girls/

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