In our discussion of Genesis 1 and 2, we learned that one of God’s characteristics is His incredible power. Paul touched on this same theme in Ephesians 3:20, 21:

Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

According to Paul, God is capable of doing anything that we can ask or even dream of asking Him to do. Paul had commented on God’s power earlier, in 1:19–23, specifying that “the surpassing greatness of His power” would be directed “toward us who believe.” In spite of our weaknesses, God is able to work through us, if we are yielded to His will. The theme of God’s power carries into Ephesians 2:1–10, in Paul’s discussion of God’s ability to save otherwise hopelessly lost sinners. (The “and” at the beginning of 2:1 shows that the “power” discussion is continuing.)

The New Testament is very clear in showing that Jesus is God’s one and only means of saving lost sinners. Jesus Himself said in John 14:6, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.” The apostles proclaimed this same truth: “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). John wrote that “He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life” (1 John 5:12).

All of humanity, therefore, is divided into only two categories: those who have been saved by the blood of Christ, the perfect sacrifice for our sins, and those who have not been saved but are still lost and without forgiveness.

“YOU WERE DEAD. . . .”

In describing our condition apart from Christ, Paul did not say simply that we were “lost”; he referred to us as having been “dead”: “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked” (2:1, 2a). Why would Paul use such a strong image as death to describe the condition of those who are (or were) without Christ? First, it highlights unresponsiveness to God. One of the most troubling consequences of the death of a loved one is that the person can no longer respond to our touch or our words as when he or she was living. Apart from Christ, we are unresponsive to God and His will for us—so we are, in fact, dead. Second, the dead are absolutely helpless. The dead are simply dead; they can no longer do anything to enhance their existence or change their condition. Without Christ, we are equally helpless to remedy our lost condition. It is entirely appropriate, therefore, to say that, apart from Christ, we are “dead.”

Paul continued his description of spiritual deadness: The spiritually dead are dead because of their “trespasses and sins.” Paul said that we once “walked” (habitually lived) in these sins. By doing so, we were living “according to the course of this world” (“ways of this world”; NIV) and “according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience” (2:2). This can only be a reference to Satan, who was once believed to rule over evil spirits that inhabited the atmosphere above the earth. Later, Paul advised Christians, “Put on...
the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil” (6:11), “taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one” (6:16). In writing to the Corinthians, Paul referred to Satan as “the god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4). When we reject the rulership of the God who created us, we are following “the god of this world,” whether or not that is our intention.

Paul had more to say about the godless lifestyle: “Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest” (2:3). To follow the lusts of “the flesh” means to yield to the human tendency to act selfishly and go our own way rather than God’s way. When we follow the desires of body and mind, we ignore God’s will and the destructive nature of our behavior. Paul did not say that this was the manner of life of “some” of us without Christ; it was true of “all.” Without Christ, each of us would be subject to the wrath of God. We would be “children of wrath,” that is, people characterized by wrath.

Spiritual death has three basic characteristics: deception (because we think we are safe when we are not), disobedience (because we are going away from God’s will in order to follow our own desires), and doom (because the end result is to face God’s wrath). This was the terrible plight everyone faced before Jesus came. It sounds completely hopeless, until we read on. . . .

“BUT GOD. . . .”

Verse 4 opens with what are perhaps the two most important words in the Bible: “But God.” The theme of the Bible is God, and Jesus said, “. . . all things are possible with God” (Mark 10:27). Were it not for God, we would all be hopelessly condemned. Paul here emphasized that salvation is not something that we figured out or accomplished for ourselves. It is entirely due to God’s initiative.

He described God as “rich in mercy” and as acting out of “His great love with which He loved us.” Because of His mercy and love, He has made us alive with Christ, raised us up with Christ, and made us sit with Him (Christ) in the heavenly places. The goal of all of this remarkable activity is to show God’s “surpassing riches” and His kindness “in Christ Jesus” (v. 7). In other words, God has joined us to His Son, who both died and rose again (see Romans 6:1–5) so we might share in His eternal life. 1 The hope that we have is ours only because of Jesus and because, through the gospel, we have been united with Him.

“BY GRACE . . . THROUGH FAITH”

We may still wonder, since we are all such incurable sinners, how God can bestow His love on us and undo the effects of our sinfulness. Paul answered this question clearly.

He said that God does this “by grace” (2:5, 8). One writer defined “grace” this way:

Grace is utter generosity, unselfish, spontaneous, recklessly prodigal generosity, which acts wholly out of loving concern for the other’s need, even if he is completely unworthy of the love and help thus offered to him. 2

A simpler definition was offered by a little boy who said, “Grace is getting what you need instead of what you deserve.”

The classic example of both the bestowal and the reception of grace is Jesus’ “Parable of the Prodigal Son,” found in Luke 15. In this vivid and moving story, Jesus told of a young man who brashly demanded his inheritance from his father, being unwilling to wait until his father had died. He then traveled into a “distant country” (v. 13), where he squandered everything he had by living in a wild and unrestrained manner. Finding himself on the verge of starvation and doing the humiliating task of feeding pigs in order merely to survive, he resolved to go back to his father. His plan was to confess his unworthiness to be called a son and ask only to be treated as a hired servant. At least, by this means he might save himself from starvation. He returned home, fully realizing that he had no basis upon which to expect anything but harsh treatment from his father. Instead of that, Jesus said, his father saw him “while he was still a long way off” (v. 20), apparently because he had been looking for him.

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1 A good way to consider this emphasis in Paul’s thought is to read Ephesians 1:3–23, underlining each occurrence of “in Christ,” “in Him,” “in the Beloved,” or a similar phrase.

constantly ever since he had left! The father ran to
him and kissed him. The son never had to make
his speech about his obvious unworthiness be-
cause his father was so anxious to celebrate his
return. He had the prodigal clothed in a manner
befitting the son of a wealthy man, ordered that
the family signet ring be placed on his finger, and
announced that a feast was to be prepared in his
son’s honor. Interestingly, he used the same term
that Paul later used to describe the condition of
all who are far off from God: “For this son of mine
was dead and has come to life again” (Luke 15:24a;
emphasis mine; see v. 32). Here is the perfect il-
lustration of Paul’s term “grace,” although the
word is not used in Luke 15: a loving father who
extravagantly receives back an erring child who deserves
nothing but scorn and rejection.

In Ephesians 2:4–10, Paul described two es-
sential qualities of grace. Without these, grace
would not be “grace.”

**God’s Grace Is Free**

First, grace is free. Paul called our salvation
“the gift of God” (2:8b). To further emphasize this,
he stressed that it is not our achievement: “Not
as a result of works, so that no one may boast”
(2:9). If salvation could be earned through our
efforts, it would not be by grace. Then the death
of Jesus would be without meaning (Galatians
2:21).

Not many things in life are truly “free.”
Sometimes an insurance policy specifies a “grace
period” to allow for a late payment. This means
that the policy does not expire for a certain
period of time even though the payment for
that month has not been made. That may sound
like grace, but it is not. Actually, it is more like
a “stay of execution”—because it is only for a
limited time, and the policy expires completely
unless the payment is made by the end of the
“grace period.” In contrast, the salvation that

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**Faith vs. Works: Did James Disagree with Paul?**

In several places in his letters (as in Ephesians 2), Paul was emphatic in stating that salva-
tion comes by means of faith and not though works (see, for example, Romans 3:28; Galatians
2:15–21).

In James 2 we find these words: “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith
alone” (v. 24); “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead”
(v. 26). Some have concluded that James and Paul presented quite different teachings about this
topic—that James taught that salvation comes through works, while Paul said that salvation
comes through faith alone.

In fact, Paul and James were discussing two different topics. Paul was addressing the question
of whether or not keeping the works of the Jewish law is necessary (in addition to faith in Christ)
for one to be saved. James was discussing what kind of faith saves. He asserted that only an active
faith (one which includes works of faith) can save; otherwise, faith is dead. It is clear that James’
view of the nature of saving faith was no different from Paul’s, once we give adequate attention
to Paul’s emphasis on obedience as a necessary aspect of faith. Paul wrote in Romans 2:6–11,

> [God] will render to each person **according to his deeds:** to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for
> glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not **obey the
> truth,** but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. There will be tribulation and distress for every soul
> of man who **does evil,** of the Jew first and also of the Greek, but glory and honor and peace to everyone who
> **does good,** to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God. (Emphasis mine.)

Many people in Paul’s time (like many now) misunderstood his teaching about salvation
through grace and faith, thinking that he was claiming people need to do nothing at all in order
to be saved. Some have misapplied his teaching about grace to suggest that we can be saved by
the very kind of “dead faith” that James described, and that our sins prompt God to be even more
merciful. This was not Paul’s intention at all, as he made clear in Romans 2:5–8; 6:1, 2.

James was perhaps responding to distortions of Paul’s teaching when he emphasized the
necessity of works as a part of faith. Whether or not this was the case, both writers clearly believed
that faith is an active response to God, not merely intellectual assent or internal trust.
God offers in Christ is truly free. To illustrate this truth, ask yourself the following questions: “What did I do to motivate God to send His Son to die on the cross for me?”; “What action on my part caused Jesus to die on the cross so that I might be redeemed?”; “Has any effort of mine helped to create the gospel message so that I would know of God’s love and offer of salvation . . . or to establish the church . . . or to inspire the Scriptures? What have I done to open the doors of heaven?” The point should be clear, for the answer to all of these questions is obviously, “Nothing!” Our salvation is truly “by grace.”

We may find it difficult to accept the fact of God’s grace and still think that we must, in reality, save ourselves. We are like the young man who came to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?” (Matthew 19:16). Apparently, he believed there must be some great feat that he could perform that would guarantee his entrance into heaven. He was missing the point entirely, as Jesus had to show him. We may also be compared to the servant in Matthew 18:23–35, who owed his master “ten thousand talents” (as much as 150,000 years’ wages for a common laborer); yet he said, “Have patience with me and I will repay you everything” (v. 26). What an absurd statement! No one could pay off such a debt! He obviously could not pay, but Jesus said, “The lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.” Again, Jesus did not use the word “grace,” but His story gives a clear sense of its meaning.

Why do we find it so difficult to accept the reality of God’s grace? There are several possible reasons.

1. We tend to expect what we deserve. One of the first sentences we learn as little children is “That’s not fair!” We insist on getting what we believe is rightfully ours. That may work fine when we are squabbling over a toy or anticipating a job promotion, but it is problematic when we start talking about the need for forgiveness. When we stand before God on the day of judgment, the last thing we will want is what we deserve! We will crave what we need—His grace.

2. We do not comprehend the depth of our own sinfulness. If we think of sin as only a few “mistakes” that we have made from time to time, then we do not understand or sense the need for God’s grace. We must not view sin as a minor injury that we can treat ourselves, rather than seeking the help of the Great Physician. If we could see ourselves as God sees us, then we would understand that salvation can only be by grace. According to Paul, without grace we are “dead in . . . sins.” Grace is our only hope.

3. We are sensitive to our own guilt. This is the reverse of the problem stated previously. Since we know ourselves better than anyone else (other than God), we may be aware of how sinful we really are—perhaps in ways that others do not see. Realizing that, it is difficult for us to believe that God, who knows everything about us, could possibly extend His grace to us. We do not deserve it; that is why it is called “grace.” God offers us, through Jesus, what we most need but cannot get for ourselves.

4. We have an unbalanced idea of God’s nature. Depending on our backgrounds, we have developed various understandings of God that do not always match what the Bible says about Him. Some think of God only in terms of a harsh Judge whose primary aim is to find things wrong with us so He can condemn us. Nothing could be farther from the truth! The Bible says that “God is love” (1 John 4:8) and that He “desires all men to be saved” (1 Timothy 2:4). While God will certainly judge the unrepentant and unbelieving, He wants to save us. Why else would He have sent His Son into the world to die for our sins?

5. We transfer our unforgiving human relationships onto God. Those who were brought up around people who did not practice forgiveness may struggle to believe that anyone—especially God—can really be forgiving. Those who tend to be unforgiving toward others may find it hard to imagine that God is not like that—but He is not. He wants to forgive, and He does forgive; He will forgive His children by His grace.

6. We have the wrong motivation for serving God. Well-meaning people may have convinced some of us that our primary motivation for serving God ought to be the guilt that we feel for our sins, or the guilt that we will experience if we fail to do what God wants us to do. The truth is, feeling guilty is only a small step toward deciding to serve and obey God. Far more powerful and motivating is grace—our gratitude for God’s willingness to pardon our sins and for Jesus’ willingness to die for us so we can be forgiven.
Believing in God’s grace is far more effective in making us faithful servants of the Lord than guilt ever could be.

7. We think we have to do everything just right—or else! “Perfectionism” is the notion that we can never be acceptable to God until we have removed all the sins from our lives. That is putting events out of order in the most serious way! Through the cross God accepts us as we are and takes away our sins. Likewise, “legalism” is the idea that we have to believe and do exactly as God wants in order to be saved. While pleasing God completely ought to be the goal of every Christian, we must be realistic: We are incapable of pleasing God to that extent. We all sin and make mistakes sometimes. We must rely on God’s grace, not on the false hope of “getting everything just right.” (James 2:10 shows the hopelessness of trying to save ourselves in this way.)

If grace is not free, it simply is not “grace.” We may have to discipline our thinking in order to accept that fact; but once we do, we experience a wonderful blessing from the Lord.

God’s Grace Is Abundant

The second essential quality of grace is abundance. In Ephesians 1:7, 8, Paul wrote that God “lavished” His grace upon us. In 2:4 we read that God is “rich in mercy,” and verses 6 and 7 speak of His “surpassing riches.” Why is this important in understanding grace? Because it means that, regardless of the extent or nature of our sins, God is willing and able to forgive. Grace is not just for “good people” who happen to mess up every now and then. It is for sinners—all sinners. In 1 Timothy 1:15 Paul said that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost [worst] of all.” Prior to this he had described how he formerly had blasphemed and persecuted and insulted Christ, yet he said that “the grace of our Lord was more than abundant” for him (1 Timothy 1:14). Why? Why did God single out Paul as an object of His grace? Paul explained:

Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life (1 Timothy 1:16).

In other words, God saved Paul so that no one could ever say, “I am beyond hope of salvation.” We cannot sin beyond God’s power to forgive! When the prodigal son returned to his father, no explanations were necessary. That he was a sinner was already an established fact. What mattered was not what he had done, but that he had come home.

Grace is both free and abundant. That is why the Christian message is called the “gospel”; it is good news!

“THROUGH FAITH”

Grace is free and abundant, but not cheap. Through the message of the gospel, grace is offered to all; but it must be accepted. Accepting what God offers through His Son is what Paul meant when he said that we have been saved “by grace” and “through faith.”

Again, the story of the prodigal son is a good illustration. He was accepted by his father before he ever decided to come home (that is grace). Nevertheless, as long as he refused to come home, he remained dead! In a very real sense, a Christian is simply a prodigal who has come home to the Father and received His grace, and who lovingly and joyfully serves Him in return. While Paul emphasized that works are not the cause of our salvation, he also stressed that they are the fruit of it: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them” (2:10). To “walk” in good works means that they become our habitual way of life.

Several aspects of faith must not be overlooked. One of these is trust. “Believing in Jesus” is accepting His identity as God’s Son and our Savior, but it also includes trusting that His blood has the power to cleanse us and give us life, as the Scriptures say that it has. To “believe” is to put ourselves in His hands, trusting that the promises of God will be fulfilled for us and in us. Having faith also means acknowledging our need for what Christ offers. To believe the gospel is to believe that we—all of us—need what Christ died to purchase for us. If we really have faith, we will obey God’s commands. Just as the prodigal son had to leave the pig sty and return to his father’s house, we are called upon to give up our sinful ways and begin living as obedient children of God. Peter’s hearers, on the day of Pentecost, asked, “Brethren, what shall we do?”
Peter’s response was in the form of both a command and a promise: “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (2:38). A life in Christ begins with obedience, and the Christian continues to live obediently and faithfully until death. (See Hebrews 5:7–10; Matthew 7:21–27; Revelation 2:10.)

Some of the popular conceptions of faith are, in fact, gross distortions of it. Faith is not just an opinion about God, as when someone vaguely “believes in God” and so claims to have “faith.” James chided some of his readers who had such “faith”: “You believe that God is one. You do well”—but then he added, “The demons also believe, and shudder” (James 2:19). No demon was ever saved by such “faith.” Faith is not something that is strictly internal (“in the heart”). Faith should begin “in our hearts,” but it is incomplete until it affects what we do on a daily basis. Hebrews 11 says, “By faith Abel . . . offered. . . .”; “By faith Noah . . . prepared. . . .”; “By faith Abraham . . . obeyed. . . .”; “By faith Abraham . . . offered. . . .” Faith is not just believing something; it is acting on what we believe to be true. Also, faith is not simply believing the right doctrines contained in the Scriptures. It certainly includes such belief (what Paul called “the faith” in 1 and 2 Timothy), but it goes beyond what is believed to living a faithful, obedient life.

“YOU?”

“For by grace you have been saved through faith,” Paul wrote (2:8a). It is this great truth that makes salvation possible for all of us. If it were not for this truth, we would have no opportunity for salvation.

To whom was Paul speaking when he said, “By grace you have been saved through faith”? Paul often referred to this “pull” as “the flesh”; see Galatians 5:16–21, for example.) It is more than simply breaking rules; it is denying God’s claim on our lives and following our own desires.

We must understand this dimension of sin so we will likewise understand sin’s remedy. Because sin is a power, Paul also described the gospel of Christ as “the power of God for salvation” (Romans 1:16). The message of Christ is not merely a philosophy, a set of facts, or a self-help strategy. Only the good news of the crucified and risen Savior can overcome the power of sin and set us free to live for God. In view of our helplessness as prisoners of sin, God’s providing a means of escape epitomizes the grace that Paul discussed in Ephesians 3:8. (See Romans 5:1–11.)