

## Introduction:

Attached are three lessons that explain some basic concepts we all need to understand about God's grace. Grace has always been the foundation of man's relationship with God, yet grace is often misunderstood. As a result, we can miss the full impact God's grace can have on our daily lives.

These lessons can be used as part of a study series of first principles or as follow-up studies to help strengthen new Christians. Each lesson builds on the previous lesson so it is important that all three lessons be studied in sequence.

### 1) **Would You Have Built the Ark?**

This lesson explains grace in simple terms. With God's grace, you can accomplish things you could never do on your own—and likely would not even attempt! Grace gives us a new perspective of the blessings *and* challenges of life. Even in the most challenging situations, we should look for how God may be showing us favor.

### 2) **The Ultimate Case of Show and Tell**

Paul wrote that obedience comes from faith and that Christians are “saved by grace.” Today there is some confusion about what he meant. However, if we compare Paul's teachings with his accounts of his own salvation, we can be sure that our understanding is correct. Then we can apply what we learn in our own lives!

### 3) **You Get to Choose**

God made it clear what he wants for each one of us, but we have the freedom to choose what *we* want. This study asks four questions about decisions we all have to make to seek God and to continue to grow in His grace.

I have done my best to boil down this topic to three simple lessons. For more in-depth study, refer to my book, *The Complete Guide to Grace*. For the most current version of this study please visit [www.SilverdayPress.com/free-resources](http://www.SilverdayPress.com/free-resources).

Sincerely,

*Jim Lefler*

# Would You Have Built the Ark?

## A New Perspective of God's Grace

Understanding God's grace makes us more aware of His involvement in our daily lives and gives us a new perspective of the blessings and challenges of life. However, grace is often misunderstood. **How would you explain God's grace?**

The English words grace, mercy and forgiveness are often used interchangeably. However, the Greek words for grace, mercy and forgiveness are distinct words with very different meanings:

- If you give someone grace (*charis*), you are showing them favor.
- If you forgive (*aphiemi*) someone, you let them leave their sins behind.
- Mercy (*eleos*) is having the compassion to offer someone relief from a trial or suffering.

*Charis* is never translated forgive or mercy. *Soteria*, the Greek word for salvation, is never translated grace. God's grace brings salvation (Titus 2:11), but grace is not salvation.

In the following verses, *charis* is translated grace, favor, gracious and gift. (All passages NIV.)

- Ephesians 2:8 – *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith.*
- Luke 1:30 – *But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God.*
- Luke 4:22 – *All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked.*
- 1 Corinthians 16:3 – *Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem.*

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word translated "grace" is *chen*. "Favor" is the most common translation, but *chen* is also translated "grace." The underlined words in the verses below were translated from *chen*:

- |                 | <u>New American Standard Version</u>                  | <u>New International Version</u>                         |
|-----------------|---|--|
| • Psalms 84:11  | <i>...The Lord gives <u>grace</u> and glory</i>       | <i>...the Lord bestows <u>favor</u> and honor</i>        |
| • Proverbs 3:4  | <i>So you will find <u>favor</u> and good repute</i>  | <i>Then you will win <u>favor</u> and a good name...</i> |
| • Proverbs 3:34 | <i>...yet He gives <u>grace</u> to the afflicted.</i> | <i>...but gives <u>grace</u> to the humble.</i>          |

Compare James 4:6, 1 Peter 5:5 and Proverbs 3:33-34.

- To describe the nature of God, both James and Peter quoted from Proverbs 3:33-34<sup>1</sup>.
- The Greek word translated "grace" in James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5 is *charis*.
- The Hebrew word translated "grace" in Proverbs 3:33-34 is *chen*.
- *Chen* and *charis* describe the same quality of God in different languages.

From the Old Testament verses that use the Hebrew word *chen* and the New Testament verses that use the Greek word *charis*, we learn that God's grace is simply his favor. God's favor has always been the foundation of His relationship with man.

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars believe James and Peter quoted the Septuagint, a commonly used Greek translation of the Old Testament.

Examples of God's grace/favor in the Old Testament:

Genesis 18:3 (Abraham), Exodus 33:13 (Moses) and Judges 6:17 (Gideon).

- The Hebrew word *chen* in these verses is translated "favor."
- When they were convinced that they had God's favor, Abraham, Moses and Gideon stepped out on faith and accomplished things beyond their ability!

Genesis 6:5-22.

- Noah found favor (*chen*) in the eyes of the Lord. **What are some ways God favored Noah?**
  - God warned him about the flood far in advance so he could build the ark to save his family.
  - God told him the exact dimensions and materials to use so the ark would not sink or tip over.
- Because of his relationship with God, Noah knew and understood things that others did not know.

**If God had asked you to build an ark, what questions would you have had?** – Why me? How will I know what to do? What will happen if I fail? What's an ark? Why not do something easier?

If Noah had any questions we are not told. Read Genesis 7:1-7.

- Noah did everything God told him to do and the ark saved his family.
- Apparently, one warning from God was all Noah needed.

**What are some reasons the task Noah faced was especially challenging?**

- It took faith to accept that the threat of a flood was real.
- Building the ark was hard physical work and the job took decades to complete.
- Noah was over 500 years old when God told him to build the ark. (Genesis 5:32)

Noah likely was ridiculed by people who passed by. "You're building a *what* for when the water does *what*?" But Noah knew he had the favor of God, so he did not quit. And because he listened to God and obeyed, Noah was ready when the water began rising. Then Noah no longer looked foolish.

**What about everyone else who watched as Noah kept building?** Read Matthew 24:38-39.

- People were going about their lives unaware of the danger. They all drowned in the flood.
- God wants to help us be ready when we die or when Jesus comes again!

**If Noah could speak to us about his experience, what might he say?**

- With God, you can accomplish things you could never do on your own.
- Don't let what people say discourage you from seeking God.
- When the rain started to fall, I was so glad I did not give up!

Summary:

1. God's grace is simply God's favor.
2. Grace has always been the foundation of God's relationship with man.
3. God's favor may lead us into situations that test our faith. That's when our faith can grow.
4. Even in challenging situations, we should look for how God may be showing us favor.

Discussion Questions:

1. How has this study changed your understanding of God's grace?
2. Why did Noah build the ark?
3. What has God done in your life to show you His favor?

# “The Ultimate Case of Show and Tell”

## The Apostle Paul’s True Story of the Power of God’s Grace

The Apostle Paul came to a profound understanding of God’s grace and wrote much of what we know about this important spiritual principle. His life was a demonstration of the power and impact of God’s grace.

**At what point did Paul first experience the grace/favor of God? – Galatians 1:13-16**

- As a mature Christian looking back on his life, Paul concluded that God favored him from birth. Paul has a valid point:
  - As a Jew, he received the best possible education under a teacher named Gamaliel. (Acts 22:3)
  - Being an expert in the Jewish law equipped Paul to teach Jews about Jesus.
  - His Roman citizenship opened doors for him to preach to the most powerful Romans of his day. (Acts 26 – Festus, governor of Judea, and King Agrippa; Acts 27:24, 28:19 – Caesar, Roman emperor)
- If we think of grace as salvation or forgiveness, Paul having God’s grace from birth makes no sense. Paul was known for persecuting Christians. How could someone who is persecuting Christians be saved? The explanation is that God showed Paul favor to bring him to Jesus, but at this point in his life, he was not saved.
  - Grace is the favor of God, not salvation. [See the previous study.]
  - By his grace, God was preparing Paul for an unexpected future assignment.
  - At the right time, God planned to reveal Jesus to Paul so he could preach to both Jews and Gentiles.

God’s plan for Paul began to unfold on the road to Damascus. God was about to show favor to Paul in a very dramatic way. – Acts 9:1-9

- Paul (then known as Saul) was on his way into the city to persecute Christians.
- He finds out that he had been persecuting the Lord.
- He learns that in Damascus he will be told something he must do.
- Paul waited three days in Damascus, not knowing if he would ever see again.

Despite Paul’s reputation for persecuting the church, Ananias courageously entered the house where Paul was staying and delivered a life-changing message from God. – Acts 9:10-22

This would have been very challenging for Paul. **What obstacles did Paul overcome to obey?**

- He had to accept that he was wrong about Jesus. This would be difficult for a man who thought of himself as “faultless.” (Philippians 3:6)
- He persecuted God’s son Jesus! He could easily have thought, “There’s no way God will forgive me.”
- He knew if he obeyed and was baptized, his Jewish friends would think he was crazy (Acts 9:23).

Paul accepted the message and made a complete 180 degree turn.

- He went from persecuting anyone who professed to know Jesus to preaching Jesus.
- He baffled the Jews by using the Jewish law to prove Jesus was the Christ.
- Paul’s Jewish heritage and education uniquely equipped him for his ministry.
- This was the beginning of a ministry that would impact generations to come.

Paul might be the last person anyone would have expected to be chosen by God to preach about having faith in Jesus. **Why did God choose Paul?** – 1 Timothy 1:12-16

- Looking back, Paul concluded that God chose him to set an example.
- Everyone would see how patient Jesus was with even the “worst of sinners.”
- Paul was God’s “chosen instrument” to preach Jesus to Jews, Gentiles and their kings.

Paul learned what the Christians he had been persecuting already knew—God provided a way for his sins to be forgiven. Paul later described that blessing as one of the “riches of God’s grace” (Ephesians 1:7).

**According to Paul, when were his sins forgiven?** – Acts 22:6-16

- This is an account of Paul’s testimony in defense of his ministry after he was arrested in Jerusalem.
- Paul was told to be baptized and wash away his sins, calling on Christ’s name—the very thing Paul persecuted others for doing.
- Paul was baptized and was able to leave his sins behind!
- Even after three missionary journeys, Paul still remembered how his sins were forgiven.

It’s a true story. Paul’s life is an example of God’s grace, mercy and forgiveness.

- God showed Paul grace/favor from birth
- God had compassion/mercy for Paul many times.
- Paul was forgiven of his sins when he was baptized.

Step back and trace how God worked throughout Paul’s life. **What were the defining moments?**

- God had a plan for Paul and showed him grace (favor) from birth.
- Paul persecuted Jesus and the church.
- God got Paul’s attention on the road to Damascus and called him to a decision about Jesus.
- God sent Ananias to tell Paul what he must do to be saved.
- Paul put his faith in Jesus as Lord and was baptized for the forgiveness of his sins.
- Paul became God’s witness to all men of what he saw and heard.

Paul’s life *shows* us the impact of God’s grace and his words *tell* us what he learned about grace throughout his ministry. We should be careful to not draw any conclusions from Paul’s writings that are inconsistent with what he personally experienced. With that in mind, read Ephesians 2:4-10.

**What does Paul mean by “saved by grace?”** (It may help to reread Ephesians 2:4-10 replacing the word grace with favor and the word mercy with compassion.)

- Jesus died so we could be forgiven. Jesus is the fullness of God’s grace (John 1:16-17).
- By providing a way for us to be saved, God shows us amazing favor.
- Before his conversion, Paul worked hard to oppose Jesus. Paul was well aware that he was not saved by his works, but because of God’s mercy and grace.

Summary: By God’s favor we *can* be saved, but experiencing God’s favor does not mean that we *are* saved. By God’s grace Paul learned how his sins could be washed away (Acts 22:16), but Paul still had to obey.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the difference between grace, mercy and forgiveness?
2. How have you seen God’s grace/favor in your life?

# You Get to Choose

God's Favor is Worth More than all the Favor in the World!

God has made it clear what he wants for each one of us, but we have the freedom to choose what *we* want. Consider the value of God's grace/favor as you decide how to answer four very important questions:

## 1. Would you rather have God's favor or the favor of the world?

In the previous two lessons, we looked at the choices Noah and Paul made and the impact their choices had on their lives. You too must choose between God's favor and the favor of the world. – James 4:4-6

- **How is a friendship with God different from any earthly friendship?**
  - Friends come and go; God will always want a relationship with us.
  - A friend's motives may not always be pure; God always wants what is best for us.
  - Friends will let us down; God always keeps his promises.
- God gives us "more grace" (NASB: "greater grace") than the world can offer.
- If you choose the friendship and favor of the world, you will give up the favor of God. **Why did James ask the people "don't you know?"**
  - There was evidence that they were choosing the favor of the world.
  - They either did not realize what was happening or were ignoring the danger.
  - If we are not careful, we can forget that our true blessings are the result of God's favor!

Pride in who we are—or what we have—or who we know—or our accomplishments—can make us think we do not need God. "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

## 2. Will you rely on God's favor and promises, even when the outcome is unknown? – Hebrews 11:1, 6-8

- Noah, Abraham and Paul accepted that the outcome of their faith was in God's hands:
  - Noah could not see the water, but he knew he had God's favor and kept building the ark.
  - Abraham knew nothing about the place where God was sending him, but he knew he had God's favor so he went anyway (Genesis 12).
  - Paul went from persecuting Jesus to preaching Jesus. He could not have known all the ways his life would change. In the end, nothing mattered more to Paul than knowing Christ. (Philippians 3:8)
- **Why is it not enough to believe God exists?**
  - Believing that something exists does not mean we care enough to pursue it.
  - We can believe we should do something, but not make it a priority.
- When we are earnestly seeking God, pleasing Him is our top priority.
  - We diligently study the Bible and apply it to our lives.
  - We won't let anything or anyone keep us from pursuing a relationship with God.
- **How should the prospect of enjoying God's favor change how you live?**
  - Obeying God will not be too much to expect.
  - You will not compromise your spiritual wellbeing in the pursuit of an earthly reward.
  - Challenges will not cause you to give up. Instead, you will look for God's favor in your life.

Understanding the promise of God's reward should motivate us act on what we know and persevere when we encounter obstacles. God rewarded Noah, Abraham and Paul for their faith!

3. Are you willing to let God decide which blessings you need?

- Philippians 4:10-13
  - Having more possessions will not make us content.
  - With God's favor we can be content in all circumstances.
  - Our gratitude to God should not depend on our physical blessings.
  - Do not wait for a better time or circumstance to serve God.
- 2 Corinthians 12:7-10
  - Paul kept discovering new things about God's grace.
  - Paul felt that something was holding him back, but God would not make it go away.
  - **What did God mean by "My grace is sufficient"?**
    - God's favor makes up the difference.
    - Even when we feel weak, with God we can be strong.
  - Feeling God's favor helps us view obstacles in a whole new way.
- When God does not bless us or answer our prayer in the way we think he should, we may later realize how he showed us more favor than if he had granted our request.

4. Will you put your confidence in God?

- Hebrews 4:12-13
  - God's Word helps us know if our feelings are right or wrong.
  - It convicts us and exposes our sin.
  - We can't hide anything from God, not even our thoughts and attitudes!
  - God will hold us accountable.
- Our situation looks desperate. **How is it that we can be confident?** – Hebrews 4:14-16
  - Typically, the more inadequate we feel, the less confident we are. And we don't let people see the real us for fear they might not accept us. But God knows us inside and out and *still* wants a relationship with us.
  - Jesus sympathizes with our weaknesses and understands the battles we face.
  - Jesus, who gave his life for our sins, is the one speaking on our behalf before God!
- In your time of need, you can seek God's grace, mercy and forgiveness with confidence!

Summary: God made it clear what he wants for us, but we get to choose what *we* want. You will face important decisions as you pursue a relationship with God and continue to grow in His grace.

1. Will you seek God's favor or the favor of the world? You cannot have both.
2. When obeying God tests your faith, will you rely on his favor and promises and do what pleases him anyway?
3. When you present your request to God and he does not say "yes," will you still be grateful for the favor you do receive?
4. When you sin or feel weak or inadequate, will you turn to God for forgiveness, mercy and grace?

Discussion Question: What decision(s) is God calling you to make?

Note: To further enrich your understanding of God's grace, read *The Complete Guide to Grace* by James Lefler.