

Living under Grace

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Introduction

Few words are more familiar to Christians than grace, and yet, the *experience* of grace—the manner of its coming, its work in the heart, and the way to “continue in it”¹ —remains a mystery to many. It is true that there are a variety of conflicting opinions and teachings about grace, but the real reason for any unfamiliarity with its work cannot be attributed to any ignorance in the mind, but rather to an unwillingness in the heart to *live* and to *remain* where grace is known.

While men live in their own will, strength, and wisdom, they live outside, or *above*, the grace of God. They are like people who walk on dry land, dying of thirst, when there is a river of water flowing just below their feet. Walking in our own will, our own strength, our own light and way, is the surest way to “set aside the grace of God,”²

1 Acts 13:43

2 Galatians 2:21

because in that condition we are too high to find it. To walk in the flesh is to trample grace under our feet, often without ever knowing that it is there.

That being the case, the way to find and feel the grace of God—that is, the way to experience the effective operation of His power—is to *come down*, and to *stay down*, where it can be felt working. This is called repentance, though many have given another meaning to this word. Repentance is changing course, coming down, and staying down, in a place of continual humility, resignation, and obedience to even the smallest movings, shinings, and manifestations of God's power. And though this idea may be simple enough, the annals of human history have shown that very few are willing to *live* in this way. There are indeed many who descend to this low place every once in a while when circumstances are painful, when sin has ruined outward lives, or when the world can offer no solutions to trials, sickness, confusion, grief, and fear. Under these conditions, many will descend for a few minutes, or a few days, and so put their toe in the river of God's grace. But just as soon as they find strength again in the natural man, or in an outward plan that distracts from inward distress, they rise back up above the place where grace is known. They stand back up in

their own will. They return to their own life, their own goals, desires, pursuits, opinions, and ways, where the power of God ceases to be an experience, and changes quickly into a memory. Then they will talk about grace, sing of grace, and tell a testimony of having felt God's power in the day of trial, when they were humbled and softened by a sight of their weakness. But though there are many who will praise the God who met them in a low place, *there are far fewer who will continue to walk with Him there*. Yes; everything in the natural man recoils at the thought of continuing in that low and desperate place, where grace becomes the very breath of daily life, and not just a lifeline thrown in a storm.

However, there have indeed been some in every generation who have learned what it means to live “under grace”³ —not as a legal status, or an invisible spiritual position, but as a continual abiding under the power of God. Paul was a man who lived under grace. He said, “By the grace of God I am what I am,” and he refused to be more. And because he would be nothing, then grace could be everything. Because he stayed low, grace was always on top. Grace triumphed in Paul, and will triumph in all who remain under its power.

3 Romans 6:14-15

The aim of this little book is to present something of the reality and necessity of living under the grace of God. But because God's grace is the fulfillment of His law, I intend to touch upon the subject of the law on my way to grace.

What is the Law of God?

To understand the law of God, we should take a step back and begin with another question, namely, *what is a law?* The first definition that often comes to mind is simply a rule or a commandment, but the meaning of law goes deeper than this. Some laws are indeed just rules, but there are other sorts of laws as well. In the outward creation there are laws of nature, like the laws of motion, gravity, or thermodynamics. There are also civil laws, laws of science, and traffic laws. In Scripture we read of the written Mosaic Law, but also of an invisible law of sin and death, a law of righteousness, a law of liberty, and the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus. In Romans chapter seven, Paul speaks of finding two different and contrary laws working at the same time in his own person.

In looking for a definition of law that works in all cases, I suggest the following: *A law is a governing power. In other words, it is a rule or*

authority that never changes, and that demands conformity or obedience when acting upon something else. The law of gravity, for example, is a constant rule or power that never changes and that demands obedience or conformity whenever it is acting upon an object in this world. A traffic law is also a constant authority, or a power made by legislation. It does not change because of man's opinions or preferences, and it demands obedience or conformity when acting upon all drivers. What about the law of sin? Sin, too, is a constant power or nature that never changes. It always seeks self, always works evil and darkness, and when it acts upon man, it demands obedience and conformity as it continually distorts the image and likeness of God in all who walk according to the flesh.

Law did not begin with Moses. Law began with God, and it began as something holy, just, and good. Before the fall, God's *life and nature* was the law, or governing power over all created things. I am not referring to written or spoken rules or commandments. I mean that the very life of God—who He was, how He was, what He was, knew, felt, saw, and loved, His very nature and being manifesting itself—this was the constant rule or power that never changed, and that acted upon all of His creation, bringing all into a living conformity

to Himself. This was not a forced conformity to outward rules, or a written code of required compliance. It was an inward and outward conformity and unity, a living power and rule that, when acting upon all of creation, brought it into a perfect alignment and conformity with its Creator.

In the beginning, everything in creation lived happily and harmoniously in and by this law of God's love and goodness. Every created thing, animate and inanimate, kept its place and position in the will and power of God. There was nothing contrary to Him, nothing independent of Him, not a single thing that opposed His nature, life, or government. And therefore all of creation abode for a time in a perfect *state of glory*. Glory is simply a visible manifestation of God's invisible goodness, and for a short while both the natural and the spiritual universe were living environments that happily received and gloriously displayed the wonders, perfections, and attributes of God. All things naturally and freely kept this perfect law of liberty. It was their created state or abode. All things willingly submitted to His government, and this happy submission was both the creature's joy and the Creator's majesty.

Now there were at least two types of beings that were created to receive and manifest an even

greater measure of God's glory than the rest of creation, and these two beings were humans and angels. Unlike the rest of the natural creation, humans are specifically said to have been created "in the image and likeness of God."¹ And by the account given of them in Scripture, we can assume angels to have been created with much the same purpose and potential. But both of these creatures, in receiving a greater capacity for glory, had also a greater freedom to turn against the perfect law of God. That is, they could either submit to and keep their abode in the law of God's life, will, and nature, or they could turn away and break themselves off from it.

This is precisely what happened. Some of the angels "did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode," and so were separated from God's glory and "reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day."² These were the first *lawbreakers*, that is, the first creatures in all of creation that transgressed the holy law of God's perfect will and power. They refused to be acted upon by His unchanging nature. They rejected conformity to His eternal truth. They broke His spiritual law,

1 See Genesis 1:26

2 Jude 1:6

and quickly found in themselves the horrible fruit of their own foolish choice. From glorious angels, they became miserable demons. They were cast out of their heavenly home, and now wander “to and fro in the earth”³ in a dark and contrary nature, “seeking whom they may devour.”⁴

Tragically, it was not long before mankind followed in their footsteps. Man was the crown of the natural creation, the clearest image and likeness of the invisible God in the physical universe. But he too used the gift of his will—a gift that empowered him to seek, cling to, love, and worship the goodness of his Creator—to turn from God, and to pursue the lusts of his earthly eyes, the lusts of his flesh, and the pride of his own life. In this way he too transgressed the living law of God. He stepped out of his proper domain, left his heavenly abode in the will and nature of God, and immediately brought disorder, deformity, and a curse upon all the creation below.

Suddenly then, there was *a new and different law* working in the creation of God. What was this new law? It was “the law of sin and death”⁵ —a new and unchanging rule or power that demanded

3 Job 1:7

4 1 Peter 5:8

5 Romans 8:2

obedience and conformity from everything that it acted upon.

Sin can be simply defined as contrariness or enmity with the perfect law or nature of God. It is the presence and power of something else in God's creation that lives and grows by a contrary will. God is the creator of the universe, but He is not the creator of sin. Sin was not created; it was born when perfect creatures, in a perfect creation, withdrew their will from the law of heavenly life to work in independence, or *self*. This is the origin of sin, and it remains the power of sin to this day. Whenever a creature uses the gifts of God to turn from God into self, it departs from the law of life into the law of sin, where spiritual death becomes the inevitable consequence. In the language of Paul, "The wages of sin is death."⁶

Sin is very much like a cancer that grows in a healthy human body. Health is not the creator of cancer; it is not a part of a body's design. But when a stubborn disorder begins to use the life, the cells, and the energy of a person to cause a growth that is contrary to the good of the body, then disease is born, and death is often the unavoidable outcome. Sin is a cancer that appeared in the perfect creation of God when the will of angels and men

6 Romans 6:23

turned against God's law of life and goodness. And everything that lives in this independent will, that is, everything that walks in *self-will*, is under this law of sin, is made a slave to it, and is led by it down a path that leads to destruction. This is the law of sin and death.

Though Israel was a subject territory under Roman dominion during the time of Christ, the Jews considered themselves free because there were few outward laws restricting their liberty to live, work, and worship their God. Jesus, however, told them that there was a much greater law that had jurisdiction over them, and that every act of sin was a proof of its dominion.

*They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can You say, 'You will be made free'?" Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin."*⁷

Just as long as this new law of sin and death was the governing principle in men—so long as it was the never-changing rule that demanded conformity and obedience when acting upon man's heart—there was nothing that could be done for

⁷ John 8:33-34

their salvation and happiness. In other words, if men would live as slaves to sin, they would necessarily die in their sins, and could in no way return to their original condition. “Then Jesus said to them again, ‘I am going away, and you will seek Me, and will die in your sin. Where I go you cannot come.’”⁸

Forgiveness alone is not the solution to this problem. Forgiveness of sin is a wonderful gift, and a necessary part of God’s work of redemption. But forgiveness by itself does not kill this cancer, or heal this disease in creation. The solution that man needed, and the very thing that Jesus Christ offered, was a *“new and living way”*⁹ *to come back into and under God’s original law of life.* Man needed to be born again of that life to which he had died. He needed to be set free from the “law of sin and death” by the “law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.”¹⁰ But before life and immortality were brought to light by the gospel, a written law of righteous commands was given to God’s people, being “added because of transgression.”¹¹

8 John 8:21

9 Hebrews 10:20

10 Romans 8:2

11 Galatians 3:19

A Law Written on Tablets

In Galatians 3:19, Paul writes, “What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made.” What is the law that Paul refers to here? And what does it mean that it was added because of transgression? This is evidently not an inward and spiritual law of life, nor a rule in the physical creation like the law of gravity. Here, the law Paul had in view was the law of Moses, an outward, written rule that required conformity or obedience from the people who were brought into a covenant with God.

In one sense you could say that the written Mosaic Law was like a traffic or civil law, in that its requirements were placed upon men *from without*, and not from within. And it was “added because of transgressions” because mankind had ceased to live by the law of God’s life¹ or nature. That is to say, because man had departed from

God's righteousness within, because he did not submit inwardly to the righteousness that came from God,² God then added, or superimposed, a written law of requirements to govern him from without, until the birth and growth of God's Seed in man restored the nature he had lost.

Abel, Noah, and Abraham were men who walked by faith, and at least to some degree, received and partook of the righteousness of their Creator. Long before there was an outward law written on stones and parchments, Abel "obtained the testimony that he was righteous,"³ "Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord,"⁴ and "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness."⁵

But when God called Israel out from their slavery in Egypt, He found that they were a rebellious and stiff-necked people that continually murmured against His leadings, and "always went astray in their heart."⁶ Because of continual

1 Also called the "law of faith," or the "law of Christ" in the New Testament. See Romans 3:27-8:2, Galatians 6:1-2 Corinthians 9:21

2 See Romans 10:2

3 Hebrews 11:4 NASB

4 Genesis 6:8

5 Romans 4:3

6 Hebrews 3:10

inward rebellion and outward transgressions, He placed them under a written law which He delivered to Moses on Mount Sinai. This was no arbitrary system of rules and regulations to test their obedience, or to satisfy God's righteous standard through rituals and ceremonies. Very much to the contrary, the Mosaic law was an outward description, a physical representation or mirror, of the living law of righteousness that Adam and Eve had forsaken and lost in the beginning. As the Scriptures amply testify, the written law had the "form of knowledge and truth,"⁷ and "a shadow of the good things to come," but "not the very image of the things."⁸ That is to say, the law was the outward form and description of an inward nature and image that man could not produce on his own.

It is of great importance that we understand that this written law of righteousness was not at all *contrary* to the law of life that once reigned in the soul of man. I emphasize this point because it is common to hear Christians speak of the law in a disparaging way, or to represent it as an enemy to the gospel. But the written law given through Moses should in no way be considered bad or

⁷ Romans 2:20

⁸ Hebrews 10:1

wrong. Very much to the contrary, Paul tells us it was “holy, just, and good.”⁹ The only problem with the law was that it was an outward description and requirement of righteousness, and not an inward nature or life of righteousness. And this indeed created difficulties for the fallen sons of Adam.

In other words, the reason why Scripture sometimes speaks of the Mosaic Law in an unfavorable way, is because there was indeed something unfavorable about *man’s relationship with the law*. The problem was not the law itself, but the fact that an outward, written law of commandments could not change or overpower the inward law of sin and death that reigned in fallen man. It was only words written on a stone, and not a nature written on the heart. It was a description and a requirement of righteousness, and not a life of righteousness. And because it was only words that described a nature that man had lost, the most that it could do was to manifest and reprove (in a multitude of different ways) the evil, impurity, and enmity that man had brought into himself by making himself a slave to the law of sin and death.

Again, there was absolutely nothing inherently bad or wrong with the written law of God. Scripture indeed speaks of our becoming free from

9 Romans 7:12

the “curse of the law,”¹⁰ the “yoke”¹¹ of the law, and the “condemnation”¹² of the law, but these expressions are not used because the law *itself* was defective or harmful. Rather, they are used because *flesh* is defective and *sin* is harmful, and because the written law could do nothing more than expose and condemn the root of sin and its fruits in man.

Paul corrects this very misunderstanding in several places in his letters. For instance:

Romans 7:7 What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law.

Galatians 3:21 Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not!

Romans 7:12 Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good. Has then what is good become death to me? Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful.

¹⁰ Galatians 3:13

¹¹ Acts 15:10

¹² 2 Corinthians 3:9

The written law was not flawed; it was only weak, and for this reason: because it could not put a stop to the law of sin and death in man. In Romans 8:3, Paul says the law was “weak through the flesh.” That is to say, on the one hand, that flesh could not perform the righteousness described by the law; and on the other, that a written law could not alter the nature of flesh. In Hebrews we read that the outward commandment was “annulled because of its weakness and unprofitableness, for the law made nothing perfect.”¹³ The author does not say the law was unhelpful or useless, but only weak and unprofitable because it could make nothing perfect. That is to say, the written law could not remedy man’s problem. It was too weak to stop the inertia of a stronger law that was already at work within him.

Imagine that there was an enormous tree in my yard that began to sway dangerously in a violent storm of wind, as though it might fall on my house. Seeing the danger, I rush inside my house, call the president of the United States, and ask him to pass a new law declaring: “It is henceforth forbidden for any tree to fall on the house of Jason Henderson.” The President agrees with my proposal, endorses the law, secures the approval

¹³ Hebrews 7:18-19

of Congress, and promptly emails me an official copy. After printing it out, I run back outside to the tottering tree, read the law aloud, and think to myself, “Phew, that was a close call!” But within just a few minutes, the wind picks up again, and the tree—unmoved by my good and just law—splits with a loud crack, falls violently, and crushes my house.

This is a silly analogy, but no doubt you can see the point: *the law of gravity is stronger than a written law forbidding gravity to work*. My law was good and fair, but it was “weak” because of gravity, and “unprofitable” because it could not save my house.

The written law was only an outward shadow of the law of life—the inward rule that God wanted to restore to man. It was a good *description* of righteousness, but it was not the *life* of righteousness. It manifested evil things, and pointed to better things, but in and of itself it had no power to *impart* what it described. And this is precisely what Paul tells us in his letter to the Galatians.

*Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law.*¹⁴

Righteousness would have been attained by the written law if it had been able to impart the life of God. But that not being the case, man needed something stronger.

Therefore, seeing that man had lost the inward “law of life,” and come under the “law of sin and death,” the God of wisdom and mercy—with an eye towards man’s redemption—gave Israel a written law of commandments and ordinances, setting it over His people as a light and a standard of righteousness. This was done for at least the following three reasons:

First, so that the description and requirement of righteousness in the written law would uncover, manifest, and condemn the law of sin that worked in the heart of man. This is clearly stated in a multitude of Scriptures.¹⁵

Second, that by creating rules and standards of righteousness, ordinances and ceremonies of worship, precepts of clean and unclean, flesh and Spirit, etc., God would keep the bearers of His testimony from sinking even further into the

14 Galatians 3:21 NASB

15 See Romans 3:20-4:15, 5:13, 5:20, 7:5, 7:7-11, 7:13; 2 Corinthians 3:7-9; Galatians 3:19-3:22

degradation and corruption that had overspread the surrounding nations.¹⁶

And third, that by both of these first two things—that is, both the manifestation of the nature of sin, and the various rules, ordinances, ceremonies, types and shadows of the law—God could point the heart of man to the Seed of life, to the birth of Christ’s heavenly nature, that alone could bring man back under the law of life that was lost in the fall.

Now, when I speak of the outward law pointing the heart of man to Christ the Seed, I refer not only to His outward coming as a Man in Israel. There are indeed many figures and types in the Mosaic law that illustrate Christ’s work in the body as the Son of Man and the Lamb of God. But the far greater share of commandments, ceremonies, and shadows in the law are illustrative of man’s need of a present, inward Savior, one who would slay the bestial nature within, clean the inside of the vessel, heal the leprosy of the heart, and make a people inwardly fit to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.

¹⁶ See Exodus 19:5-6, Leviticus 18:3-5, 24-30, Deuteronomy 19:9-14

Freedom from the Law

Let us now consider the first above-mentioned reason why the law was added, namely: that a description and requirement of righteousness would expose and condemn the reigning law of sin in the heart of man. It is important that we come to a clear understanding of the relationship between the law and the flesh, and also that we do not try to escape from this important work of the law without also escaping from the nature of flesh that is condemned by it.

In a sense, you could say that the written law, with all of its rules, requirements, and threats, pointed its finger at multitudes of evil actions, behaviors, thoughts and desires, and in a variety of ways, said: "Here is something that is contrary to the nature and righteousness of God!" It pointed to uncleanness, perversion, injustice, selfishness, pride of all kinds, and said: "This is against the law of God's life!" It shined a flashlight on every

infection and disease in the human condition and said: “I have located a disorder! I have found something wrong, something dangerous!” This is the nature of the relationship between the righteous requirement of God and the nature of sin that reigns in the flesh. And it is a *permanent* and *unalterable* relationship, because the one is a description and requirement of God’s righteousness, and the other is a departure from righteousness and a contradiction of it.

This is the reason why Paul, in 2 Corinthians 3:9, refers to the law as a “ministry of condemnation.” It was a ministry of condemnation because, by ministering the knowledge of God’s righteousness, it could not help but condemn all that was contrary to it. In Romans, Paul says, “For by the law is the knowledge of sin.”¹ And, “The law entered that the offense might abound.”² And, “What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law.”³

Now, it is likely that many of my readers are familiar with these verses and concepts as they relate to the function of the law in old covenant

¹ Romans 3:20

² Romans 5:20

³ Romans 7:7

Israel. What is often overlooked, however, is that the incompatible relationship between God's righteous requirement and man's sinful nature did not disappear when Jesus rose from the dead, nor does it change when a person comes to faith in Christ. In no way do I mean to suggest that Christians are still under the symbols, ceremonies, and outward rules and punishments of the old covenant theocracy. Nevertheless, *the righteous nature described and required by the law*, and the necessity of being holy as our heavenly Father is holy, have not changed one bit; and neither has God's view of sin. The truth is, the enmity between sin and righteousness can never change! "What fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?"⁴ By definition, and by their very essence, these two natures are eternally contrary to each other. The miraculous incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the outpouring of His Spirit, accomplished a work beyond all human comprehension, but it did not reconcile God to sin, or in any way remove the enmity between these two contrary natures. This is where confusion often arises.

4 2 Corinthians 6:14

It is common today for Christians to think that they have nothing to do with the law's "ministry of condemnation" simply because they are believers in Jesus, or because they were born *after* the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. It is not uncommon to hear statements like, "condemnation for sin was part of the old covenant," or, "I'm glad I live in the time of the new covenant, where I am free from law." But statements like these often demonstrate great misunderstandings.

It is most certain that God has made a new covenant with man through the blood of Jesus Christ, and that this covenant is not learned as rules and precepts written on stone, or observed as ceremonies, rituals and other outward types and figures of spiritual realities. The new covenant is a new relationship with God in the overcoming Spirit of His Son—a Spirit that was poured out, or made available, to all flesh when Christ overcame every obstacle to man's redemption and opened a new and living way to draw near to God. In this new covenant, man can be born of the Spirit, live by the Spirit, walk in the Spirit, and experience the "law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus"⁵ fulfilling the righteous requirements of the law in us. Through it he can be regenerated, sanctified, washed, and

5 Romans 8:2

transformed into the image of his Savior. Much more could be said about the incredible gift of Christ's Spirit, and the covenant established with man in Him. But when, after believing in Christ and receiving His Spirit, we continue to walk in the flesh; or perhaps it is better to say, *to whatever measure* we continue to live in the flesh after being made partakers of His Spirit, the righteous law of God is *still* going to point its finger at every form of sin, selfishness, and corruption, and say, "Here is something that is contrary to the nature of God! Here is something wrong, something dangerous, something that must be put to death⁶ so that you can be free."

Christians frequently object to such an idea, stating that grace has taken away the need for sin to be exposed and judged⁷ in believers. Grace is indeed wonderful, and I will soon say much about it, but one thing that grace *does not do* is change

6 Colossians 3:5 "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth." Romans 8:13 "...if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

7 We must not confuse the word judgment with punishment. Judgment is a division or a discerning between two contrary things. The God of love brings judgment by His light, that we may recognize our condition and follow Him out of it. This made David say: "The judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether. They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb." (Ps. 19:9-10)

God's righteous standard, or forge a fellowship between sin and righteousness. Sin is sin whether you were born in the days of Moses, or two thousand years after Pentecost. And the righteous standard of God that manifests sin has a right to continue its work until His just requirements are fulfilled by the life of His Son reigning in man. In other words, the righteous finger of God is going to continue pointing to all things in His creation that are contrary to Him, until everything has been joyfully brought back under the original law of His life, nature, and Spirit. But wherever man continues to live in the flesh, *there the law still has authority to expose and condemn.*

This is precisely what Paul is saying in the first six verses of Romans chapter seven.

Or do you not know, brethren (for I speak to those who know the law), that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives? For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband lives, she marries another man, she will be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she has married another man.

Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another—to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God. For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death. But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.

Paul begins by affirming that the law has dominion, or jurisdiction,⁸ over a man as long as he lives. This is a meaningful statement. As long as man continues to live *his own life*—the life of the flesh, or first birth—the law retains its dominion, or its right to condemn that transgressing nature. Remember, there is a fixed and unalterable relationship between the righteous law of God and sinful flesh. It cannot end, because God cannot change. For this reason, Paul compares this relationship to the permanent relationship established between a woman and a man in marriage. Just as under the law a woman could never sever or set aside her relationship to her husband, so too a person that is living in the flesh cannot invalidate

8 As the NASB has it.

or break free from the condemnation of the law, because the law has every right to condemn that nature. The law has jurisdiction over the nature of flesh wherever it lives, and the flesh is rightfully under its authority.

Now, in this marriage relationship between law and flesh, the law can never die. Said another way, the righteous requirement of God cannot possibly change or cease to be. However, the sinful nature of flesh can die. It can be crucified by the cross of Christ (the power of God), and in this way the soul can become free from both flesh and its condemnation. This is precisely what Paul declares in the following verses. While we lived in the flesh, he says, “the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death. But now we have been delivered from the law...”—and *how* does he say we are delivered from the law?—“...*having died to what we were held by*, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.”⁹ Do you see what Paul is saying? While the soul of man lives in and under the nature of sinful flesh, it is necessarily bound to the condemnation of the law. But when it dies to the flesh, the law loses the object of its condemnation, because the law was

9 Romans 7:5-6

only added to restrain and to judge the transgressing nature. Thus it is by dying to the flesh through the cross of Christ, that the soul can be joined to Another and bear righteous fruit unto God.

Here is the main point: the way to be free from the condemnation that is due to the sinful nature of flesh is by dying to the flesh through the cross of Christ. It is not by being born in the 21st century, after the time of the old covenant. It is not by attending church, or merely believing in Christ's outward coming, death and resurrection. Freedom from the condemnation of the law is by "dying to what we were held by." It is by a personal participation in Christ's death, an experiential crucifixion of the nature that is (and must always be) condemned by the righteous law of God. And when "the flesh with its passions and desires"¹⁰ is put off, then the law has nothing left to condemn, and death has lost its sting.¹¹

One of the reasons why this is so important is because of a dangerous inclination in the heart of man to claim freedom from the law *without*

¹⁰ Galatians 5:24

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 15:56 "The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law." Which, I believe, is to say: That which makes death sting is the presence or predominance of sin; and that which gives sin its power to sting, or harm man, is the righteous law that can never be at peace with it.

experiencing freedom from the nature that is condemned by the law. We want to say that the law was for another time and place, and that it does not really matter now. We want to say that the historical coming of Christ 2000 years ago did away with the righteous requirements of God, and that now they do not concern us. But the truth is that “the law has dominion as long as a man lives” in the flesh. Again, Paul does not mean that the shadowy ceremonies and symbols of the law must continue to be observed by believers in the new covenant. He was perhaps the first of the apostles to see through the symbols unto the Substance. He only means that the law remains a “holy, just, and good”¹² description and requirement of God’s righteous nature, and therefore, wherever or whenever it finds a man living in a *contrary* nature—that is, living in the fallen nature of Adam—it retains every right to expose and condemn sin.

And this is the reason why Paul states in the following chapter that, “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, *who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.*”¹³ And that, “The righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us

¹² Romans 7:12

who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”¹⁴ And then, writing to those he calls “brethren,” that is, to those who were already believers in Christ, he says: “Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.”¹⁵

Here we see plainly that it is possible to “live according to the flesh” even after receiving the gift of the Spirit, and that neither the outward coming of Christ, nor belief in His name, changes the nature of flesh or the consequences that accrue to those who continue to walk in it. If we, Paul says, even as believers, continue to walk in the flesh, we will die. But if, by living in and under the power of the Spirit, we put to death the deeds of the body, we will live, and so be made free from the law’s condemnation.

13 Romans 8:1 Though it is true that the second half of this verse is absent from a few early Greek manuscripts, it is nevertheless found in the vast majority (well over a thousand), and it communicates nothing more than what is repeated throughout Romans 8:1-17, that believers must escape enmity and death by walking in the Spirit.

14 Romans 8:4

15 Romans 8:12-13

However, we cannot say we have nothing to do with the righteous requirements of the law until we have nothing to do with the nature that is condemned by the law. That is, we cannot say that we are dead to the law until we are dead to the flesh that is exposed and reprov'd by the law. Consequently, if we are still living in the flesh—finding our life and heart and home in the fallen first birth—then we are still “married” to the law and its condemnation, and the law maintains its jurisdiction over us. And if, in this condition, we *also* say that we love Christ, and are married to Christ, then I believe it is safe to say that there is some measure of adultery taking place. Because, “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other.”¹⁶

It is common among Christians both to hear and to sing that Christ has made us free, and there is indeed marvelous truth in this statement. But let us be sure to understand what this freedom is, and also when, how, and whether it applies to our current condition. Those who affirm that Christ has set us free from the law so that we can live our own lives without fear of condemnation are still far from understanding the testimony

¹⁶ Matthew 6:24

of Scripture, or the purpose of Christ's coming. Christ does not free us from the law so that we can live our own lives; He frees us from our lives so that we can live in His Spirit. Or—to borrow the language of Paul—having formerly been “held” by the flesh, and kept under the dominion of Satan, we have been “set free from sin” so that we can become “slaves of righteousness.”¹⁷

It is for this reason that Jesus says, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.” Free from what? His words could not be more clear. Jesus offers us freedom from slavery to sin, and *thereby* from the condemnation of the law.

Therefore, true new covenant freedom is not a mere dispensing with old covenant rituals, rules, and penalties for acts of rebellion. The liberty that Christ provides is from self and sin, and it is experienced in our submission to His overcoming Spirit. Paul says, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.”¹⁸ This is a wonderful truth. But by the very same rule, where the Spirit of the Lord

¹⁷ Romans 6:18

¹⁸ 2 Corinthians 3:17

is *not*—not yet leading and governing—there man remains in his chains.

All of this is clearly stated by Christ Himself in the famous Sermon on the Mount, where He says:

*Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.*¹⁹

Here Jesus tells us that the law can never be destroyed or abolished, because (as we have noted) it is the written description, or outward form, of heavenly goodness and righteousness. It is the nature of God described with words and required of man by God Himself. How could it change? Every jot and tittle of the written law

¹⁹ Matthew 5:17-20

illustrates, manifests, or requires something that is holy, righteous, and good. Behind every single rule, ritual, and washing is this very simple message: “If you want to be Mine, you must be like Me; you must allow Me to make you holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” How could Christ destroy this? Why would Christ abolish this? Did God change His mind in the new covenant about what righteousness is? Or did God change His nature and so no longer require it? No, nothing of the kind. Christ did not come to abolish the law, but to *fulfill* it!

But what does it mean for Christ to fulfill the law? First of all, it means much more than the fact that He kept God’s law without fail. Jesus was indeed “born of a woman,” and “born under the law,”²⁰ as Paul bears witness. He lived a sinless and innocent life, and though He was accused of breaking the traditions and interpretations of the religious sects of His day, He nevertheless observed and honored the Law of Moses in every detail. But *satisfying* the law and *fulfilling* the law are not the same.

Fulfillment has to do with the arrival of the thing testified. The law described, required, and pointed to something, and that *something* was the

²⁰ Galatians 4:4

very life of God—His nature, righteousness, love, light, and Spirit. The aim of the law was Christ Himself, because Christ is the Person, the presence, and the perfect realization of all that the old covenant rules and symbols had ever described. Fulfillment is not just obedience to the law; nor is it destruction, removal, or change of the law. Fulfillment means that every jot and tittle of the law comes to its reality and consummation in the *arrival of the Substance*. The life and nature of Jesus Christ in man is the living substance of all that the law described. Remember Galatians 3:19 and 24: “What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, *till the Seed should* come to whom the promise was made.” “Therefore the law was our tutor *to bring us to Christ.*”

In a few words, Christ’s fulfillment of the law means that the purpose of His coming, living, dying, and rising, was to bring in and establish (first in Himself as the Son of Man, and then in His body the church) the very righteous nature described in words and rituals.²¹ It means that Christ’s own life can be “made unto us wisdom, and righteousness,

²¹ Jeremiah 23:6 “In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell safely; Now this is His name by which He will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.”

and sanctification, and redemption.”²² Jesus did not come because God changed His mind; He came as the fulfillment and experience of what God always had in mind. This is what it means to *fulfill* the law.

The following is a silly analogy, but perhaps it will help to illustrate this reality. Imagine that a young man had a very clear picture in his mind of the woman he desired to marry. And because he was so certain of what he wanted, he filled a notebook with all sorts of descriptions and sketches of exactly who she would be and what she would be like, and then began to patiently wait for her. In the course of a few years, several women were presented to him as possible candidates for marriage, but after taking out his notebook and making careful comparisons to all that he had written, he dismissed each of them as coming short of his expectation. Finally, however, after years of waiting, he met the young woman of his dreams, married her, and joyfully discovered that she was indeed the living fulfillment of everything he had envisioned and recorded in his notebook.

Now I ask you: did the arrival of this young woman in any way *change* his mind? Did it contradict, dismiss, or abolish what he had written in

22 1 Corinthians 1:30

his notebook? Of course not. It did not replace his expectation, it satisfied it. It did not change his description, it *fulfilled* it. She was the arrival of the substance, the perfect realization of every jot and tittle that he had written some years before.

It is in this way that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment, the realization, and the satisfaction of the law. He did not change or abolish it. He came as the very thing that the law described with every word. For example, Jesus Himself was the sweet-smelling aroma under the law that pleased the Father. He was the purifying water that cleansed the leper, the light that shone from the candlestick, the bread that fell from heaven, and the fire that consumed the flesh on the altar. Jesus Christ was the very nature expressed in the moral law—the justice in its civil commands, the kindness in its care for widows and orphans. He Himself was the love required between brethren, the holiness demanded of the High Priest, the true Sabbath rest on the seventh day, and the atoning blood poured out in every sacrifice. Therefore, when the Son of God came as a man, His purpose was not to teach something different, or abolish something irrelevant, but rather to usher in the substance of everything that words and rituals had only dimly represented. Very far from providing a way for

man to break the law, or to live unconcerned about its righteous requirement, He came as the fulfillment of it, and made a way for every human being to experience this fulfillment in themselves—being born, transformed, and led by His own Spirit of righteousness.

This is why He said, “Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men to do so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” In essence, He was saying, “I offer no freedom to break the law. What I offer is freedom from the nature of sin, so that all who live in My Spirit may fulfill the law.” Or in the words of the apostle: “...that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”²³

And this is the reason why Jesus finishes this passage with these words: “Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” It is because the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was not the righteousness of the Substance, but only the righteousness of the

²³ Romans 8:4

description. It was a notebook full of descriptions and sketches, but it was not the living wife. It was flesh trying to be holy with a book in its hand, but without the Spirit of Holiness.

With this very reality in mind, Paul tells us in Romans 3:21: “But now the righteousness of God *apart from the law* is revealed, being witnessed [or testified to] by the Law and the Prophets.” Do you see the distinction? Now, Paul explains, the substance of righteousness, the very nature and life of righteousness, has come *apart from the mere description of righteousness* that was given in the law and the prophets. Now the perfect wife has come, apart from the notebook. And then he concludes: “Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law.”²⁴ Or, referring once more to our analogy, we could say, “Do we then make void the notebook through the coming of the wife? Certainly not! On the contrary, her coming establishes all that was previously written.”

All of this has been said in order to demonstrate beyond any doubt that the only way the law loses its jurisdiction, or its right to condemn the sinful nature of flesh in man, is as the Person of righteousness, the fulfillment of righteousness,

²⁴ Romans 3:31

begins to live and reign in the heart. The law has jurisdiction over a man as long as *he* lives in the flesh. God's righteous requirement has a permanent right to expose and reprove what is contrary to His nature. And though it is a glorious truth that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the law, merely *saying* this, *understanding* it, or *believing* it to be a fact, does not make an individual free from sin, or above the reproofs and corrections of the righteous requirements of God. Not one jot or tittle will pass from the law until all is fulfilled, and both Jesus and His apostles have plainly informed us that this fulfillment is to be experienced *within*.

What is Grace?

Before taking up the subject of grace, it may be helpful to quickly review some of the most important things that we have already said about law. First, we defined law as a constant rule or power that never changes, and that demands obedience or conformity whenever it acts upon something else. This is true of all kinds of laws, whether they are outward written laws, natural laws (like gravity), or spiritual laws, like the law of sin and death, or the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.

We saw that, in the beginning, there was no need for any outward or written laws, because the life, power, nature, and will of God was operating as a law in and over all creation. As long as creation continued in its proper domain, in submission to its Creator, all was goodness, righteousness, and joy. It was only when man stepped out of this happy submission to God's government (called the kingdom of God), and transgressed His nature

and power and righteousness, that an outward law was added. It was added because of transgressions until the Seed would come—whose coming was both outward and inward.

We saw that the problem with this outward law, which was given to man in words, commands, and requirements, was that it could not give what it described. It described righteousness, love, and union with God, but it could not impart these things, and so it was weak and unable to “make perfect”¹ those who lived by it or under it. However, what the law *could do*, and what it *had to do* by its very nature, was point out every way that the natural man fell short of the purity, perfection, and righteous requirement of his Creator. In itself, the law was “holy, just and good,” but it worked as a “ministry of condemnation” to the transgressing nature, exposing and condemning everything in man that was contrary to the life and will of God.

Finally, we saw that this unfortunate relationship between the law of God and the sinful nature of fallen man, was compared by Paul to a permanent marriage relationship that can only be ended by death. The law cannot die, because it describes and requires the unchangeable righteousness of

¹ Hebrews 7:19-9:9, 10:1, 11:40

God. But the sinful nature of flesh, or “the old man,”² can be experientially baptized into the death of Christ, and the soul joined to the One who was raised from the dead, in order to bear fruit in righteousness. In this way, the righteous law is never abolished, changed, forgotten, or repealed. It is rather *fulfilled* by the righteousness of Christ living and reigning in those who walk by His Spirit.

Having understood these things concerning the law, we are in just the right place to understand the gift of God’s grace, *because grace is the coming of what the law could not do*. Grace is powerful where the law was weak, and unlike outward rules and regulations, grace is indeed able to perfect those who draw near to God.

It is of the greatest importance that every Christian rightly understands and experiences this incredible gift. I say *rightly*, because I believe the enemy of man’s happiness has sought to disseminate many falsehoods regarding the grace of God, several of which had already become popular in the days of the first apostles.

What is grace? Most Christians associate the word grace with a free gift from God. When I was young, I remember hearing an older Christian

2 Ephesians 4:22; Colossians 3:9; Romans 6:6

define the words grace and mercy in the following way: “Grace,” he said, “is when you get something you *do not* deserve; mercy is when you do not get something that you *do* deserve.” I remember at the time being somewhat struck with the profundity of this statement, but I realized later that it actually told me very little about grace. Understanding that we do not deserve grace, does not tell us anything about what it is. Christians sometimes exclaim: “Grace is the free gift of God!” Indeed it is. But a free gift of *what*? Much depends upon our understanding of what it is, what it does, and how we come to experience it.

It is not uncommon today to speak of grace as though it had something to do with the removal of a law for righteousness. People often make comments like: “Under the law there were strict boundaries and fixed expectations regarding righteousness, but now Christ’s death and resurrection have happily taken all of that away and given us grace.” In the mind of many, the “grace” spoken of here is more or less synonymous with *tolerance*, and for this reason, the law is frequently contrasted with grace in the sense that one is strict, and the other is more lenient. It is thought that law is intolerant, but grace is much more willing to wink at failures and wrongdoing. In fact, it has become a popular

form of encouragement to say to another, “Give yourself some grace!”, meaning, “Don’t be so hard on yourself; everyone makes mistakes.”

Others make use of Paul’s expression, being “under grace”³ as though it referred to a new status or legal position with God, where all sin is removed from His sight (some say “past, present and future”), or at least where God is less concerned with sin than He was in the days of Moses. In the mind of these, the grace of Jesus Christ works somewhat like a giant umbrella that shields the believer from God’s searching eyes and unyielding demands. In fact, it is increasingly common to hear Christians say, “Thanks to grace, when God looks at you, He doesn’t see you at all; He only sees Jesus.”

But despite the popularity of these ideas, they really have *nothing* to do with what the Scriptures affirm about the grace of God. I mean this quite literally; they have not a single Scripture in their favor. We have already demonstrated that the righteous law of God is not to be shielded or softened, but rather *fulfilled* by the very nature that it describes. Jesus’ words are clear: “Not one jot or one tittle will by any means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.” And Paul insists that, “the

3 Romans 6:14

righteous requirement of the law” is to be “*fulfilled* in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

How then should we understand the grace of God? If you look up every occurrence of the word grace in the New Testament (something I encourage every Christian to do; there are about 130 of them), I believe you cannot help but see that the word grace has to do with *the power of God freely offered to man, and effectively working in man*. To offer a very general definition, the Bible teaches that *grace is the effective working of God’s power*. And in the majority of these 130 verses, we see that God’s grace *comes* in a very particular way, and *does* a very specific thing in the heart of man. Grace is not a new status. It is not a legal position. It has nothing to do with God removing His righteous requirement, with tolerating sin, or with being unable to see it. All of this is pure invention. Grace is the living and effective power of God that works in and upon man.

When speaking of the Child Jesus, Luke writes, “And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him.”⁴ Could this possibly mean that a new legal position was upon Jesus? Or that God was

⁴ Luke 2:40

overlooking Jesus' sins by grace? Of course not. Instead, we understand that the living power of God, the effective working of His might, was in and upon the incarnate Son of God, even when He was a Child. In Acts 4:33 we read, "And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all." Clearly the meaning here is that the power of God was manifestly present with them all. Grace was God's power working in their weakness,⁵ demonstrating what He would do in His own will and by His own strength.

A Measure of His Fullness

Consider the following Scripture:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. John bore witness of Him and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.'" And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for

5 See also 2 Corinthians 12:9

*grace. For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*⁶

Here John tells us that “the law was given through Moses.” Once again, what was this law that came through Moses? It was the description and requirement of righteousness that was given to men because of transgression. And though it was holy, just, and good in itself, it was nevertheless weak and unprofitable because it could not impart the nature that it described; it could make nothing perfect. Then John says, “but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” What is this grace that comes through Jesus Christ? Grace is not a description of righteousness in words, and it most certainly is not the removal or lessening of God’s righteous requirement. *Grace is the power of righteousness, the life of righteousness, the substance and Person of righteousness, given to live, to grow, and to reign in the soul of man.*

Remember Paul’s words to the Galatians: “If there had been a law which could have *imparted* life, then righteousness would have been by the law.”⁷ We have seen that the written law could not give life, and for that reason it was called weak and

⁶ John 1:14-17

⁷ Galatians 3:21

unprofitable. Grace, however, *can* give life. Grace does give life. In fact, that is precisely what grace is! It is a gift or measure of the life and power of the One who is righteousness. Grace is a measure of His fullness.

We also read that the law “was added because of transgressions, until the Seed should come to whom the promise was made.”⁸ The law exposed transgression, and pointed to the life, nature, and righteousness of Christ. It showed the need for Christ, and was “a tutor to bring us to Christ.”⁹ But the actual coming, giving, or sowing of this life-giving Seed is called grace. Christ the Seed came outwardly, and He also comes inwardly. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say: Christ the Seed came outwardly *so that* He could come inwardly. The outward work of Christ opened a new and living way in which every soul could experience the inward work of Christ.

Therefore, the *first* and most important thing that we must understand about grace is that it is the power of God—the effective working of His life and light, which both came to the world as a Man, and then was given to all men as an indwelling gift that can do what the written law could not. It is

8 Galatians 3:19

9 Galatians 3:24

a gift of God's power, a measure of His life, light, and Spirit, which comes from the One who is "full of grace and truth."¹⁰ "Of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace."¹¹

How Grace Comes

A *second* essential thing that we need to understand about grace is *the manner of its coming*, or the way that we receive and experience it. This too has been a point of confusion for many.

We have already seen that the grace of God can have distinct manifestations or expressions. In Acts we observed that the word grace is once used to describe a visible working of God's power in signs and miracles. In Luke it is used to refer to the power of God secretly working in Jesus when He was a child. However, with respect to *its redemptive work in man*, in both the parables of Jesus and in the letters of the apostles, the gift of grace, or the effective working of God's power, is most often described as having the nature and property of a heavenly *seed*. Though in essence it is a measure of the very life and power of God, yet

¹⁰ John 1:14

¹¹ John 1:16

it begins in the heart as something very small, and there produces its own increase and kingdom.

There are a variety of terms and metaphors used throughout Scripture to illustrate the work of grace in man. This is not because grace is complicated or difficult to understand, but simply because its work is great, and because no single name or figure can capture all that it is or does. It is frequently compared to a seed because it is alive, because it grows by its own power and will, and because it produces an increase of its kind. It is also like a seed in that it must be received into good soil, and protected from the weeds, thorns, rocks, and birds that are a threat to its growth. In many places in the New Testament, the experience of God's power or grace is compared to a living Word (or an "implanted Word,"¹² a "Word of faith,"¹³ the "Word of His grace,"¹⁴ "Word of life,"¹⁵ "living and powerful Word"¹⁶ etc.) because it is an inward communicator of God's will and truth. It speaks in the heart, separating the precious from the vile, and yet it can only be heard by circumcised

¹² James 1:21

¹³ Romans 10:8

¹⁴ Acts 14:20-3:32

¹⁵ Philippians 2:16

¹⁶ Hebrews 4:12

ears. Elsewhere it is likened to a talent or a mina because the recipient of grace must cherish and steward it as the greatest of treasures. If we allow it to increase, and do not bury it in our “earth,”¹⁷ it multiplies of its own accord and brings joy to our Master. It is compared to hidden manna, or bread from heaven, because it must be carefully gathered and then eaten every day as the soul’s inward and heavenly nourishment. There are also Scriptures where Christ compares the work of grace to a pinch of leaven, because it spreads, fills, and changes all that man is, all “three measures of meal;”¹⁸ or to a costly pearl and a hidden treasure, not only for its great value, but also because it is difficult to find, and impossible to possess, unless a man is willing to “forsake all that he has”¹⁹ in this world.

All of these terms or figures (with many others) speak of the same gift of grace that is offered to man in his fallen condition. And all of them represent it as a living and powerful gift that begins very small, increases in the right conditions, and transforms the willing soul into the kingdom of God. The same idea is communicated throughout

¹⁷ Matthew 25:25 KJV

¹⁸ Matthew 13:33

¹⁹ Luke 14:33

the letters of the apostles in a variety of different expressions. We read of a “power that works in us exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think,”²⁰ or the “word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance.”²¹ Paul prays that all believers might experience “the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead.”²² We are encouraged to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ;”²³ to “desire the pure milk of the Word, that you may grow thereby,”²⁴ and to “grow up in all things into Him who is the head—even Christ.”²⁵

Grace, therefore, is the living and effectual operation of God in the soul, working and spreading as divine leaven in the inward man. It is a gift of God’s own light, life, Word, or Spirit, given to accomplish the great work of regeneration. Every other manifestation of God’s power, every

20 Ephesians 3:20

21 Acts 20:32

22 Ephesians 1:19

23 2 Peter 3:18

24 1 Peter 2:2

25 Ephesians 4:15

sort of outward miracle, bodily healing, physical provision, or anything else that God's power can do for man, comes short of resolving his true problem if it does not produce in him the birth, growth, and dominion of Christ's life and nature. And the reason for this is plain: It is because the calamitous fall of man was *not* a loss of outward things. It was not just the loss of bodily health, outward comforts, supernatural abilities, or walks with God in a beautiful garden. The fall of man was the loss of the life, light, and Spirit of God. It was a death to all goodness, and the end of the soul's union with the divine nature. It therefore cannot be otherwise: man's restoration and redemption can be nothing less than an experiential recovery of all that was lost.

This is what grace must do for man. And *this* is why the effective working of God's power is given to him. Why would fallen man need a grace that winks at selfishness, pride, and the love of this world? Or that offers a way to continue in sin without fear of punishment? How could that help us? Why would we rejoice in a grace that removes the righteous requirements of the law, hides our true condition from God's sight, and yet leaves us in bondage to sin, selfishness, and evil desires? No; what man needs is heavenly power to *see* his lost

condition, to *turn* from sin and self to the power of God, to be *born* of the Spirit, and to *grow* into the image and likeness of Christ.

Behold, then, the magnificent gospel of God's grace! What is this gospel of grace? It is the truth, the reality, *the miracle*, that God has provided such a power, a living seed or gift of His own light, life, and Spirit, that can change man's condition, and change man's eternity, by changing his nature. It is a gift of power that—when not grieved or resisted—will effectively raise and en-throne the life of God in the heart of man. And if we look anywhere else besides *this* grace, we look in vain for a solution to our problem. That is, if we look anywhere besides *this* implanted power, *this* heavenly Seed, *this* free gift of life and light that is poured out on all flesh because of the victorious work of Christ, then we look to something that cannot help us.

And it is because man stands in total dependency on such a power from above that Paul was amazed and alarmed that the Galatians were “turning away from Him who called them *in the grace of Christ* to a different gospel.”²⁶ It was because he knew there was no hope apart from this heart-transforming power that he repeats twice:

²⁶ Galatians 1:6

“Even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.”²⁷ These are familiar and oft-quoted verses, but they lose their meaning and force if we change Paul’s definition of grace. I say this because there are those who will insist with Paul upon the necessity of grace, who will sing that grace is amazing, and confess that all depends upon it, but then will teach that the greatness of grace is that God has removed the law, that He cares very little about sin, or that He saves us from the consequences of sin without freeing us from its power. It therefore must be said that such teachers of grace have not themselves been taught by grace; for they clearly show themselves to be unfamiliar with its power, and strangers to its instruction.

This brings us to a *third* thing that we should understand about the grace of God: *Grace is a teacher*. Grace does not sit on a shelf in heaven like a lifeless legal contract. It is not an inanimate doctrine, or a stationary position. No; grace is a living thing, because it comes from a living God. And because it is alive—a living gift of the light, life, and power of God—its presence and influence in the heart always teaches us to turn *from* what

²⁷ Galatians 1:8

is contrary to Him, and to turn to, look for, long after, pray for, and wait for His further appearing. Consider the following words of Paul in his letter to Titus:

*For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.*²⁸

Some preach a grace that tolerates ungodliness and winks at worldly lusts. But the grace that Paul knew taught to deny all ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present age. Wherever grace appears, there are convictions for evil and drawings towards righteousness, because grace teaches men to depart from the spirit of the world and to live in the Spirit of Christ.

And is this not what every sincere seeker of truth discovers in their own heart? Not everybody

28 Titus 2:11-14

witnesses miracles in their body, or acts of power in the outward creation. But do we not all—at least at certain times and seasons—feel a light that visits us in our darkness, exposes wrong things that we do not want to see, and calls us out from them? Who has not, in moments of stillness and sobriety, received an ability to see a contrast between the evil of their own condition, and the goodness and purity of God? Who has not had both good and evil, life and death, plainly set before them, and heard a still, small voice inviting them to “Choose life!”? Where does this come from? Who is this teacher? *This teacher is the grace of God that brings salvation.*

Grace does not save all, because all do not receive it. But it appears to all, calls to all, and brings with it salvation for all who will be taught by it. And any who will listen to the instructions of grace will quickly discover that it never teaches contrary to the nature of God, nor to the testimony of Scripture. For instance, grace will never teach you that God is unwilling or unable to overcome all sin in the heart of a Christian. You may hear such a teaching from man, but you will neither read it in Scripture nor be taught it by grace. Nor does grace speak like the false prophets, who “heal the wound of God’s people slightly, saying, ‘Peace,

peace!’ when there is no peace.”²⁹ No; grace is a good teacher, and it not only speaks the truth, but also empowers man to live it.

²⁹ Jeremiah 6:14-8:11; Ezekiel 13:10

Removing a Stumbling Block

We have seen that grace is the effectual working of God's power in man. It is not a new position or status, a legal contract, or a softening of the law for righteousness. It is the power of God, a measure of His own life, light, and Spirit that actually fulfills the requirement of righteousness in man by changing his heart. Grace removes condemnation, not by removing the requirement of righteousness, but by forming the righteous life of Jesus Christ in the soul. Grace is power. It is the power of a new life, with a new nature.

The law came through Moses, but the authority and the power *to make righteous* came through Jesus Christ. And though this power can be manifested outwardly, though it can create stars, planets, mountains and oceans, still its greatest manifestation, and its greatest miracle, is found in the dark heart of fallen man where it changes sons of wrath into children of light. The law described

righteousness, but grace is the power of righteousness, goodness, life, and love, planted in the soul by the resurrected Son of God.

Now, with respect to man's experience of grace, it can be compared to the coming of Jesus Christ to His temple, which had long been a den of robbers; or to the coming of a strong man to his house, where another had previously possessed His goods. But both the nature of this coming, and the nature of His increase, were a "mystery hidden from ages and from generations, but now revealed to His saints."¹

What was this great mystery? In a word, it was the reality that, though God is a great and mighty King, He begins His powerful reign like a small stone cut out of a mountain without hands,² like a mustard seed in a garden of other plants, or like a treasure hidden in a field. This is perhaps the greatest and most important "mystery of the kingdom of God."³ Neither Christ's outward appearing

1 Colossians 1:26-27. The context of this quotation refers to Christ's presence in man, our "hope of glory." See also 1 Peter 1:10-16, where we are told that the prophets of old "inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of *the grace that would come to you.*" In consideration of which, Peter instructs us to "rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

2 Daniel 2:34,45

in Israel, nor His inward appearing in man, has come like an army with banners, or like an atomic bomb that demolishes everything in its path. No; His coming is like a humble and unpretentious King who sets His throne right in the midst of His enemies, and from there extends His rule in those who surrender their will in the day of His power. This is the nature of the kingdom declared by David in the famous Ps. 110, the most frequently quoted Psalm in the New Testament.

The LORD said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool." The LORD shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion. Rule in the midst of Your enemies! Your people shall volunteer freely in the day of Your power; in the beauties of holiness.

The reign of God's power does not advance like the kingdoms of this world. The kings of this world first defeat their enemies, and then set their throne in a conquered land. But here we are told that God first sets His King in the midst of His enemies, and from there sends out "the rod of His strength," waiting for them to be made a footstool for His feet. God first anoints His King, sows Him

3 Matthew 13:11; Luke 8:10

like a living seed into the heart of man, and then invites him to relinquish his will in the day of His power—that is, when light dawns in the heart. These two aspects are always involved in the increase of His kingdom: on the one hand, there is a voluntary joining to the Lord in the light, or in “the day of His power;” on the other hand, there is an ongoing destruction of the uncircumcised nature.

It would be beyond my scope here to say much about the unmistakable parallels and pictures of these spiritual realities given to us in the stories of the Old Testament. But allow me at least to encourage my reader to peruse the story of David with these truths in mind. In so many ways, the beginning, increase, and reign of David in the outward land of Israel, with all of his battles, both against Saul and the Philistines, were pictures of the working of Christ’s grace in the heart. The kingdom of David was a God-given illustration of the truth that, though grace begins as a small anointing, yet it can overcome all enemies, rescue the willing soul, and fill the land of the heart with the kingdom of God.

The Word of Grace

When Paul had been with the church in Ephesus for three years, he left them with strong warnings, informing them not only that “savage wolves” were coming who would not spare the flock, but that men would arise from within the church speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after themselves. Immediately after this he says:

*Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.*⁴

Look carefully at what Paul is saying here. “Watch, be on your guard! I am leaving you, but there is something staying behind with you. Danger is coming both from within and from without, but there is a power that will remain with you. I commend you to this power! I point you to it as your only hope. It is the Word of His grace, a Seed of His grace, a gift of Christ’s living power,

4 Acts 20:31-32

which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified by it. This grace is your strength, your wisdom, your experience of God's salvation. Love it, and it will grow. Obey it, and it will build you up. Submit to it, and it will sanctify you."

It seems well worthy of notice in this passage that Paul did *not* say, "Problems are coming, deception is coming, but I commend you to my writings." Or, "Things are going to get bad, but I commend you to the leaders and elders that I have appointed over you." Instead, he commends them all to a Word of grace that (when submitted to) would never fail to lead and empower them in the way of life. This grace begins like a little light in the heart, or like a still, small voice that says, "'This is the way, walk in it,' whenever you turn to the right hand, or whenever you turn to the left."⁵ And when we love its light, we begin to feel its power. We find that it has an anointing from on high to teach,⁶ to cleanse, to change, to put to death and to make alive. Grace does all things in the believer when it is received and obeyed. Grace

5 Isaiah 30:21

6 1 John 2:27

must do all in man, because man can do nothing good apart from grace.

A Cross-less Grace

But now, in love to my reader, and with sincere desires that all will experience this Word of grace and its work in the heart, I feel an obligation to remove a couple of common stumbling blocks out of the way of all sincere seekers of truth. I take no pleasure in finding fault with wrong ideas, or in contributing to divisions in the already divided church. I have a strong aversion to argument, and generally find debate to be an unfruitful practice in the body of Christ. However, because we have a very real enemy, who would love nothing more than for Christians to end their race with heads full of doctrines, and hearts entirely void of the life and nature of Christ, I feel compelled to expose a couple of his most successful misrepresentations.

In the heart of fallen humanity, there is a prevailing tendency to want to be seen to be better than we truly are. This unholy desire is naturally in all of us. In fact, from the very onset of sin, man has tried to hide his true condition behind a variety of fig-leaf coverings and theologies. In consequence,

it has become a very attractive idea in the church today to somehow possess a righteousness that we do not actually experience or obey, to consider ourselves sanctified without actually having to change, or to call ourselves redeemed in the sight of God even when we are clearly *not* redeemed from sin, vanity, foolish talking, lust, and the love of the world, in the sight of our closest friends. Man is enamored with the idea that God can *call* us “dead to sin,” even when our daily choices manifest that we are very much under its power. We love to hear leaders tell us that God sees us one way, even when we know that our spouses would say something diametrically different.

This great propensity in the heart of man, encouraged by the whisperings of an invisible enemy, has produced a large buffet of doctrines that, in one way or another, proclaim a kind of “grace” that can be possessed and enjoyed without man having to lose his life, his will, and his treasure in the flesh. In other words, it has created a *cross-less grace*—a grace that does not crucify the passions and lusts of the first birth; a grace that covers sin without removing it, or that frees from the *consequences* of sin without actually bringing man out from under its dominion.

These are not minor doctrinal inaccuracies. This is a *false grace* that, when believed, can work in the heart of Christians as an enormous barricade, obstructing the experience of redemption, silencing the voice of conviction, and resisting the work of the Spirit of truth. And I believe it was precisely because of the attractiveness of such doctrines that the apostles felt constrained to write to the church: “Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous.”⁷ Or, “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?”⁸ Or, “Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are His,’ and, ‘Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity.’”⁹

One of the ways that false grace has gained ground in the church is through the popular idea that everything is finished in us just as soon as we say the “sinner’s prayer,” or “accept Jesus into our heart.” There are a great many versions of this doctrine, but the general idea is that God has

7 1 John 3:7

8 Romans 6:1-2

9 2 Timothy 2:19

done all, and therefore man can do nothing apart from seeing, enjoying, and resting in what Christ has already accomplished for us. Some misconstrue Christ's final words, "It is finished," insisting from this declaration that we are already perfect, and lack only the revelation of what we already are. This same idea is often set forth with clever phrases like: "You are already righteous; you just need to believe it." Or, "God doesn't see your sin; He only sees Christ in you." Or "It's not about doing; it's about realizing." Or, "The problem isn't your condition, it's your perception." Or, "You are as righteous as you will ever be; now just act like who you already are."

Again, there is something very appealing to the flesh in statements like these, but the truth of the matter is that grace has *nothing* to do with an imperceptible change in status, or with a lens through which God sees us differently than we really are. Consider for a moment how many verses in both the Old and New Testaments tell us plainly, and in a variety of different expressions, that God 'searches the heart, tests the mind, and gives every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings'?¹⁰ How many Scriptures warn us that God sees "the thoughts and

¹⁰ Jeremiah 17:10

intentions of the heart,” and that “all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.”¹¹ Are not *Christians* warned in many ways that God will “bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts,”¹² and that each man “will receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad”?¹³ Were there not many in the first-century church who claimed to be spiritually rich and in need of nothing, but were in fact “wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.”¹⁴ And did not Christ warn that “many”¹⁵ would claim to belong to Him, to have believed His doctrine and ministered in His name, and yet be rejected with these surprising words: “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!”?¹⁶ The New Testament abounds with warnings of this kind. But where are the Scriptures that tell us that God cannot see our sin, or that man can possess a righteousness that he does not obey, or in which he does not live?

11 Hebrews 4:12-13

12 1 Corinthians 4:5

13 2 Corinthians 5:10

14 Revelation 3:17

15 Matthew 7:22

16 Matthew 7:23

The simple and manifest truth (to which every honest conscience must bear witness) is that, if sin remains alive in us as a leader, a ruling principle, and a source of our action, then it is not yet dead—no matter what we affirm about ourselves. In the incontrovertible words of Christ, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin.”¹⁷ We cannot claim to be something that we are not living. Grace does not give us this power. The power of grace is real and free and wonderful, but it is not power to see ourselves differently than we are; it is power to make us different than we are, to change us, cleanse us, and create in us a new heart.

Though there are certainly Scriptures that speak of being justified by grace, this is not a grace that justifies man *in sin*. Grace justifies only the heart that receives and obeys it. Let me back up a bit and explain briefly what I mean.

The purpose of Christ’s coming as a Man, the reason for His sinless life, perfect obedience, sorrows and sufferings, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, was because mankind in Adam had died to the life of God, and was left bound *in nature* to the powers of sin and death. Adam, and

¹⁷ John 8:34

all his posterity who bore his image and likeness, were trapped by their very birth in a sort of Egyptian bondage, and under such a cruel taskmaster, that far exceeded the outward pictures that God later used to depict this condition in the story of Israel's exodus.

Like Moses coming into Egypt, the Son of God came into this world, and into our condition, in order to make a way out of it; and this was accomplished in primarily these two ways: first, by Christ's overcoming everything that had overcome Adam and separated him from his Creator; and second, by Christ then sharing His overcoming life with the souls of a redeemed humanity. All the types and shadows in the Old Testament, all four Gospels, and all of the letters of the apostles, declare and magnify the incredible truths of this miraculous salvation.

In indescribable love, the Son of God came in the nature of man (being fully God and fully Man), and conquered every obstacle in the way of man's return to Paradise. In perfect submission to the will and Spirit of God, the Lamb of God overcame every inclination of self-will and independence, every human desire and appetite that would turn man's heart from his Maker, every form of weakness, hunger, thirst, and anxiety, every kind

of temptation, persecution, demonic attack, the greatest inward and outward distresses, the greatest emotional and bodily pains, and ultimately the abandonment of God, physical death, and the grave. All of this was accomplished, and all of this was necessary, because man had brought himself under the power of every one of these things, and all of them were like gates and bars that prevented man's return into oneness with his Creator. This was the prayer of Christ on the night before He was betrayed, that "they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us."¹⁸ This was the mission He was sent to accomplish: to unite where Adam had separated, to "raise up the waste places"¹⁹ and restore all that Adam had destroyed. Thus the Son of God became a Son of Man who, in our fallen condition, but without sin, and in perfect submission to His Father, "became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him."²⁰

For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation

¹⁸ John 17:21

¹⁹ See Isaiah 44:26, 51:3, 52:9, 58:12

²⁰ Hebrews 5:9

*perfect through sufferings. For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren... Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.*²¹

But this is just the half of what Christ has done for us! This is just the door unlocked, the Red Sea parted, and a new and living way cast up in the wilderness. Were this all that Christ accomplished on our behalf, it would indeed be a miracle of love, but not a single human being could follow Him out. Without a birth of His victorious Spirit, without the gift of a nature that was stronger than flesh, man could only admire Christ's victory from afar. But when this Conqueror had overcome sin and death, and returned to the right hand of His Father in heaven, He then poured out His overcoming Spirit on all flesh, and visited every human being with a power (called *grace*) that can both see in His light and follow in His footsteps. Christ was the firstborn from among the dead, the Head

21 Hebrews 2:10-11, 14-15

that opened the womb of death and the grave. But this Head has a body in the earth that can be born of His life, grow in His nature, and overcome by His power. For this reason He declares to the church: “He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.”²²

Jesus did not come as a Man, become obedient unto death, and suffer on a cross, so that God could avenge His anger on an innocent substitute, or receive sufficient satisfaction for His offended authority. I understand that these are popular ideas, but I see nothing in Scripture that supports such a view of God’s nature, nor such a motivation and means of man’s salvation. It was not God’s anger that sent Christ into the world, but His love; and that love came, suffered, died, and rose again in order to reopen the everlasting gates, and to share the “power of an indestructible life”²³ with all who would receive it. This is what Christ finished two-thousand years ago. And this redeeming power of our overcoming Savior that sanctifies us even as He was sanctified,²⁴ this power that overcomes by His overcoming nature, is called *the grace of God*.

²² Revelation 3:21

²³ Hebrews 7:16

²⁴ John 17:19; Hebrews 2:11

This is the “Spirit of grace”²⁵ that is able to work in the body of Christ the same victory that it first accomplished in the Head.

Now, it is entirely true that man is justified by grace, and not by works of the flesh or works of the law. But we must be careful not to invent our own meanings of these words. If anyone is claiming to be a partaker of grace, and yet is not living *in and under the government of grace*, then this betrays a great misunderstanding—the same misunderstanding that was rejected by Paul in these words: “Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!”²⁶ Christ has indeed finished all that is necessary, and all that is possible, for man to experience the benefit of His redemptive work. He has loved us first, come in our image, offered Himself as a sacrifice, and overcome sin and death so that repentance and forgiveness of sin can be offered in His name to all the nations of the world. He has torn the veil that leads to the Holy of Holies, opened a door out of inward slavery and darkness, and cast up a new and living way for the redeemed to walk upon. He has stripped the devil of his right to hold souls, and taken away man’s debt or obligation to the

²⁵ Zechariah 12:10; Hebrews 10:29

²⁶ Romans 6:15

flesh.²⁷ He has become the perfect captain of our salvation, removed the immovable wall of partition, and brought us into covenant with God by sowing a seed of His own grace, light, and Spirit in the soil of our hearts. Everything impossible has been done, the wedding feast is ready, the invitations are sent out, and every human being has been empowered to “work out his salvation with fear and trembling.”²⁸ But all of this was accomplished, not so that God could call us something that we are not, but so that He could make us ‘holy, for the Lord our God is holy.’²⁹

Grace has come as power from on high. But man must *abide* in this power if he wants to experience its work, continually uniting his will to this gift and denying all that is contrary to it. It is a truth beyond question that man is justified by grace and not by works; but there is no grace that justifies man *in sin*. Grace visits man, calls him out of sin, and empowers him to abide in the overcoming Spirit of Christ. It is like a strong hand that reaches into Egypt and pulls out all who will submit to its rule. But it is only those who

²⁷ Romans 8:12

²⁸ Philippians 2:12

²⁹ Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:26; 1 Peter 1:15-16; Matthew 5:48

will be ruled by grace, who will continue under its government, and turn their back on the flesh and the world, that are justified, sanctified, and glorified by it. This is why Paul and Barnabas persuaded the churches “to *continue* in the grace of God,”³⁰ and why the author of Hebrews warned his readers to “look carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God,”³¹ and to never “insult the Spirit of grace.”³²

At no point in this miraculous gospel does God reckon a man to be something contrary to the nature in which he is living, nor does God become blind to the sins of mankind. It is true—and worthy of thanksgiving and praise—that even a newly converted sinner, upon turning from sin and self, and surrendering his life to the gift of grace, is justified from past sin, *because his will has then gone out from it*. That is to say, when God sees that we have changed leaders, ceased to follow sin and Satan, and become “obedient from the heart” to the teachings of grace to which we have been delivered,³³ then we are forgiven and

30 Acts 13:43

31 Hebrews 12:15

32 Hebrews 10:29

33 See Romans 6:17 “But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of teaching to which you were delivered.”

justified from the sin that we now hate. Here the believer is justified by grace, and now he must diligently continue in grace to make his calling and election sure.³⁴ But if the heart will not continue under the Hand that visited and called him out of Egypt, if the will does not abide in submission to the power that justifies, but rather “turns the grace of our God into licentiousness,”³⁵ then this is what the apostle calls “falling from grace,”³⁶ or “receiving the grace of God in vain.”³⁷

It is a dangerous untruth when Christians are told that they have arrived at the journey’s end when in fact they have often only just begun to experience the work of grace. And it is not the true work of the ministry to speak comfort, reassurance, and safety to a people who still feel themselves to be slaves to sin, living the will and way of the first birth, in the lusts of the eyes, the lusts of the flesh, and the pride of life. The Scriptures offer great encouragement and comfort to those who are carefully and constantly living under the grace of God, submitting their will to its guiding, teaching, and empowering work. But in

34 2 Peter 1:10

35 Jude 1:4

36 Galatians 5:4

37 2 Corinthians 6:1

no verse are we encouraged to rest in yesterday's grace. Every single epistle of Paul both begins and ends with an expression of desire that his readers continue to grow in the grace of God. And this is because Paul knew grace to be a growing power, a living seed of Christ's kingdom, appointed by God to crucify all selfishness, pride, envy, anger, fear and lust, and to fill the soul with the power of Jesus' light, life, and love.

Permit me to address my reader in the words of the author of Hebrews: "I appeal to you, brethren, bear with the word of exhortation:"³⁸ Please do not content yourself with a name that you live, if you are really dead;³⁹ or with a claim that grace has done all, if your heart still finds its home and its treasure in this world. Do not sit down in what Christ has done for you outwardly, if you have experienced little or nothing of what He desires to do inwardly. This has been a pervading error in the church since the time of the Reformation. The masses cry out, "Grace has done everything!", but a still, small voice continually whispers in the heart: "But what have you allowed grace to do in you?"

³⁸ Hebrews 13:22

³⁹ Revelation 3:1

Grace Must Reign

Speaking from my own regrettable experience, I know that it is easy to talk about grace, sing about grace, and celebrate grace, even while living a life that is contrary in nature to its power and purpose. This is not uncommon. There is at present a great assortment of definitions and opinions about the grace of God, and the range of ideas on this subject can be confusing. But I have come to see that every *false* idea about grace has this one thing in common: it affirms that we can possess and enjoy the blessings of God without losing our life, our will, and our treasure in the flesh. In other words, it is a grace that does not crucify the passions and desires of the first birth, does not take our heart out of the world, nor the world out of our heart, and does not empower us to live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age. It is a grace that saves from the *consequences* of sin, without saving from the power,

pleasure, and reign of sin in the heart. But this is a grace that the Scriptures will not allow. Notice Paul's words in Romans chapter 5 verse 21:

For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous. Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Paul first reminds us that “the law entered that the offense might abound.” The meaning of this should be clear to us now as we have seen how the written law could manifest sin, but had no power to remove it. The law entered in order to *describe* righteousness, and to *require* righteousness, but because it could not *provide* righteousness, it only caused offenses against righteousness to abound.

Then we are told, “But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more.” Where did sin abound? One could argue that sin abounded in the world, and therefore grace came to the world through Jesus Christ. Certainly this is true. But, because of the immediate context, and the subject

matter of the following three chapters, it seems clear that the word “where” is meant to point the reader more specifically to the heart of man. Sin did not primarily abound in outward things; it abounded *in* man. That is where the disease was found. There the law of sin and death was producing its fruits unto death. There the written law could only expose and condemn what it could not change. And it is there also that grace abounds much more, or in a way that is even greater and stronger than the abounding of sin.

Here we come to the heart of Paul’s argument: “So that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” If we give these words the attention they deserve, it seems to me that this verse alone could put an end to all misunderstandings regarding the nature and purpose of the grace of God. Because here, as clearly as words can do it, Paul says that grace *should reign* in man through the nature of righteousness, even as sin has formerly reigned in death.

Grace is meant to reign in man just as sin has reigned! But how did sin reign? I believe we all know too well the answer to this question. Sin has reigned in all of us in a way that is evident and unmistakable. Its kingdom is subtle and deceptive,

but it is not invisible or difficult to perceive. There is no doubting or debating whether sin is a power, or whether we have experienced its dominion, because we have all felt its strength in our minds, its influence in our desires, and its fruits in our lives. We have felt it changing our perspective, changing our direction, enticing, pushing and pulling, first inflaming desires, and then leaving us disappointed and embarrassed as it poisons our lives. The reign of sin in man is perhaps the most demonstrable thing in all of the world. To observe it, we need only peer out the window, read the news, talk to a neighbor, or look into our own heart. It has roots and vines wrapped around all that man does. It causes all men to dance behind its pipe, leading them on toward one form or another of darkness, deception, emptiness, and shame. He who denies it has already fallen under its power.

But if we only understand this much, we understand enough to know exactly how grace should reign in man, and how it should abound much more where sin has abounded. Because, how can sin reign in all of these powerful, discernible, heart and life-transforming ways, and grace not be able to do the same? How can a Christian confess that sin touches everything, pulls and pushes, grows, fills and defiles from the inside out, but

then say that grace can be possessed and enjoyed without changing our heart? Paul says that where sin abounded, grace abounds “much *more*,” not “much *less*.” Is sin an inward reigning nature, and grace just an outward legal position? Does sin destroy a person’s heart and life, and grace only forgive the mess that sin has made?

No; grace also is an inward nature, a living power, given to take back the land of the heart from the reign of sin. The true grace of God also pushes and pulls, draws and teaches, fills and spreads, changes our perspective, our heart, and our course. It cleans where sin has defiled. It speaks truth where men have believed lies. It comes to all men bringing salvation, and teaches them to deny ungodliness and worldly lust. It awakens the slave that sleeps in Egypt, empowers him to leave, and daily leads him towards the Land of Promise. The power of grace can be as demonstrable and undeniable in the lives of Christians as the power of sin is in the people of the world.

In 1 Corinthians 15:10, Paul says, “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.” In 1 Timothy 1:14 he tells us, “The grace of our Lord was exceedingly

abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.” Clearly, the grace of God was changing Paul’s heart, working mightily both in him and through him as he persevered in it. And though we are not all called to be apostles and prophets, we *are indeed* all called to walk in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. Every single believer is called to put off the old man, to be renewed in the spirit of their mind, and to put on the new man. We are called to die to self, to be crucified to the world, to walk in the Spirit, “to do nothing through selfish ambition or conceit,”¹ to “be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.”² *This requires power!* It requires the effective working of a nature that reigns and abounds in man where sin did reign and abound. And this is why we must understand both *what* grace is, and *how* it is experienced.

Returning to sin for a moment, how does it begin its reign in man? Of course there is a seed or nature of sin in us even from birth. We all come into this world in the image and likeness of our fallen parents, and even in infancy our hearts can feel the stirring and pulling of a nature that is contrary to God’s righteousness and will. But the question here is not concerning the mere presence

1 Philippians 2:3

2 Matthew 5:48

of sin in man, but rather its reign or dominion, the way that it grows and governs a person, both inwardly and outwardly. How does this begin and increase?

With a little reflection, we can all answer this question. We do not experience the coming of sin's power to be like an overwhelming flood, or like a tyrant that suddenly seizes command and overthrows our will. On the contrary, sin begins as a thought—a mere desire. The world, the flesh, or the serpent presents an image before the view of the mind, together with the lie that possessing it will satisfy our desire and remove the uncomfortable sense of longing and lack. And when the will consents to this desire, or willingly joins to this thought, *then* (and not before) sin is conceived and its power begins to gain ground. It is only when the will of the soul *turns its attention, and voluntarily unites* to the evil desire, that the seed of sin obtains a stronghold, begins to grow, and gains inertia in the mind. This, repeated again and again, is how its reign increases in man to bring forth death. Consider the words of James in chapter 1:13-15:

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God;" for God cannot be tempted by

evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.

When does desire conceive and give birth to sin? Again, when the will of the soul voluntarily unites to it. Sin is the child of *two* parents: 1) an evil thought or desire, and 2) man's consenting will. It is not sin to be tempted, or to have our attention attracted by thoughts, desires, suggestions of the flesh, or lies of the enemy. Jesus Himself "was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin."³ But one thing that Jesus never did was unite His will to a temptation, and thus sin never found a place in Him. It is for this reason that, just prior to the cross, and having lived more than thirty-three years upon the earth as a Man, He could say, "The ruler of this world is coming, and he has nothing in Me."⁴ That is to say, "The ruler of this world is coming, but his nature has never been born in Me; I have never once joined my will to his thoughts."

³ Hebrews 4:15

⁴ John 14:30

Therefore, though sin is present as a seed or an innate nature in man from the time of his birth, yet its power, or ‘abounding reign,’ grows in response to the activity of our will. When we welcome the appearing of evil thoughts and desires, entertain their enticements, and voluntarily join to their increasing suggestions and promises, sin is felt to have a snowball effect in our hearts. It gains ground, gathers speed, weight, and size, until its influence upon the will seems almost irresistible. In some, sin seems to rule nearly unhindered, because they have repressed and grieved the only power that opposes its progress. This is a dreadful condition of slavery, and all who persist in it will find the wages of sin to be spiritual death.

But the reason I mention these things is not to glorify the power of sin, but rather to explain and glorify the power of grace. Because again, “Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, so that *as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness.*” Grace also has a seed in man, a seed that is sown in the heart by the One who is “full of grace and truth;”⁵ and “of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace.”⁶ The good Sower has gone out and sown a measure

5 John 1:14

6 John 1:16

of His fullness into every kind of soil, and this is the reason why grace can abound where sin has abounded. This gift of Christ's Spirit—His grace in the heart—is the ground of our hope, and the reason why Peter says, He “has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”⁷

But how does the soul grow in grace? Or you could ask, how does grace grow in the soul? Grace is a superior power, an even stronger nature than that of sin, but its growth in man also depends upon the activity of the will. I do not mean to say that man's will can create it or add anything to it. But both Scripture and experience demonstrate beyond doubt that what we turn to, look to, unite with, follow, and obey greatly affects what we experience of both of these natures.⁸

7 1 Peter 1:3

8 Consider the words of Dionysius Freher (1649-1728) — “It is a constant and unalterable truth, that whatever the mind, will, and desire are busied with, the same is drawn into man, and the soul is thereby made alike unto it. By what it is fed, entertained and nourished, its life and image grows in conformity. So that when man's mind, will and desire, going downward, were busied with shadowy, dark, weak, earthly, dead, and impure things, what else could have been his portion acquired thereby but earthiness in the body, defilement in the soul, and death in the spirit?—for he fixed his eyes on such things, and fed upon them with the mouth of his desire. But when, on the contrary, by the power restored unto him through Jesus Christ, his mind,

First, grace “appears” within as a gift from heaven. “The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.”⁹ A measure of God’s light visits man in darkness, giving him a sight and sense (be it ever so small) of heavenly truth, along with a mustard seed of power to obey. God’s grace finds us in perfect helplessness and loves us first. In the language of Ezekiel: “I passed by you and saw you struggling in your own blood, I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’ Yes, I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’”¹⁰ Like Moses sent to Egypt, or the angels sent into Sodom and Gomorrah, grace comes and awakens, warns, invites, and empowers to leave. This is the beginning of God’s “working in us both to will and to do for His good pleasure.”¹¹ This is the day of small things, the talent put into the hand. And when the will unites to this free gift, loves its appearing, agrees with its testimony, and yields to its attraction, grace

will and desire goes upwards, and is busied with light and life, and with heavenly pure substantial objects, how can it fall out with him otherwise than according to the words of the apostle, saying: ‘We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.’”

9 Titus 2:11

10 Ezekiel 16:6

11 Philippians 2:13

then finds room within to grow, to abound, and in time, to “reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

But it is of the greatest importance that we do not overlook the *beginnings* of grace. Because just as sin began its kingdom with mere thoughts and desires that attract towards self, so grace begins its reign with thoughts and desires that draw the heart towards God. I do not mean voices, visions, or profound revelations. Grace can certainly be the author of these things as well. But I speak now only of those heavenly inclinations, godly convictions, desires after purity, and thoughts of a better way to live, that from time to time make an appearance in the mind of man. I speak of the little checks and reproofs for selfishness, vanity, pride, and dishonesty that everyone feels throughout every normal day. There are times when we cannot help but sigh under the burden of sin, when we feel repulsion towards evil and immorality, or when our hearts feel drawn beyond the things of time. These thoughts and feelings come down from above; they do not originate in the fallen heart of man. They are gifts of grace from the Father of lights, and are good and perfect according to their kind.

Were it not for grace, all mankind would be confined to *one birth*. In fact, this is the state of all other terrestrial beings. I do not mean that all creatures of this world live in sin, or in a will that is contrary to their Creator. I mean simply that all created beings, besides man, experience *only one nature*. A mule is perfectly content to remain a mule until its end. It never feels convictions for stubbornness, or inward reproofs for not sharing its oats. A fox is not burdened in conscience for stealing a hen. A goose does not feel an aversion to vice, or a secret hope that one day it will be free from the vanity of this world. But a man feels all these things because, in the mercy of God, grace introduces another nature¹² that calls man out of his own.¹³ Were it not for grace, man would live and die undisturbed in his first birth, where “every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”¹⁴ This is the condition of man in

¹² 2 Peter 1:4

¹³ See here the fulfillment of every exodus story (i.e. that of Abraham, Lot, Israel, Rahab, etc.) that appears in Scripture—a work of grace by which God enters into man in order to bring man into God. Deuteronomy 4:34 “Or did God ever try to go and *take for Himself a nation from the midst of another nation*, by trials, by signs, by wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great terrors, according to all that the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes?”

¹⁴ Genesis 6:5

his fall, and there is nothing in him or of him that can go out from himself. But grace brings a living Word very near unto man—into his heart and his mouth—and by it God not only sets life and death before every soul,¹⁵ but also cries out: “Choose life over death! Choose grace over nature!”

This Word of grace, as we have already seen, is that gift of power to which Paul commended the church in Ephesus. All of Paul’s hope for their preservation, growth, and sanctification rested in it. It is a measure of God’s own light, a seed of His Spirit, a gift of His implanted Word, and therefore the origin of every *truly* good thought. From grace comes every conviction of evil, every aversion to vice, every longing for purity, every hope of escaping vanity, and every humble desire to know and walk with God. Grace does much more than produce thoughts and desires, but this is where its reign begins.

Grace calls to man through convictions for evil. It knocks at his door with good thoughts and desires. It appears as a teacher, and offers power to obey. But just as with sin, *its power is experienced in the submission of our will*. It is when the will unites to sinful thoughts and desires that we begin to feel its power. It is the will’s

¹⁵ See Deuteronomy 30:11-20, and Romans 10:5-8

joining to temptations that brings man under its government. And in just the same way, it is when the will of man unites to grace (in the ability that it supplies), when we love its testimony, bow low before it, embrace its judgments, and practice the truth that we see in its light, that grace finds a home and its kingdom begins. Here is where the snowball starts to roll, so to speak. Here is where the sailor can raise his sail to catch the wind.

Now, to avoid all misunderstanding and to answer a common objection, allow me to say that this uniting of our will and submission of our lives to the grace that teaches and convicts within, is neither legalism nor works of the flesh, but simple obedience to the Spirit of Truth. How else are we meant to “live in the Spirit” and “walk in the Spirit,”¹⁶ apart from a continual subjection of our will to the guidance of the Spirit? Is there a way to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Christ, without a diligent surrender of our will? Certainly not. For Paul writes emphatically to *the church* in Rome: “If you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Galatians 5:16,25

If you forget everything else you have read in this book, my hope is that you will remember this one thing: that grace is the power of God that redeems the soul of man, crucifies the nature of sin, makes “all things new, and all things of God;”¹⁸ but the experience of its reign is found as the will unites and the heart continually submits to even the first and faintest manifestations of His nature. The power of God can display itself in all sorts of ways, but for a heart to experience redemption, for a man to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,”¹⁹ *he must surrender the first birth at every appearing of the second.* This is presenting ourselves as “a living sacrifice;” this is the Christian’s “reasonable service.”²⁰ This is how the heart lives under grace, and how grace spreads over man, to reign in and over all.

But when our experience of grace is small, we are then most apt to turn aside. When we are not accustomed to following its voice and continually yielding to its light, and when “the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires

¹⁷ Romans 8:12-13

¹⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:17-18

¹⁹ 2 Peter 3:18

²⁰ Romans 12:1

for other things”²¹ feel stronger in our hearts than the teachings of grace, we stand in great danger of coming out from under its reign. This is the case of so many poor souls who are visited by grace and, like Abraham, hear a call to “get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you.”²² They receive the Word of grace with joy, but because they do not become rooted and grounded in the surrender of their will, they “endure only for a while.”²³ They begin to build a tower, but are not able to finish. They start the Christian life with a strong battle cry, but soon after “send out a delegation and ask for terms of peace,”²⁴ joining the ranks of those who believe in grace, defend grace, and yet remain strangers to its power.

And this is precisely why the apostles exhorted new believers to “continue” in the grace of God, and pleaded with them not to receive the grace of God in vain. The New Testament speaks of grace not merely as a gift to receive, but as a power or government under which we must continually live. For this reason we are warned against setting

²¹ Mark 4:19

²² Genesis 12:1

²³ Matthew 13:21

²⁴ Luke 14:32

aside the grace of God, falling from grace, insulting the Spirit of grace, and even turning the grace of God into a license for the flesh. These aren't hypothetical possibilities; they are common temptations and real dangers for all of our hearts. Because if we do not continually bring our will under the grace of God, we will inadvertently keep grace under our feet.

Now this phrase “under grace” is one that Paul uses in Romans, and it is often misunderstood. In Romans 6:14, Paul says:

For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not!

To understand what Paul means by being *under* grace, it is helpful first to ask in what sense Israel was *under* the law. I believe it is fair to say that Israel was under the law in *every conceivable* sense. The law of Moses ruled over them, it taught them, it governed every aspect of their personal, religious, and civil lives. It determined how they lived, how they related to one another, how they worshiped, prepared food, raised children, dealt with sin and evil, cleaned their bodies and homes,

responded to disease, hired servants, etc. There was no part of their life that was not brought *under* its jurisdiction, and submitted to its authority. Yet, despite all of this, sin still had dominion in their inward man, because (as we have seen) there is a great difference between a written word of law, and an implanted Word of grace.

But Paul says, “sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law *but under grace*.” Being under grace does not mean disregarding or dispensing with the law, as some mistakenly believe. Being under grace means continually bringing our hearts, our lives, our thoughts, desires, and deeds, *under* the rule of God’s light and Spirit, so that just as the law once governed the outward man, now the Word of grace governs the heart, and through it the outward man as well.

Let us read a little more of this passage in Romans to better understand the context of this statement. He writes:

For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be! Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey,

*either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were delivered, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.*²⁵

In other words: “You are no longer obliged to be slaves of sin, because you are no longer under the rule of an outward command, but under the rule of an inward power. Does this mean that you are free to sin because you are not under the authority of the outward letter? May it never be! Do you not realize that when you give yourselves as slaves for obedience, you are slaves to the one whom you obey? You used to be inward slaves of sin, and outwardly controlled and condemned by the law. But thanks be to God that, though you were slaves of sin, you have become obedient from the heart to a new form of teaching—to *the teaching of grace*—to which you were delivered. And now, having been made free from the power of sin by coming under the even greater power of grace, you have become slaves of righteousness.”

Therefore, since grace has come, since a measure of His fullness has been sown into our hearts,

²⁵ Romans 6:14-18

and since our only hope of salvation lies in it, and not in works of the flesh or works of the law, “let us go boldly to the throne of grace”²⁶ to abound more and more in this good and perfect gift. And let us take seriously the following advice of Peter:

*Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, “BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY.”*²⁷

Irresistible Grace?

Clearly, all that has been said here about grace, along with the many Scriptures that demonstrate both the need of continuing in it and the possibility of falling from it, cannot be reconciled with the idea of “irresistible grace,” commonly associated with John Calvin and his followers.²⁸ According to Calvinists, there are two kinds of grace: *common*

²⁶ Hebrews 4:16

²⁷ 1 Peter 1:13-16

and *saving*. Common grace is given to all men, and is that which sustains life, restrains some measure of corruption and evil, and allows human society to function. Saving grace, on the other hand, is said to be an unstoppable power given only to the elect, that not only offers salvation, but actually accomplishes it—*irresistibly* producing in man repentance, faith, and ultimately union with Christ. However, not only is there no such distinction between *kinds* of grace mentioned in Scripture, but the idea of an irresistible grace is at variance with both the clear testimony of the Bible and the undeniable experience of every human soul.

The manifest truth seen from Genesis to Revelation is that, though God is infinitely stronger than man, yet man has always possessed freedom to resist His will and the offers of His power. Nothing is clearer in the history of men and angels. God is omnipotent, but in His dealings with fallen man, He has never used power to force compliance or to coerce love. And the reason for this is grounded in the very nature of things: forced compliance is not *true* compliance, nor is coerced love *real* love.

28 Although, to be fair, the strongest assertions of this doctrine are made by Calvin's successors and interpreters, and not by Calvin himself.

Compulsion through power is simply not God's way of establishing His kingdom.

If ever there were a time when grace might be thought irresistible, surely it would have been in Paradise before the fall of man, when everything stood in a state of perfect harmony, order, blessedness, and peace. But even then, when nothing in this world had departed from the heavenly law of life and love, man still possessed the freedom to reject the gracious workings of His Creator.

And if this was true in Paradise, how much more is it true in our fallen condition, when so much both around us and in us, tempts and allures us to turn away from our Maker! Because now there is a nature in man that eagerly pursues his own destruction. There is a law of sin and death that cannot be disobeyed but by careful submission to the law of life. There are desires of the eyes, desires of the flesh, with pride and selfishness that are ready to mix with all that man does. And there is also a company of fallen angels who go about like roaring lions, looking for any trace of darkness in the heart of man to which they can unite. I cannot help but wonder how anyone can suggest that grace is irresistible, when the condition of the world and the church makes so many believe that *sin* is irresistible!

Was grace irresistible when God chose the descendants of Abraham and called them out of Egypt to follow Him through the wilderness? Was grace irresistible when God brought His people into the Promised Land and commanded them never to depart from His laws and statutes? Was grace irresistible in the days of the judges, the kings, or the prophets? And we have read many New Testament passages in which believers were “persuaded”²⁹ by the apostles to continue in grace, and were “pleaded with”³⁰ not to receive the grace of God in vain.

I will not belabor the point. I only desire my readers to recognize what I believe they cannot help feeling in their own hearts: that the power of God does not work against the will of man. Grace convicts, convinces, invites, empowers, and then transforms the *willing* heart. He offers all that He is, and all that He has, to everyone who hungers and thirsts after eternal life. But from the very beginning, this grace has been experienced by the “willing and obedient,”³¹ while the proud and self-seeking remain strangers to His power.

29 Acts 13:43

30 2 Corinthians 6:1. See also Galatians 1:2,6:21, 5:4; Hebrews 12:10,15:29

31 Isaiah 1:19 “If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall

be devoured by the sword;’ for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

The Sufficiency of Grace

And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

Aside from the work that Jesus Christ has done *for* us in His incarnation, life, death, burial, and resurrection, there is nothing in Christianity that is of greater importance than the genuine experience of what Christ seeks to do *within* us. In fact, this inward work is how we reap the benefit of all that He did outwardly. The experience of His “effective working”¹ in the soul is, in my view, the most prominent subject in the Scriptures, and

¹ Ephesians 3:4,7:16

the principal reason why they were given to us. And in them we read, from beginning to end, of two seeds or births in man that are striving for preeminence.

Immediately after his fall, God began to speak to Adam about these two contrary seeds. Addressing the serpent, He said, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel."² And from this point onward, the nature and fruit of these two seeds or births became a recurring theme in His communications with man in the generations that followed. Cain and Abel were not only pictures of these two seeds, but living demonstrations of their contrary kingdoms rising into dominion in man. In Cain, the firstborn, we see a birth governed by the seed of the serpent, who, "crouching at the door," found entrance and overcame. In Abel, the second, we see a birth governed by grace, who through faith, "obtained the testimony that he was righteous."³

The same story continues with Isaac and Ishmael, who were also types or shadows of these two births in man. Ishmael, the first birth, was the

² Genesis 3:15

³ Hebrews 11:4

son of the slave woman, the product of self-effort and not of faith. Isaac, however, was the son of God's promise, and came as a miracle out from the dead womb of Sarah. In the next generation, Rebekah found these same two births struggling in her womb. The first came out hairy and wild, and became a hunter of flesh in the open field. The second dwelled at home in the tent, and obtained both the birthright and the blessing.

These stories, and several others in the Old Testament, are living pictures or allegories of two births or seeds in man. The first birth is what we are by nature. It is the fallen nature of flesh that we have inherited from our father Adam, and is what most men call their life. The second is not of man, nor from man, but is given to man as a gift of heaven to redeem him from the first. This seed, as we have seen, is called the grace of God, and every man has at least some experience of its nature and work. Even those who do not receive it with meekness to experience a birth of its nature, are at times checked and reproved, called and invited by it, for the Lord is "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."⁴

It is with reference to these two births that Jesus declares, "That which is born of the flesh is

4 2 Peter 3:9

flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit,”⁵ and, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing.”⁶ And what does each of these births bring forth in man? A life, of course. Each one has its own life and nature, its own light, food, growth, and fruit. And Christianity—at least in one way of speaking—is meant to be *a discernible experience of the second birth rising into dominion in the soul*. As we daily deny and surrender the flesh, the incorruptible seed grows in strength, overcomes sin, and supplants the first birth.

This is why Jesus came preaching a kingdom in man, and a death to the nature that had usurped God’s reign. He told us we must lose one life to find another. We must hate one life to experience the other. We must deny what we call self, put a cross on our shoulders, and follow His Spirit out of our first birth. Christ opened a door through His death, burial, and resurrection, so that a people born in Egypt, in slavery, and in darkness, could come out from sin by the power of grace. Here is the gospel! A power that crucifies the first birth with its passions and desires, and raises up the second to walk in newness of life.

5 John 3:6

6 John 6:63

But why is it that, in many who have been Christians for years, the first birth remains so strong, and the second so weak?

I believe this is part of what God was teaching Paul in Second Corinthians chapter 12, and it is the final thing that I would like to share concerning grace. In essence, Paul said: "Lord, I feel weak, and I want to be strong. I feel a thorn in my flesh, and this is where I need You to help!" But God replied, "No, Paul. I want you to learn the sufficiency of grace. I want you to know and to feel that everything truly necessary is found in the growth and reign of the second birth—in the life, light, and Spirit of My Son in your soul. If I were to make the first birth sufficient, you would never grow weak there. You would never reach for grace, because you would never feel your need of it."

Now, I am far from suggesting that God never relieves pain and distress in the outward man. There is no doubt that He does. But I do believe that, both in Paul's case and in ours, He also allows trials and troubles to weaken the strength of the natural man, and lessen our confidence in it, so that we learn to feel our need for grace. And here is the question I desire my reader to consider: To what extent do you feel your need for the grace of God? I know that we all say we need grace. We

need it to forgive our sins and to take us to heaven. We need grace to protect us when the airplane takes off, and to preserve the people and things that we love. But I suspect that there are a great many believers who feel no need for grace *right now*, in the ordinary activities of daily life. And, truth be told, there is something within us that prefers not to see or feel the extent of our need.

You see, to learn the sufficiency of grace, we must lose the sufficiency of self. To grow strong in grace, we must grow weak in the flesh. But this strikes at the very life of the natural man. We live in a world where Christians recite and admire Christ's Beatitudes, and yet do everything in their power to keep from feeling the conditions Jesus declared to be "blessed." We say, "How wonderful that the kingdom of God is for the poor in Spirit!" But if we are honest, nobody wants to *feel* poverty of spirit. Nobody wants to mourn. Nobody wants to feel hunger and thirst for righteousness, or to be persecuted, hated, or misunderstood because of it. We love the wisdom and beauty of these sayings, and we love the *idea* of resting in the sufficiency of grace. But when it comes to the hundreds of little decisions that make up our daily lives, we fight to remain strong and safe where grace would make us weak.

There is a birth in us that has grown strong over time, and in it we have sought to feel secure, confident, and in control at all times. Control is arguably the greatest human value, and the very thought of losing it drives us to panic. Weakness is the absence of control. Weakness means I do not possess what I need to fix this problem, to relieve this discomfort, to overcome this difficulty, to change what is happening, to secure what I desire. Weakness means I stand in constant dependence upon something stronger than myself. But we have been taught both by the people of this world and by our own fears and desires, to fight for every opportunity to stand on our own. I believe this is at least part of the reason why we know so little of the sufficiency of grace. *We have grown too strong in the wrong man.*

Some have grown strong and self-reliant through the work that they do, or through their role in their families. Others find confidence and security in their pursuit of education, in their beauty, expertise, intellect, or in always being the funniest person in the room. Some avoid weakness by making others need them, managing their own emotions by controlling those around them. Many Christians have grown strong in spiritual words and opinions, valuing themselves for their

perceived wisdom and understanding. Humans are masters at adapting to their environments. They learn very quickly just what to say, or just what to do, to maintain their self-image, dodge their insecurities, make a good impression, and end up with what they desire. But in these and many other ways, they often grow strong where they are meant to grow weak, and so remain weak in what is meant to grow strong.

If I may speak of my own experience for a moment, when I wholeheartedly gave up to follow the light of Christ, I was both surprised and confused to find myself growing weaker over time. I do not mean when I was first convinced of the gospel, or first believed that Christ is the light of the world. It is one thing to believe that Christ is the light; it is quite another to carefully follow the light that is Christ. But when I began to heed His corrections, bring my deeds to His light, and “wait upon the Lord in the way of His judgment,”⁷ I began to feel the finger of God popping my balloons of self-confidence, and bringing me low where I had always been high.

It is difficult to describe my experience of this. I was a confident young man, with pride and false strength mixed with everything I did. I had grown

⁷ Isaiah 26:8

big in words, big in ambition, strong in the flesh and in my thoughts about myself. In the world, I believed I could achieve my goals and exceed expectations. In the church, I spoke confidently about what I did not really know, calling attention to myself with pretense and wit. Without realizing it, I had high self-esteem and an inflated sense of importance, and my perceived spiritual understanding only added to my pride.

But all of this strength was acquired *outside of grace*. Grace had given none of it to me. And though I believed in grace, read and preached about grace, I felt no true need for it. I lived above grace, and not under its rule.

But as I began to let the unflattering light of Christ search my heart, and reveal my true condition, I was surprised to see that it was not grace that had made me strong. On the contrary, I had grown strong in the wrong birth, and, in many ways, had trampled upon that grace which teaches to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age. Paul once said, “By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain.”⁸ But I had to confess: “By the strength of self-will I

8 1 Corinthians 15:10

am what I am, and His grace toward me has thus far been largely in vain.”

The work of the Lord in me was then a work of reduction, a pruning of branches that had grown from the wrong root. I felt like the Lord was leading me backwards, and I soon discovered a wilderness in my own heart, with the murmurings of the Israelites who did not trust their Leader. I found their Egyptian appetites, their golden-calf imaginations, their doubts, complaints, accusations, and fears. I found biting serpents and scorpions, droughts and famines, enemies all around, and all of my own making.

And sometimes when I cried out for strength in other things—begging, as it were, for grace PLUS something else—it was as though I heard in my heart the same answer given to Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you.” As if the Lord were saying: “Son, this is what you need, and I want you to feel it. You have grown too tall in the first birth, and now you must grow downward. I do not intend to make you strong. I intend to make you weak in the flesh, weak in self-confidence, weak where you have labored to make yourself strong. I want to take away your control. I will remove what makes you feel so smart and capable, so strong and important, so comfortable and secure. Just

where you have been strong, there I will make you weak.” And I say, “But, *why* Lord?” And the divine answer remains the same: “So that you will *feel* and *learn* the sufficiency of grace.”

How can a person know if they are too strong in the wrong birth? Allow me to suggest the following way: If you can have a good day today that has nothing to do with feeling your need for Jesus Christ, there may be something wrong. If you can be strong today, in control, confident, on top of things, with everything under your feet; if you can make it a whole day (not to mention a week) and feel that things are “good,” and yet the “goodness” has nothing to do with dependency upon grace, with “blessed are the poor in spirit,” “blessed are those who mourn,” and “blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness;” if you are content with your plan and secure in your way, but neither your plan nor your way are related to a constant and careful yielding of your will to the light of Jesus Christ, to an inward death to all sin and vice, and to an inward growth in the Spirit of righteousness, then it may be because there is still far too much strength in the wrong seed or birth.

If you are a Christian, let me ask you this question: How strong are you? And where is your

strength? Are you strong enough to have a good day without living under grace?

Paul says: "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong." "There is a birth," he might have continued, "a seed, a life, a nature that comes down from above, and the God of love has taught me this truth: when the first birth is weak, then the second birth is strong. When flesh has lost its confidence, its strength, its security, its ability, its sense of importance, relevance, and control, *then* I am strong in the grace of God."

You may hear voices in the church that will tell you just the opposite—that God makes us strong, confident, prosperous and self-assured. And there are voices in our own hearts that raise the same expectations. We hear whispers within that say, "This cannot be the hand of God making you weak, foolish, less important, less confident, and out of control. God does not make you small; He makes you great!" But there is a great cloud of witnesses who have lived under grace, and one faithful Witness who speaks in your heart, all bearing the

same testimony: “No; God makes you weak, so that He alone will be your strength.”

And if I happen to have a reader who feels that faithfulness to the light has brought you downward rather than upward, backward rather than forward; if the full surrender of your will has led you into a wilderness instead of a Promised Land, into a season of confusion instead of a state of certainty, then do not think that “some strange thing has happened to you.”⁹ The greatest men and women of faith, the friends of God in all generations, who have had the weightiest words, the purest hearts, and the strongest fragrance of life, have all been brought low by the mighty hand of God. They have all been first wounded in the flesh and then healed in the Spirit.¹⁰ And though they have lived at different times, in distinct parts of the world, and perhaps have differed somewhat as to names and forms, they have all been taught to abide low and to live under grace.

I leave you with a few lines from Isaac Penington, one of these worthies who, “being dead, still speaks,” and who paid a great price for the weight of his words.

⁹ 1 Peter 4:12

¹⁰ See Simeon’s prophecy in Luke 2:34; Hannah’s song in 1 Samuel 2:1-10; Hosea 6:1-3; 1 Peter 4:6

“When I was turned to His truth in the inward parts, I found it was God’s grace and tender love both to turn me and to keep me turned, causing truth to spring in me day by day, and give me ability through it. But oh, none knows (besides those who have had experience) how we have been weakened in the natural part, how poor we have been made, that we might receive the gospel. Oh how poor in ourselves we are kept that we might enjoy the riches and inheritance of the kingdom.”

* * *

“You must be very low, weak, and foolish, that the seed may arise in you to exalt you, and become your strength and wisdom. You must die exceedingly, again and again, more and more, inwardly and deeply, that your life may spring up from the holy root, and you may be more and more gathered into it, spring up into it, and live in the life, virtue, and power of it. The travel is long, the exercises many, the snares, temptations, and dangers are many, and yet the mercy, relief, and help is great also.”

* * *

“Oh blessed be the Lord, I feel Him near, His Spirit near, His life near, His power near, His pure

virtue near, His holy wisdom near, His righteousness near, His redemption near; for He is my rock, and my strength, and my salvation, day by day. And I have no confidence in the flesh, in what I am, in what I can do after the flesh; but my confidence is in Him who has weakened me, who has stripped me, who has impoverished me, who has brought me to nothing in myself, that I might be all in Him, and that I might find Him made all unto me."

* * *

"Now the Lord knows, these things I do not utter in a boasting way, but would rather be speaking of my nothingness, my emptiness, my weakness, my manifold infirmities, which I feel more than ever. The Lord has broken the man's part in me, and I am a worm, and no man before Him. I have no strength to do any good or service for Him. No, I cannot watch over or preserve myself. I feel daily that I keep not alive my own soul, but am weaker before men, yes, weaker in my spirit, as in myself, than ever I have been. But I cannot help but speak to the praise of my God, for I feel His arm stretched out for me. And my weakness, which I feel in myself, is not my loss, but my advantage before Him. Indeed, I am a worm, I am poor, I am nothing, less than nothing as in myself. I am weaker than I can express, or than

you can imagine. Yet, in the midst of all this, the life, power, righteousness, and presence of Christ is my refreshment, peace, joy and crown.”

* * *

“Oh here the true poverty of spirit is witnessed. He is poor indeed who has sold all, and has nothing left him except this seed, and the appearance and help of God in this seed; which also is not in his own hands, but in the will and disposal of God.”