

# What is God's Grace?

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | September 15, 2022



What do you understand the grace of God to be? A classic answer is “unmerited favor,” and what is usually meant by that is something we have not earned.

And it is certainly true that none of us have earned God’s grace. His grace is not a paycheck, a medal, or a reward for some achievement on our part. But to talk about grace in this way focuses on the process of receiving grace—not on what grace *is*.

The United States has historically been a society based on merit—a meritocracy. If you work hard, you reap the rewards of your work. So, if you get paid by your employer, you have earned or merited that pay. If you get stronger muscles by exercising regularly, you have earned or merited the growth in your muscles. If you become a better musician because you practice regularly, you have earned or merited that proficiency.

Unmerited favor is when you receive something you didn’t earn or didn’t merit; in other words, you don’t have a right to claim something as being owed to you. In that sense, God’s grace is not ours to claim by right. But understanding that God’s grace is not something we earn still doesn’t tell us what that grace *is*.

If someone gave you a glass of water as you were dying of thirst, you didn’t buy it, earn it, or work for

it—it was a gift. One could say the water was unmerited; it was given to you freely. But the water is water—the method of how you get it, whether free or at a cost to you, is separate from the substance of what it is.

The gift of God's grace to us is the manifestation of His character of love; it is gracious of God. But the fact that God gives His grace freely does not tell us what that grace is. Consider grace as a noun; the action of gifting it is a verb—we receive God's grace without earning it, but what *is* His grace?

## **Deserve Versus Being Owed**

Since it is true that God's grace is a gift to us—something we have not earned, something we are not owed, something we do not receive by right—does that also mean we do not *deserve* God's grace?

That depends on how one understands or defines “deserve.” Does a child born with a terminal illness deserve to be treated with kindness, compassion, and offered a remedy if one exists to restore them to wellness—even though they have done nothing to earn such treatment? Why would they deserve it? Does a child, simply by being a human child, deserve the love of its parents—not because the child earned anything but because of who the child is to the parents? Do we have value and worth to God, not because of our achievements or any work we have done, but because of who God created us to be, because of what God has designed for us and invested in us?

When the Bible describes Jesus as growing in wisdom and stature and favor (which is the Greek word for grace) with God and men (Luke 2:52), did Jesus not deserve His Father's grace or favor?

Was the grace that Jesus received from His Father, as our human substitute, given freely by His Father or did Jesus have to earn it? No, the Father gave His grace to Jesus *in the same way* He gives His grace to us! Jesus didn't “earn” grace from His Father through some system of employment or quest fulfillment. Jesus, as a human, received the free grace of His Father and was empowered by the Father's grace in order to accomplish their joint purpose in saving humanity from sin.

## **Heaven's Empowerment**

So what is God's grace?

The Greek word translated as grace is χάρις [charis /khar·ece/], and the Strong lexicon says it is “good will, loving-kindness, favour ... the merciful kindness by which God, exerting his holy influence upon souls, turns them to Christ, keeps, strengthens, increases them in Christian faith, knowledge, affection, and kindles them to the exercise of the Christian virtues” (Strong, J. 1995. In *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon*. Woodside Bible Fellowship).

This is exactly what Paul wrote in Romans 2:4: “God's kindness leads you toward repentance” (NIV84).

And the kindness of God is freely given because of who God is. We see God's grace in His every action, all His activities, which are the outflow of His character of love and which always fights against evil, opposes corruption, stands against sin, and heals, renews, recreates, cleanses, and ultimately destroys

death and brings life and immortality to light (2 Timothy 1:10). God's grace is the dispersement of His energy, love, life, and power and is seen in His every act, but it is most fully seen in response to rebellion and sin. As Paul wrote, "Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more" (Romans 5:20 NKJV).

God was just as gracious before sin and His grace was present and active before sin, but after sin His grace has been active and revealed in ways that were never before seen in the universe because it was never before needed—including the gracious condescension of Jesus to be our Savior. Prior to sin, God was just as gracious, but His grace never had to function to overcome sin until sin occurred.

We see God's grace in calling to Adam in the cool of the day *before* Adam sinned, but His grace is more powerfully revealed when God gently called, "Adam, where are you?" when Adam was hiding in the bushes after he sinned.

We see God's grace in His patient forbearance toward lost sinners prior to the Flood, waiting to act until there was no other option, when only one righteous man was left on the earth; thus, we see God's grace in bringing the Flood as a therapeutic intervention to keep open the avenue for the Messiah in order to save the species human from sin and eternal death.

But we see God's grace most fully revealed in sending Jesus to take up humanity, broken and damaged by Adam's sin, and overcome where we never could.

"The **Word became flesh** and made his dwelling among us. We have **seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only**, who came from the Father, **full of grace and truth**" (John 1:14 NIV84).

"From the **fullness of his grace** we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; **grace and truth came through Jesus Christ**" (John 1:16, 17 NIV84).

"But each of us was **given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift**" (Ephesians 4:7 NRSV).

"For it is by **grace you have been saved, through faith**—and this not from yourselves, **it is the gift of God—not by works**, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:8-10 NIV84).

The grace of God is indeed a gift—like water to a person dying of thirst is a gift; the gifting is gracious, but the grace is more than the act; it is the *substance* of God's character—His love, truth, methods, power, glory, righteousness—fully manifested in Jesus. When we receive God's grace, we are receiving the presence and power of God via His indwelling Spirit, we are receiving the gift of Jesus, and can say as Paul did, "It is no longer I that live but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). When we receive God's grace, we receive a new heart and right spirit; we have His law written upon our hearts and minds (Hebrews 8:10).

To receive the grace of God means that when we trust Him, when we place our faith in Him, we receive God, via His Spirit, into our hearts, and Jesus lives in us—this is the living grace of God that heals and transforms us. I invite you, if you haven't already done so, to ask and receive His grace into your heart and mind today.