

“It is by grace you have been saved” (Part Two)

Reflection 24 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

It's by grace we have been saved. It is the gift of God. It's not by works, so none of us can boast. All this is from God. God in Christ becomes the sin-offering. God becomes the last scapegoat and the final sacrifice for sin. So what is the result of all this? Because there is a result. A change happens to us. A big change. It has to happen. I mean, if God leaves you as you are and where you are, from what has he saved you? But now there is a result.

Something is now possible that wouldn't be otherwise (Ephesians 2:10). We are God's workmanship, created, not self-made, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do, that is, to bring all things in heaven and on earth together until Christ, to tear down the dividing walls of hostility. Here's where work comes in! It's the result of salvation, not the way to salvation. The simple truth is: Grace leads to works; works do not lead to grace.

So now a new humanity is being formed: saved by grace through faith (through trusting); not boasting; no longer wasting time and spiritual energy on questions about status – it's God, it's all God; a new humanity not alienating by their own self-righteousness those they are meant to save so that when a woman is brought in before us caught in sin, we will take her side and protect her from her accusers, and if we urge her to leave her life of sin – and we will – we will still not condemn her.

And now we can get on with bringing all things in heaven and on earth together under Christ. We are God's answer to moralizing and judgment, to hatred and anger, to fear and to the violence all around us. We are God's answer to racism, to prejudice and discrimination everywhere, to polarized faith and polarized politics, to dividing walls of hostility everywhere. Grace reigns. The power for life is in grace. This is the big idea that draws us all together.

Grace reigns. We are all interconnected. None of us are self-made. The wealth we have, the success we have, we may have worked hard for but we also owe it to the grace of others. Even the good we were able to do, we were able to do because of the goodness that was done to us. Grace reigns. Grace is the reason strong marriages are strong, friendships survive across years, and some people seems always able to draw the best out of others. Grace is the only reason we can dare to examine realistically the sins, failures and mistakes in our lives. If we approach God through law, we will live “under cover,” hoping to avoid detection. It's only grace the gives us the courage to be truthful and honest. And grace is the reason we can dare to tackle tough questions and the most difficult ethical issues of our time. Where there is no margin for error, who would dare to address them?

The power for life is in grace, in knowing the love of God. Grace reconciles God and us. It heals our anger and eases our fear. It heals our relationship. It breaks down the dividing walls of hostility. It cuts out boasting and arrogance. It cuts out dogmatism. It cuts out all the self-defeating behaviors that hinder reconciliation. Because of grace, I need spend no more time

justifying, defending and protecting my own little ego. Now I can let things go. Now I can extend to others the grace I know I need myself. And now I have the moral confidence to move forward. It's grace that makes sustained work possible. And I must hold to this truth whatever else I say, or think, or do, and never let it go. It gives the right tone, the right spirit, to everything else. The power is in this dazzling insight. It's grace that saves, rescues, delivers, heals and transforms us.

Amy Grant has a song called "I Have Decided" with these words:

I have decided
 I'm gonna live like a believer
 Turn my back on the deceiver.
 I'm gonna live what I believe.
 I have decided
 Being good is just a fable.
 I just can't, cause I'm not able.
 I'm gonna leave it to the Lord.
 There's a wealth of things that I profess
 I said that I believed.
 But deep inside, I never changed.
 I guess I'd been deceived.
 Cause a voice inside kept telling me
 That I'd change by and by.
 But the Spirit made it clear to me
 That kind of life's a lie.

I have decided
 I'm gonna live like a believer.

Let's go back to Ephesians 2:8: "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith." It is this truth that taken deep into the soul can bring all things in heaven and on earth together under Christ. Certainly it can change your life. But this life-transforming, world-saving idea has no power for you, unless you trust it. It doesn't change your life until you let go of all your reservations and trust it – that it really is by grace.

God has always operated on the principle of grace. Let's go back to Genesis 28, to Jacob's dream of angels on a staircase to heaven. Here's a man who has just deceived his father and cheated his brother out of an inheritance. But God's response to finding Jacob vulnerable, sleeping all alone in open country, is not to strike him down for his sins, but to bless him, to promise to be with him wherever he goes. It's what God always does. So Peter denies Jesus, and Saul does everything in his power to destroy the church. And God turns the church over to such men. God's the shepherd who leaves the safety of the fold for the dark and dangerous night outside looking for the one who is lost. To God's banquet, God welcomes tax collectors and sinners and prostitutes. He came for sinners, he said, not the righteous.

Maybe you feel a lot like Jacob, in trouble, on the run, all alone at night, unsure if you'll make it to morning. You even sometimes feel you're dying inside, that maybe some important part of you is already dead. God comes to you – offering you a chance to start over, to be born again. And all of this is grace. All of this: to wash away the past, to spiritually resurrect you, to cleanse you and make you clean again, and to promise to be with you wherever you go. And so you wake up like Jacob and say, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it. How awesome is this place. This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.”

– Dale Pauls