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WHAT IS GRACE?



WHERE ARE YOU IN THE MANGER SCENE?

The following anecdote from a popular Italian novel is an allegory of many peoples' religious experience:

"In the entrance to the school, the sisters had built a large manger scene, which remained standing all year long. There was Jesus in the stable with his father, his mother, an ox and a little donkey, and all around there were mountains and cliffs made of cardboard and rock, where only a flock of little sheep lived. Every one of them represented a student, and depending on his conduct each day, was moved closer or farther away from Jesus.

"Every morning, before going to class, we would pass by the manger, and they made us look to see our position. On the other side of the stable there was a very steep cliff, and that's where the bad students were put, with two legs suspended over the edge. From six years of age until ten, I lived conditioned by the position of my little sheep. I don't need to tell you that I hardly ever moved from the edge of the cliff."²

Is this the way you feel sometimes? If so, there is good news for you! Jesus loves you! He doesn't just push you toward the edge of the cliff and leave you hanging! There is no grace in that perspective! Instead, He goes to bring you back! He is the Good Shepherd who goes out to find the one who is lost and carries him back on His shoulders. God is the Father who receives the prodigal son with open arms and celebrates with a party!

You may sense that you have offended God so often or so severely that there is no hope for you. But please don't underestimate the love of God! If you ask Him, He will forgive you. Jesus died on the cross for us! What more could He do to show His love?

Where are you in the manger scene?

² Translated by the author from the Spanish version, *Donde el corazón te lleve* [Where Your Heart Leads You] Susana Tamara (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Atlántida, 1995), pp. 66-67.

FOR REFLECTION

- a. Do you think God loves you? Why?

- b. How would you define "grace"?

BIBLE STUDY

Read Romans 4:1-5

1. According to verse 3, why was Abraham acceptable to God?

2. According to verse 4, can you call it grace when someone receives a salary for the work he has done? Why?

GRACE IS:

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What we want to emphasize in this series of Bible studies is that *God accepts people by grace*. That is, man does not deserve eternal life, but God gives it to him because He loves him in spite of his sin.

3. Which of the following illustrations shows what grace is?
 - ___ a. A father tells his son that he will buy him a bicycle if he gets good grades in school. The boy makes a big effort and gets the reward.

- ___ b. Just before Christmas a father finds out that his son has made bad grades at school. He is sad about that, but decides to buy him a bicycle for Christmas anyway, just to show that he loves him.

To receive something *by grace* is the opposite of earning something.

4. According to Romans 4:5, how can one be considered righteous or acceptable by God?

Read Ephesians 2:8-9

When the Bible talks about being saved it means that we will not have to pay for our own sin. God has “saved” us from the consequence of our sin by accepting us just as we are.

5. According to this passage, how can we be saved?
6. Why does God offer salvation as a free gift, according to this text?
7. Salvation is received "by grace." That is, we can have eternal life because of God's U _____ F _____.

Imagine standing in heaven at the foot of God's throne: How would it seem if someone said, "I'm glad you recognized that I was a good person and let me come to heaven!" or "I knew I was right about Christianity! It's a good thing I was smart enough to realize it was the true religion!"? Both of these comments display an arrogant attitude because the person thinks he did something to deserve eternal life.



Your eternal life depends on understanding that salvation is by grace, not by works! You cannot be saved if you think you can somehow earn eternal life. The Lord offers salvation as a gift; it cannot be purchased! Imagine that a young man worked hard and saved for several months to be able to give his girlfriend a beautiful diamond engagement ring. How would he feel if she offered to *pay* for it? Wouldn't that make him feel bad? Imagine how the Lord feels when He has done something much greater for us, and we fail to comprehend the wonder of His love. He sent His Son to win our salvation by His death on the cross, and sometimes we still try to pay for it ourselves! Our sin is too great to earn our own salvation anyway. Our best deeds and our most noble intentions are completely unworthy of persuading God to save us. The only way to obtain eternal life is for the Lord Himself to *give* it to us.

REVIEW

1. How would you explain what "grace" is to someone else?
2. The opposite of receiving something by grace is to E _____ it.
3. Why does God offer salvation by grace alone?
4. How does God feel when we try to earn our salvation?

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Does knowing that God loves you by His grace make you feel more sure of His love? Why?

2. Sometimes we feel a little humiliated when we have to accept help and can't return the favor. Why do we feel that way? Do you think that for the same reason some people have a hard time accepting the fact that our salvation/acceptance is by grace?

TEXT TO MEMORIZE

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—
and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—
not by works, so that no one can boast.

Ephesians 2:8-9