

THE POVERTY OF CHRIST AND THE GRANDEUR OF GRACE

By Scott Christensen

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.

The Apostle Paul - 2 Corinthians 8:9

Grace. Amazing Grace. It is a theme richly woven within every fiber of the tapestry of the Christian faith. Yet, it has become so much a banal staple of the parlance of Christian discourse that the term has lost its luster. It no longer excites the passions of believers beleaguered by indifference. But, Oh! How glorious is that grace that set the captives free - the fountainhead of God's love for a world trapped in its own destructive melee.

God's grace in its simplest expression is unmerited favor. This certainly distinguishes it from lesser definitions paraded by so many. Some have proffered the idea that grace is synergistic, a special prevenient divine power assisting the free moral agent in making his choice for God. Others say it is an infusion of a salvific manner administered sacramentally. The radical theologian, Karl Rahner, would have the unsuspecting inquirer believe grace can be found in all religions and philosophies to one degree or another. However, these must be deemed inadequate to canvas the genuine character of divine grace. Even the simple definition first offered is entirely too reductionistic. It only allows the surface to be skimmed, while what lies beneath, closer to the depths remains uncharted.

Grace is of two sorts - common and special. Common grace is bestowed upon the whole world where everyone has always enjoyed its ongoing benefits. The plenary scope of human achievement; the arts, the sciences, and the cultural attainments of imaginative and intellectually astute creatures are ultimately gifts from the God who created us as His image-bearers. Everyone partakes in the safe haven of divinely ordained civic institutions, restraining evil and rewarding good. Never has the collective moral conscience of any people retreated entirely into sustained and unbridled anarchy. There has always remained the hope of a well ordered society even in the most horrific regimes.

The environment in which humans make their abode is a teleological marvel intended for our profit. Christ said the sun rises and the rain falls on all without distinction. In fact, daily do the inhabitants of this planet take for granted the uniformity of the natural laws governing our physical existence. For example, gravity is said to be that mysterious glue that holds the cosmos together, in spite of the fact science has absolutely no idea what it is or where it came from. They do know that if gravity suddenly ceased, the entire material construct would disintegrate into innumerable minuscule fragments all across space and time. What the physicists do not know is that Christ, the Creator, sustains the universe and causes it to cohere together merely by the power of His voice. Should He relent and silence Himself, untold madness would reign. Common grace is manifested by God's patience and mercy with mankind. As a matter of divine practice, He postpones judgment on man's penchant for evil. His mercy began with Adam and Eve and continues to this day. One might say that God is a purveyor of second chances.

The second sort of Christian grace is the special extension of God's particular love for those He called out for Himself - privileged to be named as His children. It is the grace that forms the very ground of God's redemptive actions toward undeserving sinners. All the pillars of salvation - atonement, justification, propitiation, election, reconciliation, regeneration, and sanctification rest securely upon the grand foundation of God's grace. This grace is first a

gratuitous, undeserved reward; a prize conferred for no achievement. Secondly, it issues forth from the incalculable benevolence of its heavenly source. It is abundant and capable of satisfying every need. Grace is monergistic and irresistible, ever efficacious in its exercise.

First, God's grace is unfettered and free, no strings attached. This is what is meant by its unmerited character. No man is able by the strength of his moral will to gain God's favor. Virtually every religious system conceived by humanity is rooted in the ability accorded to humans themselves. Religious man is transparently anthropocentric; he thinks he can appease what ever powers he imagines through his own self-inflated sense of achievement. However, God's grace extends toward those who recognize their utter incapacity for meeting the terms necessary to achieve salvation. The force of grace is only apparent when they recognize how undeserving they are of its benefits. This is why Jacob said to Jehovah, "I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant" (Genesis 32:10).

While, grace is without cost to its beneficiaries, it did cost God a great deal. It required Him to send His Son to this sin stricken earth as a vicarious substitutionary sacrifice to atone for horrible crimes of wickedness on behalf of sinners. It is in this willing action the Son indicates the depth of love God displayed in grace. That pure, undefiled love is seen in the condescension of Christ to bear the burden of sinful creatures on a shameful cross. He was whipped and beat, spat upon, cruelly mocked and despised. He was left to die a cold and lonely death outside of Jerusalem while His detractors retreated into the warmth of the city gates. While Christ's physical agony pales in comparison to what He experienced in His spirit; still, few appreciate the magnitude of humiliation the Creator of the universe underwent so that we might have the only available means of freedom that exists. In a poignant moment, the famed "Rabbi" Duncan cried to his students, "D'ye know what Calvary was? What? What? What?" And while the air turned pregnant with silence and tears started streaming down his face, he boldly proclaimed, "*It was damnation - and he took it lovingly.*"

It is out of the abundant character of the divine sacrifice Christ made, that grace is unbounded in its ability to meet every need of every sinner to whom it is extended. No amount of malice that seethes through the veins of the vilest offender can thwart the designs of grace to erase the impossible stains left in the wake of such transgression. One need only look at the Apostle Paul, a formerly horrible blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent man, in order to see the abundant character of God's kindness to His enemies.

God's grace is not synergistic, but monergistic. No one and nothing cooperates with God's grace. God called Abraham from a strange land and for no apparent reason He chose to make a tremendous promise to the wandering Aramean - a great nation and a blessing not merely to his posterity, but to all the nations of the earth. In honoring the promise, God made a covenant with Abraham, which in those ancient times usually required obligations on the part of both parties. But God never asked Abraham to meet any such covenantal stipulations; instead, God bound Himself alone to meeting its demands. So has it always been with God's grace. He never asks the recipient to cooperate with Him, nor to contribute to its exercise in any manner whatsoever.

The grace of God is also irresistible. Sinful humans are of course utterly unable to do anything of spiritual value for themselves. We are said in Scripture to be dead in our sins, spiritual zombies of sorts. Many relate the offer of salvation to the illustration of throwing a pearly white life-saver to those perishing in a tumultuous sea. If only the drowning seafarers would reach out and firmly grasp hold of that life-saving rim they would be brought to the safety of the ship. But the analogy is misappropriated, for the seafarers are already dead, floating about

lifelessly upon the waves, tossing to and fro like helpless rag dolls. The salvation they require is not an escape from impending death, both the impartation of new life, something seemingly impossible. The better analogy pictures the Captain of the ship discarding his captain's garb, putting on the seafarers' swimwear, and diving into the stormy waters to retrieve dead bodies. In transporting them to the deck of the ship, he breathes new life into their souls restoring them from death. The grace of God is much like this. Unless God pulls us into His kingdom, we shall not come. This is not to say that anyone comes into the kingdom kicking and screaming. God never saves anyone who is not desirous of it. Rather, God effectually and tenderly transforms human wills that were once enslaved to rebellion, but now are freed to serve a new master with unparalleled joy and devotion. Cold stone hearts are replaced with warm hearts of flesh. All people penultimately resist God's grace, but for some, ultimately resistance breaks down and melts into sweet gratitude for the lovingkindness of a compassionate Savior.

Another illustration, closely resembling the spiritual reality of the exercise of grace, is like that of a citizen of a great kingdom who is arrested and charged for awful crimes against its ruler. The citizen is one among many who have strangely enough chafed against the laws set forth in the kingdom by the great ruler. This king was perfectly benevolent, always bearing in mind the best interests of the citizens. He provided the best opportunities the land afforded the citizens so they might enjoy its benefits. But they always despised him and the principles he set forth for experiencing freedom and living life to its fullest, squandering everything given to them. They cried to be free from these imaginary fetters they supposed they faltered under.

As the defendant faces the plaintiff in the courtroom, to his dismay, he discovers that not only is the great ruler the plaintiff, but he is also the prosecutor. Furthermore, to add grief to his misery, he notes the plaintiff and prosecutor was also the chief investigator of the crimes. This especially did not bode well for the man, since the investigator had the reputation of never erring in his assembling of evidence. And as the prosecutor, he never failed to take the best advantage of the evidence in his arguments before the court. Worst yet, the prosecutor never lost a case in his many years of prosecuting wayward citizens.

But nothing had prepared him for the astonishment that overtook him when the plaintiff, the investigator, the prosecutor, the king himself, walked up to the judge's bench after all the arguments had been made. For there was no jury, the judge made all decisions in these judicial matters. The problem was profoundly disconcerting for the defendant. He had no defense attorney, not even a defense. He knew in his heart he was guilty. He also ascertained quite perceptively that the great king and judge was absolutely just and never failed to make a fair decision. His majesty would be compelled by principle to pronounce a guilty verdict which always resulted in death. The defendant may protest, but to no avail, the verdicts were always sound and everybody knew it.

While justice demanded retribution in the death penalty, the judge did have the prerogative to extend mercy to the defendants, commuting their sentences temporarily. This he did regularly, giving the citizens opportunity to reconsider the nature of their rebellious actions. But mostly, they never thought twice of the king's mercifulness, but continued to take him for granted increasingly engaging in treasonous crimes.

However, this day was different. The judge did not execute the letter of the law, neither did he extend a commuted sentence for the defendant. You see, to the right of the judge's bench stood another such seat. It was reserved for the judge's son. Many had heard of the king's son, that he was one with his father, and that he too exercised the same authority his father did. Today, the father and the son conferred quietly with one another before the bewildered

courtroom. Suddenly, the son quietly stepped down from the judge's bench. He removed his princely garb, his judge's robe, all that identified himself with his royal position. To the amazement of all, he put on the clothing that convicted criminals were to wear. He came and stood close by the defendant. Then the judge spoke tenderly to his enemy and offered him something unthinkable. He said, "Today I wish to extend a gift to the defendant. My son has agreed to pay your debt, to set you free, to clear your record of wrongdoing. He and I are willing to show our compassion for you. Not only that, but as the ruler of this kingdom, I want to give you a special inheritance - a share in the wealth of the royal household and a place in the king's palace. I give to you this day, the opportunity to become an adopted child of the royal household." The king extended more than mercy, he extended grace.

In the kingdom of God, He sent his Son Jesus Christ to offer such a gift to all mankind, not to just one individual. This condescension of one so rich to become so poor is genuine grace. Through Christ's poverty, many who are poor and utterly undeserving are made rich. They are forever made co-heirs with Christ and children of a new father, God Himself. That the Creator of the universe died for His special creatures is nothing less than astounding. Perhaps the only thing more astounding than this marvelous extension of love, is how so many refuse it. But for those who do not, the love of God for as wretched sinners as they is grace, nothing less than Amazing Grace.