

## Study Two

# CALLED IN THE GRACE OF CHRIST

Paul says that the Galatians were called in the grace of Christ, and that he himself was called through grace (Gal. 1:6,15). In fact the Galatians were perverting the gospel by understanding that God's call had come by a deficient 'grace', or an initiating grace that now needed to be supplemented. Hence, it is important to understand the meaning of a call which comes in the grace of Christ. It is called a holy calling, and is not related to man's works but God's own purpose and grace (II Tim. 1:9). We understand then, that whatever God calls his chosen people to be or do will flow out of his grace. If this were not so, the call would be ineffective, and in fact, not a call of God. (So Rom. 4:13–17; II Corin. 1:19–22). Therefore we need to understand the nature, and working of grace.

## GRACE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

God's nature never changes; he has always been the God of grace (II Tim. 1:9). In the OT, this is conveyed particularly by two words meaning favour (chen) and covenant love (Chesed—or kindness, mercy or everlasting love). This favour or love is the basis of the relationship he seeks with man (Ps. 31:21; 42:8; Num. 6:24–27; II Sam 7:15) and in which he takes the initiative choosing them for himself (Deut. 4:37; 7:7–8; 9:5–6; 10:15; Hosea 3:1; 11:1). He gives them his law as the one who brought them out of bondage (Exod. 20:1). When they sin and chastisement is called for, he cannot bring himself to destroy them as they deserve (Hos 11:8–10; Isa. 43:25; 48:8–11; Ezek. 36:22–32; Micah 7:18–20). Therefore the grace of God is seen particularly in the forgiveness of sins (Exod. 34:6f.; Ps. 32:1–5, 51; 103:8; Prov. 3:34; Isa. 30:18). The new covenant of God's grace is to be based on forgiveness (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 34:25).

## GRACE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the NT, 'grace' translates a Greek word 'charis' meaning firstly gracefulness, or loveliness. It has this particularly Greek cultural meaning when applied to Christ's and the christian's gracious speech (Luke 4:22; Col 4:6). But its characteristic meaning in the NT is graciousness, kindness, or favour, and especially of God's own favour. The verb derived from 'charis' means to give freely, and to forgive freely.

In the epistles, it is shown that man is saved by grace (Eph 2:8f.) and continues to relate with God on the basis of grace (Rom. 7:21—8:2; II Peter 1:2–4). Grace is the nature and action of the Father (Titus 2:11; I Peter 5:10), the Son (John 1:14–17; II Corin. 8:9; 13:14), and the Spirit (Titus 3:5–7; Heb. 10:29, also Rom. 5:5; I Corin. 2:12).

## **GRACE, BY JESUS CHRIST**

However, the meaning of grace in the NT is far wider than what is conveyed by one group of words. In fact it is the thrust of all that Jesus was and did, so that grace is particularly the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 16:20), or the grace of God given you in Christ Jesus (I Corin. 1:4). Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ (John 1:14–17), or ‘appeared’ to man by his coming (Titus 2:11).

The very presence of Jesus with men would have been grace, but through the dullness created by sin men were slow to see that, or did not see it at all. (John 1:11,14,17). Therefore the grace of God was portrayed by Jesus particularly as he encountered sin. He forgave sin (Mark 2:5; Luke 7:48; John 8:11), gave himself to people at the expense of his own necessities (Mark 3:9f., 19–21), even though people misunderstood and misused his favour (Mark 1:40–45; John 6:15,26f.; Matt 20:20f.). He told Peter of his failure and what to do after he was converted (Luke 22:31-34) and gave the mark of honour to the one who would betray him (John 13:21–26). Peter says Jesus was reviled, but did not return the hatred; and suffered, but did not threaten (I Peter 2:23). As the logical consequence of being gracious to sinners, he bore all their hatred with love, and died, the just, for the unjust (I Peter 3:18) tasting death for everyone (Heb. 2:9). Even at his execution, he cared more for the well-being of the souls of the soldiers, than for the injustice of what was happening to himself (Luke 23:24). When he rose from death, he immediately gave instructions concerning his ‘brethren’ (Matt. 28:10), those in fact who had all forsaken him in his trials. Therefore when Paul says that God shows his love for us in that Christ died for us when we were sinners, he is not stating an unrelated doctrine, but a fact that even a hardened mind would find hard to ignore. So God commends his love to us, literally proves or establishes it before us (Rom. 5:6–8).

This gracious action of Jesus, with all of the injustice that it involves from a human point of view, is seen as central by the apostles. They conducted their whole ministry in the realm of grace. (Acts 4:33; 11:23; 13:43; 14:3,26; 15:11,40; 18:27; 20:24,32)

## **GRACE UNDERSTOOD BY SINNERS**

It can be seen why grace, and the cross where it is focussed, are not necessarily attractive to man and are often rejected. Grace does not exist in isolation as the kindness of God, but in relation to the guilt of man and as God’s refusal to condemn; and even more, to take that condemnation to himself. The nature of grace is seen by observing its opposites; namely that God owes man his salvation (Rom. 4:4) because of his keeping the law (Rom. 11:6; Eph. 2:8f.). In fact, if man is to be saved, God must give him his salvation because he cannot keep the law. (So Luke 18:9–14). Therefore grace can only be understood by the sinner, that is, by him who has been humbled and knows he is incapable of keeping the law. Therefore those who were well, said Jesus, had no need of a doctor. (Luke 5:31f.; 15:7) The whole of the message of salvation would be incomprehensible to them. Grace would seem repulsive. (I Corin. 1:23)

Man's nature constantly reverts to illusions of his being a deserving creature. But God from the beginning has prevented this conclusion by revealing his grace before there was opportunity to be deserving (Rom. 9:10–18), or when man was least deserving (Ps. 106; Isa. 43:22 – 44:5; Ezek. 36:22–32). Therefore, he has no grounds for boasting (Eph. 2:9). When the law was given, man was told that if he did this, he would live. But the NT shows that God did not give the law, believing man would live because of it, but to 'increase the trespass.' And where sin increased, grace abounded all the more (Rom. 5:20). Consequently, Paul frequently disputed with those who sought to gain ground with God by their supposedly good actions (For example Gal. 2:21). He himself chose to glory not in his own advancement in godly living but in the enduring grace of God toward him. (I Tim 1:12–17; Rom. 7:21–25)

## **LIVING IN THE GRACE OF GOD**

As the Christian faith is grounded in this grace of God, all his attitudes and actions are to grow from it (II Peter 3:18). He loves because he has first been loved. That is, he fears no punishment from God so does not need to 'punish' others by hating them (I John 4:13–21). This opens up a whole new field of relationships in which no one needs to deserve the love they receive or insist that others be deserving of the love they give. People who relate in this way do in fact become gracious and lovely, but know the frailty of that grace and love and never make it the basis for acceptance within relationships. They always love because of the love of God. It is this attitude which must characterise the closest of human relationships (I Peter 3:7), and be the spirit of all Christian ministry (I Corin. 15:10). It must also extend to the most basic of human responsibilities as in the offering taken up for the Jerusalem saints (II Cor. 8 – 9), where the Greek word for grace is used ten times and is translated by 'grace', 'favour' 'gracious' blessing' and thanks'.

Gratefulness is the atmosphere in which a person lives when understanding grace, and in fact it is only at this point that a Christian is able to glorify God. If he is unsure of a gracious acceptance with God, his works and praise must all be attempts to earn favour. Only when that issue is settled can his praise and service be, free and full. (II Corin. 4:15).

## **FINDING GRACE IN THE EYES OF THE LORD**

All of the believer's growth in holiness flows from grace (Rom. 6:14) and everyone should beware of failing to obtain it. (Heb. 12:14–17). If grace is not received with gratefulness, the whole stream of human frailty, fear, suspicion, accusation and bitterness is let loose. In the grace of God however, a man can endure limitation and suffering and yet be the vehicle of God's strength (II Corin. 12:9; II Tim. 2:1).

No-one can ever say he has fully understood or experienced the grace of God. To believe that we are accepted in the Beloved (Eph. 1:5f.) that is, that we have the same acceptance with the Father as the Son has (John 16:26f.; 17:23), is so hard to accept that Paul prays that the Ephesians will be given a

spirit of revelation (Eph 1:17). If we did entirely understand grace, there would be an end to all grasping, anxiety, jealousy, criticism, and unwillingness to forgive, party spirit, foolish anger and so on, all of which arise from a sense of threat, and which grace dispels. (Matt. 18:21–35). There would also be an end to unwarranted attention to outward form. Bunyan tells how in the days before he understood God's grace he revered anything belonging to the church—'the priest, the clerk, the vestments, the service and everything else' ('Grace Abounding' p11). Paul would call all of these 'a shadow of what is to come' (Col 2:17).

Those who have only grasped the grace of God in a superficial way, will only be able to acknowledge their guilt with corresponding shallowness and therefore have a somewhat wooden relationship with God. Their faith must unavoidably resolve itself into a pleasing of man and receiving the praise of man (John 5:44; Gal. 4:17) seeing that the full acceptance of God has been too difficult to attain.

## **PERVERTING THE GRACE OF GOD**

The grace of God is liable to perversion, not only by those who add to it, but by those who believe they have a right to it (Matt. 18:23–25), or accept it as a thing, apart from the relationship in which it is offered and to which it leads (Rom. 6:1). These approaches to grace entirely miss its nature and purpose and lead to licentiousness (Jude 4).

Paul exhorts the Corinthians not to accept the grace of God in vain (II Corin. 6:1), and gives a clue to his meaning by pleading with them to widen their hearts because they were restricted in their affections (vss 12f.). The message of grace can only be conveyed by a full-orbed personal encounter (vss 3–10) and received in the same spirit. And this could not be otherwise because grace is essentially the out-pouring of the love of God by the self-giving of the Son of God. Not to appreciate this is to outrage the Spirit of grace. (Heb. 10:29).

## **CONCLUSION**

Therefore let us ourselves come to God, understanding that the centre of all authority and judgement is in fact a throne of grace, before which we have nothing to fear (Heb. 4:14–16). And let us anticipate that in the ages to come God will yet show to us the immeasurable riches of his grace (Eph. 2:7). Let us gird up our minds and set our hope fully on this grace (I Peter 1:13).