

Collected Writings of John Murray

Volume One: The Claims of Truth

"The Grace of God"

DEFINITION - The term 'grace' has various shades of meaning in the Scripture. When it speaks of the grace of God, what is in view most frequently is the favour of God. It is not always unmerited favour. Of Jesus it is said that 'he increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man' (Luke 2:52). But, generally, sinful men are in view as the objects of God's favour and then it is always unmerited favour. This is brought out very clearly when we read, 'Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt' (Rom. 4:4); 'And if by grace, then it is no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace' (Rom. 11:6). Grace is here placed in sharp contrast with what is earned and therefore with all merit. Grace is undeserved favour, and if any constraint is placed upon God arising from worthiness on our part, whether it be of thought or word or action, then it is no longer grace.

We cannot think of sinners as merely undeserving; they are also ill-deserving. The grace of God to sinners is, therefore, not simply unmerited favour; it is also favour shown to the ill-deserving, indeed to the hell-deserving. When Paul says, 'justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 3:24), the grace in view must be understood on the background of the judgment of God referred to in verse 19--'that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.' It is guilty men, and therefore hell-deserving men, that the justifying grace of God contemplates.

It is from this primary meaning of the word 'grace' that various other meanings are derived. The grace of God can refer to the gracious influences which are brought to bear upon men (cf. Luke 2:40; Acts 4:33; 2 Cor. 12:9). It can refer to the state of grace into which men are introduced (cf. Rom. 5:2). It can refer to the gifts bestowed and to the virtues generated (cf. Rom. 12:3, 6; 2 Cor. 8:7). But so closely related are these shades of meaning, and so dependent are they upon the primary import, that it is often difficult to be certain what particular thought is being expressed. We are always pointed back to the disposition of favour, of loving kindness in God as the source, and as that which gives character to all grace in exercise.

SALVATION BY GRACE - The grace of God comes to its richest expression in redemption and salvation. How plainly this is set forth in Paul's well-known word, 'By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God' (Eph. 2:8)! When he says 'and that not of yourselves,' he is reminding us of the true nature of grace, that its whole urge and explanation reside in God. It may be easy to give formal assent to this text. Every

evangelical Christian will do so. But how ready we are to shy away from its implications! In reality we deny the truth here asserted when we introduce at any point in the whole span and process of salvation a decisive autonomy on the part of man. If salvation at any point is contingent upon some contribution which man himself makes, then at that point it is *of ourselves*, and to that extent it is not of grace. Paul's definition 'and that not of yourselves' is thereby effaced and the true nature of grace is denied.

THE CROSS OF CHRIST - The marvel of God's grace is pre-eminently displayed in the cross of Christ. It was by the will of the Father he was given and sent. It was by his own will that Christ came. He was sent to save and he came to save. The only alternative was that the whole human race should perish (cf. John 3:16; Matt. 1:21). Jesus alone is the captain of salvation. No one but he wrought redemption, no one but he made expiation, propitiation, and reconciliation for sin. How blasphemous would be the thought that we men had any part in this grand accomplishment! 'Now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself' (Heb. 9:26). It is as we view the solitary uniqueness of Christ's cross, the magnitude of the grace it exhibits, and its complete effectiveness unto salvation, that we learn the riches of God's 'grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus' (Eph. 2:7). And it is here [that] the insult we offer to God's grace appears, when we try to condition its character or operation by some ingredient of our making. It is this perspective of God's great love--when we were dead in sins--that evokes Paul's word, 'by grace are ye saved.'

ELECTION OF GRACE - The span of salvation has its origin in election before the foundation of the world. And election is of grace (Rom. 11:5). Too often Christians have sought to intrude human decision as the explanation of the distinction which election requires. God elects, it is said, those whom he foresees will believe, and thus man's choice determines God's choice. If this is the true account of election, then we should have to say that what we *ourselves* decide determines election. In that event Ephesians 2:8 cannot apply to election, for here Paul says 'and that not of yourselves,' and the grace of election would have to be of an entirely different character. But how impossible! If election is of grace (Rom. 11:5), it must be of the same grace defined in Ephesians 2:8, and therefore in no respect of *ourselves*, but wholly the gift of God. Besides, it is *salvation by grace through faith* that is the gift of God, and so faith itself is of grace and not something that resides in human autonomy. The faith which God foresees is the fruit and not the root of electing grace.

Grace demands humility, the humility that constrains us to be willing debtors all along the line of salvation from its fount in election to its consummation in glory. Salvation is of the Lord, and it is only of him if it is all of him. This is the doctrine of grace and it is its glory.

JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE - It was the discovery of the grace of God that signaled the Protestant Reformation. The movement was focused in the uncovering of the great truth which Rome had buried beneath a pile of superstition--the doctrine of justification by faith

alone and of grace alone. It was this same truth that Paul identified with the gospel, and it was the denial of it that elicited the severest denunciation we find in the New Testament. 'But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed' (Gal. 1:8,9). When later on he says, 'Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace' (Gal. 5:4), the thought is not that of falling away from a state of grace but rather that, if, to any extent, we look to our own works for justification, then we have abandoned grace altogether. Grace does not comport with any human contribution. If grace is in operation, if it has any place, it must have the whole place, it must be exclusively operative. If we are justified to any degree by works of law, we are debtors to do the whole law (cf. Gal. 5:3) and justification must be wholly of law.

Here again we have the same principle exemplified and confirmed: grace knows no human contribution. If of grace, then it is wholly and exclusively of grace. Since salvation is of grace, it is all of grace. Human autonomy is excluded at every point as decisively as at the point of justification.

SANCTIFICATION - Sanctification begins by union with Christ. There is a once-for-all breach with sin in its power, love, and defilement. By union with Christ believers partake of the virtue of Jesus' death and the power of his resurrection. In that Christ died to sin, he died to sin once for all (Rom. 6:10). So believers died to sin and they live in newness of life (Rom. 6:2, 5). The unmixed grace of this release is apparent from the fact that it was by God's effectual call they were ushered into union and fellowship with Christ and therefore into the participation of his death and resurrection (1 Cor. 1:9).

Sanctification is also progressive until it is completed in glorification. It might appear that in this process there is the convergence of grace and works. We are to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12). This activity on the part of believers must not be denied. Our whole personality in its diverse aspects and activities is enlisted in the doing of God's good pleasure. But this doing means no suspension of grace. The apostle goes on to say, 'for it is God who works in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure' (Phil 2:13). Our willing and doing are altogether of God's working and therefore of grace. And this operative grace of God is not only the cause but also the urge and incentive to our activity for his good pleasure.

SOVEREIGN GRACE - The sovereignty of grace is implicit in its nature. If grace excludes the constraint of human merit, if its whole constraint and explanation reside in God, it must be of his free good pleasure. It is well to note the emphasis which the Scripture places upon this fact of sovereign will. When it speaks of the riches of God's grace (Eph. 1:7) and of what will redound 'to the praise of the glory of his grace' (Eph. 1:6), it is then that we find the reiterated reference to 'the good pleasure of his will' (Eph. 1:5), to 'the mystery of his

will, according to his good pleasure' (Eph. 1:9), and to 'the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will' (Eph. 1:11). To dissociate grace in its source, progress, or fruition from pure sovereignty of will is to annul not only its character but also that by which its exercise is conditioned. And Paul's teaching here is the reproduction of our Lord's--'even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight' (Matt. 11:26).

The mansions of glory will eternally resound with the praise of God's grace. It is not the minimum of salvation that the saints will enjoy but salvation the highest conceivable. No higher destiny could be appointed for them than to be glorified with Christ and conformed to the image of God's own Son (Rom. 8:17, 29). Nothing but sovereign grace at the zenith of its counsel and exercise could explain such glory. For it must be placed against the desert that is ours, the blackness of darkness forever. This contrast God's grace alone can explain.

"The Grace of God," in *Collected Writings of John Murray, Volume One: The Claims of Truth* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976). **Note:** The text has not been modified.