

Acts 15:1 Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”<sup>2</sup> And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.<sup>3</sup> So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers.<sup>4</sup> When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.<sup>5</sup> But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.”

<sup>6</sup>The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter.<sup>7</sup> After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers.<sup>8</sup> And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us;<sup>9</sup> and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.<sup>10</sup> Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?<sup>11</sup> On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

Ephesians 2:1 You were dead through the trespasses and sins<sup>2</sup> in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.<sup>3</sup> All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.<sup>4</sup> But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us<sup>5</sup> even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—<sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,<sup>7</sup> so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.<sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup> not the result of works, so that no one may boast.<sup>10</sup> For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

## We Believe: The Grace of God

Acts 15:1-11  
Ephesians 2:1-10

Grace overwhelmed me this week. Working on this sermon on Thursday morning, the thought struck me, “why not ask you all what grace means to you?” So I sent out a tweet, an email, and a Facebook message, inviting you to share what the grace of God means to you. I was still getting emails this morning, and I lost count at around fifty. I was – and am – overwhelmed. Not by the number, but by the depth of your answers. It was like standing under a waterfall of grace.

I had planned to start by talking about how we have both head knowledge and heart knowledge of the meaning of God’s grace. Head knowledge is what we *understand* about grace, and heart knowledge is what we have *experienced*. But you knew that already. About half of your emails described how you understand grace. You said that grace is,

- *“A blessing or gift from God, given not because we have earned it, but simply because God wants us to have it.”*
- *I believe God's grace is indicative of His sovereignty. It is the way in which sinners escape God's justice.*
- *“The all encompassing love ... of God that passes all understanding. It is the undeserved care that he has for us all. It is his forgiveness through Jesus Christ shown to us by the Holy Spirit.”*
- *Grace is the gift of salvation freely given to me by God – It is the forgiveness of my sins through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross - it is the gift of the Holy Spirit provided for my guidance – and finally it is God's Love that I can count on always.*
- *The most precious and divine gift anyone could ever receive is the moment that one understands nothing you have done or could do could have earned the loving kindness and forgiveness of God.*
- *The concept of grace sets Christianity apart from all other major religions. Grace is the undeserved gift of God to His wayward children. Grace is the ultimate act of forgiveness. The only reasonable response to grace is gratitude.*
- *“...when Jesus died for our sins that was His grace on us and we show our gratitude by obeying the commandments...Extravagant grace calls for extravagant gratitude.”*

Recalling the parable of the vineyard where the owner paid all of the workers a full day’s wage even though some had only worked an hour, one of you said that grace first means letting God be God. If he chooses to be generous, why should we be resentful? He’s God! The second thing grace means is that it is the great equalizer – we are all given the same gift regardless of how good or bad we’ve been, how well we’ve served, or how poorly. God loves us all equally. That is grace, indeed!

Several of you remembered the chorus of an old-time Methodist hymn, “Grace is Greater Than Our Sin.”

*Grace, grace, God's grace,  
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within;  
Grace, grace, God's grace,  
Grace that is greater than all our sin!*

You summed it up well. Grace is a gift; something we did not earn and do not deserve; our lives are grace; a good night’s sleep is grace; holding your newborn grandson who is named for you is grace; knowing that your eternal life is guaranteed. Grace.

The way you expressed your *understanding* of grace shows that you have also *experienced* grace. Your words hold the passion and the gratitude of people who know what it is because they have felt it in their lives. I want to share some of those with you, as well.

- *I think I'm going to have this one framed. I know when worry knocks, faith answers and hope prevails.... That is God's grace for me. I love that.*
- *I received a triple heaping helping of God's grace this week. It washed the most peaceful feeling over me...and his voice and presence were never more familiar to me.*
- *It was by God's grace that I was able to learn how to handle our son's death, our son-in-law's death, and our daughter-in-law's death. HE enabled me by HIS GRACE to help our family and to know that HE was there for me even though I would sometimes not remember as I was dealing with my grief.*

- *God's bountiful grace was bestowed on us through the healing and recovery from a severe cancer illness of our son. God's grace is one of His greatest gifts and is never ending.*
- *The grace of God means the overwhelming relief I have when I give my sorrows, my ideas and my love to God in prayer. He has total control and when I accept that, I can feel the love and grace within me.*
- *"Our salvation is secure in the grip of grace; God's grace uses imperfect people for blessings to all."*
- *Having your eyes opened to just how hopelessly lost you are, only to hear God say "you're mine, you have always been mine. I love you and nothing can change that."*
- *Grace is receiving what I do not deserve. I personally have received far more from God than I deserve, which of course is everything that I have. But what seems to be the most important to me is forgiveness...being forgiven for things I've done, my sins, and being able to forgive others who have wronged me. This leads to amazing freedom and removes the many burdens from my soul.*
- *Bottom line for me is that no matter how bad you are or what you have done, in the end when you are alone and you have nothing left, you still are a part of God's family and all of the members of his family have access to his gift of God's Love, which I call Grace.*
- *Grace is the the hug from a friend or loved one when words won't transfer that grace. Grace is the beauty of my husband's prayers a year-and-a-half after two major strokes. Grace is the beauty of last night's rainbow that assured me that God "is in His Heaven; all is right with the world" in spite of the mess that we humans make of His world!*
- *Prevenient Grace is my story ... God's Grace in and through me before I even knew of Grace or knew that it would be God and Grace that would turn me toward God and toward Jesus Christ. GRACE has brought with it a yearning to tell others of this Presence of God's Love for them.*

To experience grace is to be changed. As Anne Lamott says, "Grace meets you where you are, but it doesn't let you stay there." The common theme of the messages you sent me is that experiencing God's saving grace changes us in three ways: First, we experience incredible freedom. This load is lifted from us...the burden of self-hate, guilt, worry, not being good enough...it lifts like a morning fog disappearing in the warmth of the sun. We don't have to live up to some impossible expectation. We are not alone. What incredible freedom!

Second, we feel this immeasurable gratitude. There is a deep and enduring desire to say, "Thank you, thank you, thank you..." over and over again.

Third, in our gratitude we want others to experience grace, too. Because we've been given the gift of forgiveness, we want others to know what that feels like, and so we begin to forgive them. To experience the extravagant grace of God is to begin to be extravagantly gracious to others. To know the sins we've been forgiven of is to want to stop judging others. To experience God's love is to begin to love others; to understand what God sees when he looks at us is to begin to see others as God sees them.

As one of you said, God's grace is *prevenient* – it comes first. God loved us before we were even able to love ourselves or each other. God planned this all out way before we came on the scene. Grace has been God's plan all along.

Grace is *life-giving*. As Paul tells the Ephesians, "You were dead through the trespasses and sins." He says we all were dead, living by the life-killing values of the world – greed, selfishness, revenge, prejudice, hate. "But," Paul says, "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ."

Grace is *unfair*...deeply, wonderfully unfair. It is paying workers a whole day's wage when they only worked an hour. Grace is illogical. It is a father throwing a feast for a prodigal son; a shepherd leaving ninety-nine sheep unprotected while he goes out and searches for that one wayward sheep. Grace is touching a leper, dining with a tax collector, healing the son of an enemy, dying on a cross for the sins of the world.

Finally, grace is *forever*. Permanent. Nothing you do can change it. God isn't going to change his mind. Just as there is nothing we have to do to receive it, there is nothing we can possibly do to lose it.

A planned, resurrecting, unjust, forever gift we've not only done nothing to deserve, we've done everything NOT to deserve. And yet, it is ours anyway. This is grace.

Amazing.