

Do the doctrines of Grace really matter in 2021?

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[0 : 00] Ephesians chapter 1. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus, grace to you and peace from our God and Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace with which he has blessed us in the beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us in all wisdom and insight, making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things, according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.

[1 : 37] In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it to the praise of his glory.

For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you.

What are the riches of his glory in the saints, and what is the glory of his glory in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might, that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead, and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come.

And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Over eight weeks now we've been looking at the doctrines of grace, or that notion of how we experience God's absolute sovereignty in our salvation. We've dug into that, we've looked at some questions this morning, our final question is, as Martin's already introduced, do they really matter in 2021?

[3 : 27] It's a lot of fuss about nothing. Historically, how we experience God's sovereignty in salvation has become a great theological divide.

On one side of the divide is the notion that God must, needs to save sinners. He can't save themselves.

On the other side of the divide is those who believe that God helps sinners to save themselves. That is, people have some ability at some point to move towards God, and then God helps them in that effort. It's a big theological divide.

The debate, the divide was at the heart of the Reformation 500 years ago. But it actually wasn't new then. It raged 1,100 years before that, because all the way back to the 5th century, and earlier than that even.

[4 : 30] And so in the Reformation, what we call the Doctrines of Grace was a formal statement representing the major Protestant reformers. And they, as a unit, were convinced from the Bible that the nature and extent of sin renders a person unable and unwilling to move towards God or to save themselves.

So, quite naturally then, from there, they determined that every aspect of salvation from start to finish had to be God's initiative, had to be God's sovereign power intervening in a sinful life, a sinful person, and turning that life around.

It had to be through grace alone. God doing for and in the sinner what they could never do for themselves. And that was in sharp contrast to what many believed and taught.

And it goes something like this. In sharp contrast to people who saw that, well, okay, yes, we agree that people generally are, or people universally, are severely affected by sin.

No question at all about that. But we also believe that still within that person, they have a freedom to choose and the ability to choose to move towards God in the right circumstances.

[5 : 53] And that indeed, God recognizes that and then helps them along the way, as it were. So, it's a joint effort. Partly my contribution and then partly God supplying what I can't do.

There's two powers at work in there. God's sovereign power and some of my own remnant power, sovereign power.

But interestingly, the debate's not about God's sovereignty. We'd be wrong if we thought it was about God's sovereignty because both sides of the divide actually concede the necessity for God's sovereignty, for God's sovereign power to be at work in our salvation.

The issue is whether God's sovereign, powerful action is required at every point in salvation or not. Or whether we maintain some sovereign power enabling us to contribute at whatever point to whatever degree.

Now, to me, it's a massive theological divide. But I think the climate of Christians and evangelicals today is that so many Christians would just dismiss this issue as a historically and theologically redundant issue.

[7 : 17] It's a waste of time, people would say. What does it matter, they say? Why do Christians just get so nitpicking about these detailed processes of something like salvation?

Let's focus on the majors we hear and not the minors. And so people are actually relegating a discussion like this to the minors, something that's just sidetracking Christians.

And so we hear today, many people said, look, what's really important is that we just love and affirm one another. And not fuss about this process of being saved.

So I say again to you, do they really matter in 2021? Well, the first thing I want to say in terms of answering this is that no, the doctrines of grace do not matter, comma, in the sense that it's not necessary to believe them to be saved.

Now, I want to be really, really clear here. It's possible for a person to be saved, genuinely saved, and not believe in election, predestination, particular atonement, God's effect of our irresistible calling, or the final perseverance of the saints.

[8 : 35] It's possible to be a Christian and not believe any of that. The Lord's not limited by our lack of understanding, or our sinful refusal to consider such important issues, or even to make them important, or even sinful pride in thinking that our faith is our contribution to salvation.

The Lord's not limited by any of those things in his purpose of salvation. However, I would argue the experience of any believer over a period of time pushes us more and more towards the idea of God's absolute sovereignty and grace in our salvation.

And it works like this. As I become more and more aware of my sinful failings, and just my abject step before God, and become aware of God's grace and mercy in moving towards me, then what happens is that I become smaller.

And God's grace becomes bigger and bigger. As I understand myself more, looking on the inside, I think, yeah, that would never have happened. I would never have done that except of God's sovereign action in my life to turn me around, to turn my thinking around, turn my desires around. And equally true, I think, therefore, also, individual Christians and church communities will not be as mature as they might be if they relegate this great divide or debate to something unimportant.

[10 : 15] Why? Why? Because it will be a church of individuals with a very seriously diminished view of God.

A very diminished view of God's specific love, specific commitment to their salvation. Perhaps even it will be a church where they claim for themselves that which is rightfully God's to claim and take glory for.

And so, again, you see, in churches where these things are relegated as unimportant, then I think God will be smaller in their thinking than he ought to be.

And conversely, individual Christians will be bigger in their thinking than they ought to be. But here's the point, the main point I wanted to make in this section.

As those who do thoroughly believe in the doctrines of grace, and I include myself, as those who do thoroughly believe in the doctrines of grace, the golden chain of salvation, we have no business suggesting that others who do not hold this position are not and cannot be genuine believers.

[11:37] Now, sad to say, I make this point because that's exactly what some have done who hold the doctrines of grace over the generations.

And they do so without biblical warrant. They've taken a superior position. It's actually unbecoming of the very gospel they claim to be defending. Second answer is this, that the doctrines of grace do really matter in 2021.

First sub-point then. They are nothing else than the sum and substance of how and why God saves us. They underpin and permeate the whole of scripture.

Now, why can I say that? Because in the end, the doctrines of grace are just really about God's character. You can look at them lots of different ways, but at the end of the day, the doctrines of grace are just a display of God's character.

And God's character is displayed right across the breadth of the Bible in two closely related words. First one is the word grace that we're so familiar with here in this church, which means God's act of blessing or showing mercy.

[13:00] Something that's entirely of his own choice. And he does this to those who are totally undeserving of anything from him except condemnation. And every page of the Bible, we see that's God's character.

To move towards people who cannot command anything from him. The second word, very closely related, is steadfast love. In the New Testament, it's more agape.

In the Old Testament, it's the Hebrew chesed. God's unwavering loyalty to those he has committed himself to bless. He sets himself to love.

And nothing that that person can do, good or bad, will cause him to waver in his commitment. And that chesed, that steadfast love is expressed mostly in God's plan and purpose of salvation.

He determines he's going to save out of this sinful pool a great multitude of those who will show his glory and reflect his character.

[14:07] And he does just that. And in spite of sin wrecking everything good in God's creation, we're shown repeatedly that God's steadfast love is both powerful and unwavering.

And that his grace is unconditional and free to those who do not deserve it in any shape or form.

And we pick up here in Ephesians now. Paul's language is repeatedly and overwhelmingly and just overflows from Paul all the time.

He speaks about the riches of God's grace and how God has lavished that upon us. It's extravagant language. Paul talks about being overwhelmed by the sheer generosity and beauty of God's actions towards sinful people.

And we pick it up in Ephesians chapter 1. We've looked at this passage several times in this series. But it's worth coming back to again. Paul in verse 3 says, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms. It's extravagant language. It's overflow language. This is how we see God's character is Paul's point to these Christians in Ephesus.

[15:35] And we just need to let that sit. And we just need to sort of swim in that for a little bit. Because Paul then goes on in verses 4 through to 14 to spell that out a little bit.

What does he mean when he talks about every spiritual blessing? Well, verses 4 onwards is this golden chain of salvation again. Where Paul just starts from eternity past.

God determining before the creation of the world to love the unlovely. God's character to love the unlovely. Promising to renew and restore relationship with them.

God's grace. Restoring relationship when condemnation would be the right thing. Rightful path ahead. Actually saving them by securing forgiveness at great cost in the death of his son.

Somebody must pay the penalty for these sins. There must be a death. But I will cover the cost. I'll absorb the cost myself. Through the death of my son. God's character on display.

[16:43] Effectively moving people to respond. When left to themselves, they would not have cared less about Jesus' death. God making sure that each individual has the benefits of Christ's death applied to them.

When, as I say, left to themselves, they couldn't have cared less. Leading them into full knowledge and enjoyment of himself. And overcoming all the obstacles to the fulfillment of this promise that arise at every stage and throughout life itself.

So that that saved person will make it home to heaven. Eternity. Future. Future. At every point. We, what we call salvation is just the sum and substance of God's character.

Why he saves us. How he saves us. Both of those are explained by God's character. His grace.

And his steadfast love. So friends, the point I want you to grasp here is that the doctrines of grace are biblical truth.

But I don't want us just to think of them as a sort of bland biblical truth. The doctrines of grace are a display of God's sovereign character and purpose in this world.

[18:04] They're to be embraced, therefore. What a great God. He's come looking for me when I was hiding from him.

They're to be treasured. God has actually done something for me that I could never have done for myself. They're to be guarded for successive generations.

I want my children and grandchildren and everybody else in this country to know the same character of God that offers them the same option of salvation.

I don't want to let that go as an inconsequential thing. I want it to be front and center. I want it to be my legacy as I leave this church and go home to be in heaven with the Lord.

I want the next generation and the next generation of this church to be teaching the same stuff for the same reasons. And the doctrines of grace cannot rightly be dismissed as a historical creed.

[19:15] They have been, but they cannot rightly be dismissed as a historical creed that perhaps has some value in its day, but no longer an issue for genuine believers who want to serve the Lord.

If we're going to serve the Lord, we must serve the Lord within response to his character. Second point, it pushes to have proper supernaturalism with respect to our salvation.

The cry of all Bible writers and indeed the teaching of Jesus himself is that salvation is of the Lord. But sadly, again, I suggest to you this morning, this concept has been severely diminished or even lost among some so-called evangelical Christians today.

I think it works like this. No longer do we hear of the need for a person to be saved or to be converted. Because both those statements emphasize God's action of rescuing a person from their hopeless plight and renewing them.

Now, the common statement we hear, so many evangelicals teach, is that people need to make a commitment. They need to make a decision to follow Jesus.

[20:49] Now, do you hear the difference in the verb there? It suggests that it's something the person does primarily and substantially. Now, I think this is more than just modernizing language.

I think it expresses a radical change in our theology of salvation. Now, clearly, and I want you to hear me carefully here, Scripture does call us to be committed to Christ at every point in life.

But that's always in response to being saved. God's action in our life, to start with. The one can't cancel out the other.

The one doesn't replace the other. It appears that desperate issues of salvation, that is being dead, being under God's wrath, being made alive, that we see here in Ephesians 2, it appears that those desperate issues of salvation have been lost or rejected or so toned down as to be unimportant.

And therefore, Jesus becomes more of a model of morality, a lifestyle to emulate or reproduce, rather than a substitutionary sacrifice for sin. And so, if we ask why professing Christians today argue that the doctrines of grace do not matter, I think sometimes we find the answer in this change of theology.

[22:21] The modern gospel, which is so common among evangelicals today, plays down the holiness of God, especially in respect of his anger at sin and rebellion, and plays up the basic goodness of a person or people individually.

Saying that, well, yeah, we've got some problems, but we're not all bad. We've got some good things that we can rightly bring to the table when we approach God. Even though they'll also say

that, yes, when we do that, we still need God's help.

The modern gospel promotes, my friends, I'm going to, this is probably the most provocative thing I'll say this morning. The modern gospel, I think, promotes shared sovereignty.

Now, they'll quickly add that our sovereignty is not equal to God's, so it's not an equal sovereignty, but it's a shared sovereignty. Something that is, something that's real, something that we have the right to bring with us when we're approaching God.

Something that we can actually bring to the table as we say, well, okay, what's going to make me acceptable to you, Lord? Well, I'll bring this. I recognize that you need to provide that. My friends, the doctrines of grace, I believe, put things back in the proper perspective.

[23 : 47] As I've said already, it makes God big, demanding his supernatural activity at every step in our salvation. And equally important, it makes us small, demanding our humble dependence and thankfulness for God's mercy and grace.

Third sub-point, then, is they get glory for God like nothing else. The doctrines of grace get glory for God like nothing else. Very simple point here. The more hopeless the plight of the condemned person, the greater will be the love, adoration, and sense of indebtedness of the one forgiven and rescued and freed into new life.

For Paul, when he talks about the gap between God and sinful people, he's talking in terms of the gap between heaven and hell. Between being saved by grace alone, chapter 2, and being without hope and without God in the world.

Massive gap. And four times in this one chapter here, and I don't have time to go through them all, but in verse 6 and 7 and verses 12 and 14, four times Paul bounces from describing the spiritual blessings we have in Christ as a result of God's salvation purpose to saying, he just stops, and it's all too much for him, and he just stops to the praise of his glory.

To the praise of his glory. To the praise of his glory. It's just so overwhelming that Paul just has to stop and breathe. To the breathe.

[25 : 28] I've done a day of thought again. To the praise of his glory. And Paul goes on from there in the following chapters in his letter to the church at Ephesus to speak about the beautiful mystery of God's grace that is salvation in Jesus.

The unsearchable riches of God's grace in Christ. Chapter 3. These very things that create the church, the community of resurrected people, of saved people, through whom God's incredible wisdom and love, faithfulness and purpose is shown.

Again, God's character. And from here in chapter 4, and from there in chapter 4, he urges a whole of life response. And here's Paul's point.

Since God is sovereign in salvation, since salvation is really an experience we have, a very personal experience of God's character, of grace and steadfast love and mercy.

And because of that, we're new. Join heirs with Jesus. Then, says Paul, chapter 4, we owe him everything.

[26 : 48] We owe him everything. We owe him everything. Heirs with Jesus. And that's why, my friends, Christian songwriters, modern and ancient, write over and over and over again about amazing grace.

I remember when I was a bit younger, I used to think, why do Christian songwriters have these cliches? Because amazing grace is in so many songs. And I've come to appreciate now that it's not a cliché, unless it's in my mind a cliché.

It's the essence, the sum and total of God's character that we experience every single day as we experience at that single point when we were saved and made alive.

To say that salvation is of the Lord in conception, in planning, accomplishment, application, such that sinners like you and me will be in heaven with the Father forever, is simply to give God the glory he deserves.

So the better we understand the doctrines of grace, the more we respond to God's grace and mercy and love by showing we owe him everything, the more glory he gets from us.

[28 : 12] It literally is to the praise of his glory. Second point then, and we're getting close to being done.

The doctrines of grace free us. They free us and encourage us to confident Christian living. Two sides of this coin, encouraging us to come to Christ in all our sinfulness.

Now I suspect you're just like me. If you're not, then you just listen in for this moment. But so often, I fear I'm too sinful to be saved.

Perhaps we, if you're like me, perhaps it's some big sin in the past. You think, I can understand God being forgiving and all this, but this one, no, that one's just too big.

No. Too awful for God to forgive. Or it can be more immediate. So sometimes we can get worn down, not just by that big sin from the past that we cogitate on, but sometimes it's our small, daily, repeated sins that just rise up to cause fear.

[29 : 32] And it's when we go to pray, because we're praying and confessing the same sin today as we confessed yesterday and the day before and the day before and the week before and the month before. And we think to ourselves, really?

Is God going to listen to this again? You see, in Ephesians chapter 1, Paul gives us the tools of freedom.

By saying it is, it's not about my failures, it's about God's commitment to me. It's about his golden chain of salvation that he didn't leave anything to chance.

He didn't leave any part of my salvation down to my own resources because he knew jolly well that I would stuff it up. In Christ, we have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realm.

There is nothing else, my friends, nothing else that God could do for us or give us that would make us more secure, that would make us more new.

[30 : 48] So when our fears threaten to overwhelm us, we need to drive them away by praying as Paul prays in verses 15 to 23.

I've even got it written down here wrong. Thanks for embarrassing me, Liz. From 15 to 23, we need to drive away those fears by praying as Paul prays.

And again, I don't have time to go through this prayer in detail, but I'd encourage you, urge you to go through it in detail in your own time. Freedom from fear is knowing the doctrines of grace, to use the terminology, but move away from the terminology.

Freedom from fear is knowing God's power and God's grace and God's commitment and God's purpose in salvation. Not just to make salvation available and hope to goodness that somebody might be interested in it, but to actually save those he set his love on and bring them home to heaven.

So they'll be part of this vast multitude that no man can number who will just be singing the praises of God's glory. And this in turn, you see, frees us to confident Christian living.

[32 : 13] It frees us from the performance treadmill of always trying to earn favour with God by getting things right. And friends, this also includes freedom to fail again and again as we do.

Then to seek God's forgiveness. Once more determined to live and act and think in a way that shows a proper response of gratitude and worship for his mercies to us. I'm still confident even in our failures that God is working with us and in us to make us more like Christ little by little.

Jude chapter 24 says this. I'm going to read this one too. I'm going to find it. I should have a look at it. I should have a look at it. Okay.

It's commonly used as a doxology. Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy to the only God our Saviour through Jesus Christ our Lord be glory, majesty, dominion and authority before all time now and forever.

God's character our freedom and security God's glory. The second the other side of this coin is they encourage us to encourage others to come to Christ.

[33 : 46] Now friends there's no question about it at least in my experience that evangelism is hard work. Which of us can change a single attitude or desire in another person? Which of us can cut through that deep instinct of hostility that people have towards God or that deep inclination to hide from God?

The answer is thankfully we don't have to. As we saw two weeks ago our job is to simply preach God's word get on with our stuff and let God do his stuff.

That's a beautiful freedom. We just need to speak when we have opportunity. Tell our friends tell our families tell our neighbours tell our workmates. It's God's work then to create new life and repentance and faith in the person.

I just find that such a relaxing partnership. The doctrines of grace are the platform for confident evangelism and cross cultural mission work.

As I said two weeks ago not only has God determined that a great multitude would be saved he's determined how and when through the preaching of the gospel.

[35 : 06] God's work God's stuff our stuff wonderful freedom in that. God's work God's work God's work God's work I just want to conclude the series then by reading to you from Acts chapter 18 verse 10 Paul knew the travail of being a witness for Christ and speaking the gospel to people who were lost in their sin and unwilling even to hear it and he says this or rather the Lord says this to Paul the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision do not be afraid but go on speaking and do not be silent here it comes for I am with you and no one will attack you to harm you for I have many in this city who are my people where was he working

Corinth that den of iniquity bit like our country isn't it I have many in this city who are my people go on speaking do not be silent our stuff God's stuff Paul's confidence in a very hostile city with a strong worldview that was openly opposed to God was God's sovereignty in salvation God has his elect people in Corinth and nothing would stop those appointed for salvation from being saved Paul could roll out of bed in the morning sometimes even nursing his bruises and get on the job of speaking with Jesus let me pray Lord we are just literally overwhelmed by your character that you pursue us in love and mercy you call us back to yourself in grace and you love us with a steadfast love help us never

Lord to even think about diminishing that at our front and center piece help us to make you big and ourselves small in Jesus name I pray Amen thank you very much for listening