

# GRACE ALONE

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[ 0 : 00 ] During a conference quite a number of years ago now on comparative religions, experts from around the world debated what belief, if any belief, was unique to the Christian faith.

And they began by eliminating a bunch of possibilities. The incarnation. They thought, no, actually other religions have different versions of their gods appearing in the world in human form to people. So what about resurrection? Again, other religions had accounts of people returning back from death. And the debate went on for some time until the Oxford Don C.S. Lewis walked into the room and in his classic C.S. Lewis style said, so what's all this rumpus about?

And when he heard that they were debating the unique contribution of Christianity and had for some time, Lewis just responded, just jumped on it. He said, well, that's easy. It's grace.

Grace. And after some discussion, the conference agreed. The notion of God's love coming to humanity free of charge, no strings attached, goes against every world religion and every instinct of humanity.

[ 1 : 29 ] There's the Buddhist eightfold path. There's the Hindu doctrine of karma, the Jewish covenant, the Muslim code of law. Each of these offers a way to earn approval or to stay in approval.

Only Christianity dares to declare God's love as unconditional. You can't earn it. It's not yours by right. You don't deserve it.

You don't ever deserve it. Now, grace is a word that's familiar to our ears. Grace. It can be a person's name. It can be an attitude, a gracious attitude.

It can be a prayer that you say before dinner if you're not terribly hungry. It's even a name of a hotel in Sydney. Ironically, however, there are no free rooms.

The word grace in the Greek New Testament is the word charis. And it's a holy Christian word.

[ 2 : 39 ] It was a word. The word charis was unknown in Greek or Roman ethics and theology before Christianity. This doctrine of grace gave rise to a new word for grace.

Grace in Christianity is a personal activity of God. God operates in unconditional love towards people. Grace is generosity.

It's when something is given purely out of the goodness and the kindness of the giver, despite the unworthiness of the recipient.

And salvation in Christianity is a work of God, not people. It's a work of God from beginning to end, and is given freely and undeservedly through Jesus Christ, as we just sang in three songs to kick our service off.

And this was the rediscovery or one of the rediscoveries of the Protestant Reformation, the 16th century, that has come down to us over these 500 years. As we started this series off, salvation is according to Scripture alone, in Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone, for the glory of God alone.

[ 3 : 59 ] That is our heritage. It's St. Paul's, and it's where we take our stand as a church today. And in the past two weeks, we've been reminded of two key foundations so far to biblical Christianity that were rediscovered in the Reformation 500 years ago.

Scripture alone, that is, it's not the Bible plus the traditions and the authority of the church and reason and experience. And it's Christ alone, not Jesus plus human priests and the sacrifice of the mass.

And next week, we're going to explore faith alone. It's not faith in Jesus plus good works for the basis of my salvation. And to these, the reformers added grace alone.

And in a sense, grace alone summarizes and explains the two that we've already done, the one we're going to do next week.

The Bible, the Word of God, comes to us from outside of us. It stands as a gracious gift of God to humanity.

[ 5 : 13 ] It's God communicating to us because without it, we would not see or know God. And Jesus Christ alone is the way to God. And Jesus again comes from outside of us, purely and only because of the kindness and love of God.

We don't earn him. We don't contribute to his work or help him finish off what he lacked. Jesus does everything through the generosity of God.

Even the ability, this is what we're going to see next week, even the ability to see and to trust in God, as we just read in Ephesians 2, is a gift of God itself.

Our response is nothing more than an open hand, held out in trust, that says thank you to the wonderful promises of God.

The grace of God is love freely shown towards guilty sinners, contrary to their merit, and in fact in defiance of their demerit.

[ 6 : 23 ] You see, the context of the Reformers rediscovering grace alone in the Bible was a church that believed in grace. That's the context. It was a church that actually believed in grace.

You see, Roman Catholic teaching states that God's grace is God's free favour and generosity towards sinners.

Grace is God's free. But, and in this case, the word but says everything. It is also, grace is also a kind of power or assistance in which God gives us to help people to respond to him and help people live through life.

And that's, the word but, is where it goes wrong. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, it reads, we can merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for sanctification, for the increase of grace and for charity and for the attainment of eternal life.

What that means is that salvation in all its different forms becomes a cooperation between us and God.

[ 7 : 46 ] This view of grace is built on a particular view of humanity. A view that says that people are sinful. Yeah, yeah, we're all broken, we're all sinful, but we are still capable as human beings of reaching out to God and communicating with God and with his assistance turning our life around.

But, so, for us to understand, therefore, what grace is, we need to go back to the Bible and embrace and see the need of grace alone.

For us to be able to do that, we need an accurate diagnosis of the actual human condition. And if we hold to what I preached on two weeks ago about Scripture alone being authority and not my experience of the world or not my feelings about myself or anything else, that if that is our authority, then we need to hear what it says.

And the right diagnosis was just read out to us. This is the human condition, Ephesians 2 verse 1. As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.

All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying and cravings of our sinful nature and following us desires and thoughts and like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

[ 9 : 07 ] Or we also see the diagnosis in Romans 3 verses 10 to 12. There is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands. There is no one who seeks God.

All have turned away. They have altogether become worthless. There is no one who does good, not even one. That's the authority of Scripture's perspective on the human condition.

No one righteous, no one who seeks God, worthless, dead, left to our own devices. We are dead in our sins.

And the core nature of humanity is not that we are basically good, it's that we're actually fundamentally bad. We are spiritually bankrupt. We are spiritually dead.

Dead. And dead people don't respond to anything. I've, in my job, I've done a lot of funerals over the years and a number of those funerals have been open coffin funerals.

[ 10 : 08 ] And it's an awkward thing if you've ever had that experience where the funeral director tells you, which I'm assuming you haven't, the funeral director tells you, we're going to have an open coffin and your job is to stand beside the coffin and sort of be there for people as they come.

And more often than not, no one really wants to get there early for that occasion. Most people come, you know, at the last minute. So I'm standing there beside Bill or whoever it is, coffin open

and it's me and this person and no one else, no one else for some time, often three quarters of an hour.

and in my, maybe it's me dealing with the issue at the moment and my black humour, I often talk to the person and they never, ever speak back to me.

Ever. Not that I'm expecting it, but they never speak back to me. I can practice my sermon, I can sing songs, they never join in, they never participate in any way because dead people don't respond.

They don't have life to respond. And that's the biblical picture. It's not that we are all as bad as we could possibly be, but that because of sin we are totally marred in every aspect of our being and we are spiritually dead.

[ 11 : 36 ] We are corpses, we're not drowning, we're drowned, we're dead. Unfortunately, as Sam mentioned last week, some people understand grace as God making up the difference between our good and the amount of good that God requires.

So, I mean, it's like, depending on how you've lived your life, you've got different amounts of good. Nice middle class people don't need as much good as topping up as, for instance, a criminal sitting in Long Bay Jail.

But whatever it is, God makes the requirements. So you can imagine, I want to buy a car that costs \$100,000, which I don't want to, but I've only got \$50,000, which I also don't have.

And this view of grace means that, well, I've got \$50,000, it's \$100,000, well, God will just, you know, kindly top up what I need. It sounds nice, but it's a grave misunderstanding both of grace and of our lack of righteousness.

We've got nothing to offer, we've got nothing to contribute. Not only do we not have any righteousness into our account, we've actually got debt in our account. And so we need God's grace not just to make up for our deficiencies, we need His grace to provide a remedy for our rebellion, for our guilt, for our pollution, our sin, our debt against God, which is incalculable.

[ 13 : 07 ] We need His grace to provide a satisfaction for His justice and to cancel a debt that we cannot pay. And so it's absolutely crucial that we understand our plights before God if we're going to understand and be amazed by grace because those who have been forgiven little in their minds don't love much.

Don't appreciate grace much. This is how one person has put it. The first and possibly the most fundamental characteristic of divine grace is that it presupposes sin and guilt.

Grace has meaning only. It only has meaning when people are seen as fallen, unworthy of salvation and liable to eternal wrath.

Grace does not contemplate sin as merely as undeserving but as ill-deserving. It's not simply that we do not deserve grace but that we do deserve hell.

that's that's the bleak pronouncement of our natural state before God.

[ 14 : 23 ] But in the very next verses in Ephesians we have the hope of grace. Ephesians 2 verse 4 but the word but there is a very different word but at this point you've got to love the word but in this occasion but because of his great love for us God who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions it's by grace that you've been saved.

We're dead in our transgressions and sins but God intervenes. We're in bondage to sin but God intervenes. We were objects of wrath but God intervened.

God who is rich in mercy intervened. Our condition was hopeless. We are corpses floating in a sea of ocean. We cannot respond. We're not asking for rescue and God gets the fish hook and pulls us up onto the boat and gives us life.

The grace of God is love is his love freely shown towards guilty sinners contrary to their merit and in fact in defiance of their demerit. And we get a glimpse of the way God treats us in that parable in Matthew 20 that Sam read out to us.

So go to Matthew 20 in your Bibles. There's some stuff I want to see, show you around it. Matthew 20, parable of the workers in the vineyard, starting at verse 1.

[ 15 : 51 ] Let me say straight up, this is not a story about Jewish agribusiness. Before I became a Christian, I had grown up in a house that was on a farm and had a Bible.

And I remember reading this parable a number of times as a teenager and stuff going, it makes no sense, this parable. I don't know a single farmer who would operate like this anywhere.

And that's because I was totally missing the point, because I was dead in my transgressions and sins I couldn't see. The background to Matthew 20 is Matthew 19. There we go.

19 becomes before 20. That's a big moment there. And there's this story in Matthew 19, this encounter that happens between Jesus and this guy, the rich young ruler.

And you might remember this man, this young guy comes running up to Jesus and asks a really crucial question. He says, what must I do to inherit eternal life? It's a great question, but he's totally coming at it from the wrong angle.

[16:59] The word I is the problem there. what must I do to inherit? It's about me. It's about my effort to get eternal life.

And as you read the encounter, you get this sense of this guy's pretty pressed with himself. I've done a bunch of stuff. Jesus rattles off a few of the commandments and he's sitting there in his mental thing and his heart going ticking off the box.

Yeah, done that one. Yeah, done that one. Done that one. Done that one. And you go, yeah, I've done pretty well. Jesus says to him, you need to just do one more thing.

Sell up everything you have and follow me. It's a call at that point to stop trusting in yourself, but in fact, and the stuff that you have and trust in me alone.

And unfortunately, he's not willing to do that and he walks away. And in the background over here as this encounter's going on between this rich guy and Jesus is Peter, James and John and the boys, the rest of the disciples are over here and they're hearing this encounter go on.

[18:13] They see the rich young man walk away and Peter, as he has a tendency to do, speaks first and he says, well, Jesus, then who can be saved?

And Jesus says, with man, this is impossible. With God, all things are possible. So you get the point? Salvation is not by what you do. Salvation is what God does.

And notice the very next question that comes out of Peter's mouth. We've left everything, Jesus, to follow you.

What will there be for us? You get it? Jesus, we're not like him. We didn't walk away. We've followed you, Jesus.

Have we done enough then? Big, strong sniff of merit-based thinking. So Jesus tells his story.

[19:19] It's pretty straightforward. Farmer hires men at different times during the day. We're told that he hired them early in the morning, the third hour, the sixth hour, the ninth hour, and right to the very end of the day in the eleventh hour.

And those began the work at the beginning of the day, agreed to a day's pay for their work at denarius. And the denarius was considered to be what was needed to provide well for a family. Get a denarius for a day's pay, you provided well for your family. notice that it wasn't an expectation the farmer would actually pay for them a denarii, but the farmer gives them a denarii to provide well for them.

All of these who got paid on this particular day got what they needed, not what they had earned.

They were paid according to grace of the farmer, not according to the work that they did.

And the twist comes at the end of the day when the owner pays everyone the same, lines them up, pays them everyone the same. It's like they all received an A grade. It's like we're all in the same university course and I'm your lecturer and there are some of us here who are diligent studiers and we haven't slept for days and we've worked hard and we're expecting 99.9% if not 100% but we're just kind of expecting that.

[20:52] Those of us down here have been watching movies which is kind of what I do. And 51% means I work just a little bit too hard. And so I put all your scores and I've given every single one of you an A grade no matter how hard you've worked.

You've all got it. And there are some of us down here who have been diligent and working really hard expecting high score and we see the Steve Jeffries in this world getting the exact same score. That's not fair. See the natural human tendency is not like to everyone to get the perfect score regardless of effort.

And that's why we struggle with grace so much. Our natural moral default position is to count ourselves up here with the 12 hour workers of the day.

The 99.9% score markers. Our moral position is to put ourselves in that area. When it comes to morality we can always look down to find someone else who's worse than I am.

[ 22 : 13 ] And so we regard ourselves more highly. I know someone who is currently who's been marked to never be released from prison.

Many, many years ago he murdered a mother and her baby. And he was in the same section of a jail, of a high security jail in Sydney with the perpetrators of the Milpera Bikie Massacre from many decades ago now where two Bikie gangs came together, had a shootout in a car park and they gunned down a seven year old girl in the process of that shootout, got caught in the crossfire.

This man who I know was in the same section of the jail of those guys. The guys who perpetrated the Milpera Bikie Massacre grabbed him one day, poured boiling water all over him and beat him up, quite savagely, to an inch of death.

Do you know why? How dare you kill a baby? You can sit in Long Bay Jail, you can even sit in Long Bay Jail, convicted of murder, of a seven year old kid and you could still find someone worse than you.

Normal, default, human position when it comes to the way we think of ourselves and our morality. You see, in a sense here, the workers are right. It's not fair what the boss is doing, but that is the point.

[ 23 : 51 ] Grace is not about being fair, it's about God giving us what we don't deserve and saving us from what we do deserve. And the Bible speaks about the incredible extent of God's grace to us in a number of ways.

Wonderful image of Psalm 103 verse 2, transgressions against God have been removed as far as the east is from the west. What an incredible picture. That's infinite amount.

East, for as far as the east is from the west, is infinity. Isaiah 38, 17, the prophet Isaiah says of God, you have put all of my sins behind your back.

They are out of sight. For a Christian, God no longer sees our deliberate disobedience or our marred performance. An emphasis on the completeness of God's forgiveness is in Micah 7 verse 19.

You will tread our sins underfoot and you'll hurl our iniquities into the depths of the sea. They haven't fallen over board. Oh my goodness, where'd they go?

[ 24 : 56 ] They sort of sunk down there like a phone over the side of a boat or something like that. God has deliberately removed them and placed them in the depths of the sea.

Isaiah 43, 23 emphasizes the completeness of God's forgiveness again. I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake and remembers your sins no more.

God it's not that he's somehow forgotten them like we've lost my keys where did they go?

He's deliberately chooses not to remember the sins that we've committed against him. He's decided never to bring them up again. You see blotting out our sins is a legal act.

It's like an official pardon from a suffering governor. However the choosing to remember them no more is a relational act. It is where the injured party God in this case actively chooses to have no sense of being wronged.

[ 26 : 05 ] He chooses to do that. The reformer Martin Luther really summarized it well when he wrote sin is not cancelled by law living for no person is able to live up to the law.

The law reveals guilt. It fills the conscience with terror and drives people to despair much less is sin taken away by man invented endeavours.

The fact is the more a person seeks credit for himself by his own efforts the deeper he goes into debt. Nothing can take away sin except the grace of God.

In actual living however it is not so easy to persuade oneself that grace alone in opposition to every other means we obtain the forgiveness of our sins and peace with God.

You see the outcome of God's gracious actions towards us in according to Colossians 1 is there's no accusations anymore.

[ 27 : 09 ] No accusation can be brought against us because there is no evidence against us. Two elderly Roman Catholic men were having a conversation about the son of one of those one of their men who this son had converted to biblical Christianity he'd embraced salvation according to faith scripture alone in Christ alone by grace alone through faith alone glory of God alone and one of the men said to the other about his son and what he had made the shift away from Catholicism into Protestant faith and he said do you know why they don't believe in purgatory it's because they believe that God is so kind that he will take his people straight into heaven he was right even though he said it in a mocking way he was right the sheer kindness and grace of

God expressed in the sufficient work of Christ of the cross means that death becomes the doorway into the loving presence of God God but here's a sober but notice what Luther said at the end of his quote it is hard to accept and live by grace alone if grace is so amazing why is it that we struggle to embrace it as freely as it is given in fact one of the most significant Christian voices of the last 100 years suggest that very few of us in the church grasp it and live by grace alone he's talking about those in the church struggling to grasp and live by grace alone in his classic book knowing God Jim Packer writes there do not seem to be many in our churches who believe in grace now when someone of

Packer standing writes something like that you've got to listen what he's saying there is we are in danger of abandoning the very thing that we say we stand on and he gives three reasons the first reason he gives is that people have a high view of themselves we tend to treat small virtues as compensation for great vices we tend to think that we are basically good we tend to downplay the suggestion that we are fallen from God's image rebels against God's rule guilty and uncleaning God's sight and fit only for God's condemnation high high high high view of self the second reason he suggests is that we don't believe grace is that we have a tendency to turn a blind eye to all wrongdoing that we can he said there's a willingness to tolerate and indulge evil up to a point he said the ability to indulge evil up to a point is seen as a virtue it's seen as a virtue of tolerance we make excuse after excuse for our sin we even justify it

I justify myself and I've heard it many times I was provoked I've had a bad life I was dropped on my head as a baby it's just or it's just the way that person is we're just used to the way they are now they gossip we're just used to that that's just who they are they're angry we're just used to that just who they are we even conclude that God is the same towards us grace is turning to leniency and leniency is where God makes up the difference for me divine retribution against all level of sin is not taken seriously we tend to have a hierarchy of the real serious ones and the rest we just tolerate us just the way they are third reason why we struggle to believe in grace is the belief that we're in a position to be able to repair our relationship with

God while we might concede that we are not perfect we still have doubt that respectability we still have no doubt that respectability will account for something in the end to the degree that we view ourselves as worthy is the degree to which we nullify God's grace so earlier I mentioned an inadequate even fatal view of grace where God makes up the deficiency of our efforts salvation of salvation

[ 32 : 47 ] I just drift away from grace into my own merit my own self reliance and independence from God it is so easy to drift into God's blessings at least partially to think that God's blessings even partially are earned by our obedience and by our spiritual disciplines it might not be via the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church but it might be even our ability to articulate grace alone or a theological clarity as being a reason why God would bless me we know we're saved by grace but we can drift into thinking that I must live by my spiritual sweat we all need grace from beginning to end the saint as well as the sinner the most conscientious dutiful long-term hard-working

Christian needs God's grace as much every day as the hardest living sinner the sinner doesn't need more grace than the saint nor does the immature and undisciplined believer need more than the godly zealous missionary we all need the same amount of grace because the currency of good works is worthless it is worthless neither our merits nor our demerits determine how much grace we need because grace does not supplement merits and it does not make up for demerits grace doesn't take into account merits it doesn't take into account demerits at all grace considers all people totally undeserving and able to undo anything to earn the blessing of god as one author has written grace ceases to be grace if god is compelled to bestow it in the presence of human merit grace ceases to be grace if compelled sorry grace ceases to be grace if god is compelled to withdraw it in the presence of human demerit grace is treating the person without the slightest reference to desert whatsoever but wholly according to the infinite goodness and sovereign purposes of god that is grace alone and so if you sometimes feel that you deserve an answer to a prayer or a blessing from god because of your diligence and your hard work and your longevity as a christian it's no longer living by grace alone but if it's just as true that if we sometimes despair of experiencing god's blessing because of our demerits you're no longer living by grace alone to the extent we are clinging to any self righteousness or putting our confidence into any of our own spiritual attainments to that degree we are not living by grace and so what's the evidence of grace

in an individual and a church let me try to capture by quoting one of our core values humble authenticity humility humility is a genuine outworking you do not elevate yourself over people you do not say I'm more worthy of those people

I deserve more things than those people that cultural group or those individuals are less worthy they need to understand the world from my perspective humility grace humility humility they're the foundations of a transcultural church that bears and loves one another the need for us to see our spiritual bankruptcy the daily need for us to do that this is where we must begin and end if we are to experience the daily joy of living by God's transforming grace so I urge you today to lay aside any remnant of self goodness that you might still have admit your total spiritual bankruptcy and drink deeply from the infinite grace of God we deserve nothing we were owed nothing and yet we have everything through the grace of the Lord

Jesus Christ my friends nothing in our hands we bring only to the cross we cling