

BASIC BIBLE THEMES

SESSION 3: GRACE

by Sam Harris and Dean Nelson

Scripture Cited: Romans 6:15; Ephesians 1:5; 2:4-5

Many years of anticipation and effort had gone into this event—Ron and Susan Wenaas of Minneapolis were finally going to be able to adopt a child. An aircraft from South Korea landed at the Twin Cities International Airport, and the couple paced as they watched the plane pull into the gate. When the passengers unloaded, the Wenaases saw a tiny, five-year-old Korean girl among them.

The girl had been prepared by the adoption agency to recognize her new parents. She looked at a picture in her hand, then scanned the crowd and spotted Ron and Susan. She spoke the only two English words she knew: “Daddy! Mommy!”

The parents had a picture, too. Like the little girl, they had been prepared for this meeting. Though the parents and child had never really met, they had already begun the process of knowing each other.

What the adoption agency did for the couple and the little girl is a bit like what God does for all of us in salvation—He prepares the way. Theologians call this prevenient grace, the grace that comes to all people before they meet God in conversion. It’s the love God extends to people to show He wants to save everyone.

Some Christians have trouble accepting the idea of grace. They think they have to earn God’s love. Even the great hymn writer who helped found Methodism, Charles Wesley, had trouble with the concept.

Charles Wesley was seriously ill when he was visited by Peter Böhler, a missionary and preacher in the Moravian movement, which was known for its emphasis on evangelism and Christian living. During their conversation, Böhler asked Wesley what hope he had for being saved. Wesley replied, “I have done my best to serve God.” Böhler said nothing. He just shook his head and left.

Later Wesley reflected, “I thought his response was quite unkind, as though my best efforts were not good enough to hope to be saved. If all that I have done is not enough to be saved, I have nothing else to trust in.”

Wesley had reason to be upset. He had been living his life as though his good deeds influenced how God perceived him. For example, in 1729, he organized a small group of Oxford students, nicknamed the Holy Club and later called Methodists, who were devoted to daily Bible study and prayer, visiting the sick, feeding the hungry, and teaching poor children. Later headed by Wesley’s older brother, John, the group also fasted each Wednesday and Friday and took Communion weekly. They devoted themselves to strict discipline so that every aspect of their lives would reflect inward holiness. Charles even refused a wealthy inheritance so he could become a missionary to the Indians of Georgia.

Wesley eventually came to realize that spiritual success in life could not be measured by the categories of being good or bad. Salvation depends entirely on God’s desire to build a relationship with us. The good news is that He decided to love us long before we became either “good people” or “too bad for Him to forgive us.” God’s grace precedes and actually enables our decision to accept His love for us. This has been a hard concept to grasp, even among Christians. That’s because common sense tells us that love is something to be earned.

Temporarily Insecure

John Wesley, the forefather of the Wesleyan movement, was not only a member of the Holy Club; his disciplined commitment to God would make the most religious among us blush with shame. When he was 22, his father convinced him to become a

preacher. At that time, Wesley committed himself to being what he called a “good Christian.” Each day, he prayed for two hours. He tried to keep the whole law of God through careful self-examination and through helping others in need. Yet for all of his devotion and charity, John was miserable. He constantly fought, but never seemed to win, his battle to live a life pleasing to God.

Like his brother Charles, John also served as a missionary to the Georgia Indians. His motive was to glorify God and to save his own soul. But his three-year missionary service turned into a disastrous failure mired in scandal. His worship style proved too formal for the pioneers. And his refusal to give communion to newlyweds John and Sophie Hopkins looked like sour grapes at having lost the battle for Sophie’s affection. Wesley wrote in his journal on January 24, 1738, “I went to America to convert the Indians; but O! who shall convert me?”

By 1738, Wesley had lived through some 15 years of frustration over trying to please God—frustration that began when he decided to pursue a career in ministry. Yet, we would have to search long and hard to find any greater example of devotion to God. Ironically, it was Wesley’s devotion that kept him frustrated. By establishing his own terms for salvation, sincere and devoted though they were, John only intensified his broken relationship with God.

The experience of John and Charles parallels the sin of Adam and Eve. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, they chose to be self-centered—to do things their own way. Even though they believed in God, they chose to be their own gods, to determine how they would live in this world.

Neither John nor Charles was conscious of any desire to disobey God—quite the opposite—but they were trying to set the terms of their relationship with Him. We can be right with God only when we accept God for who He is—our Creator, Lord, and Savior. We cannot experience a loving relationship with Him if we try to tell Him how He will be our God.

Early in 1738, John Wesley met Peter Böhler. This became a turning point in Wesley’s life, for Böhler taught him to rely on God for his salvation—not to rely on his good deeds or on a sense of spiritual achievement. On May 24th of that year, at a Moravian meeting on Aldersgate Street in London,

Wesley had a spiritual experience. His journal describes what happened: “I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given to me that he had taken away my sins.” Students of history call this Wesley’s Aldersgate Experience, which marks the point at which Wesley was freed from the anxiety and insecurity that came from trying to be good enough for God. It is when Wesley experienced peace with God.

His tortuous struggle reminds us that salvation does not start with ourselves. Without God’s prior decision to love us, we would not even care about our relationship with the Lord. Still before our misconceptions, before our misguided attempts to find sincerity, before our desire to set our own terms with God, He chose to love us. He refused to let our relationship with Him remain broken. The death and resurrection of Jesus was God’s (1) definitive statement that He would never stop loving us, and (2) provision for us to become right with Him again. Because of God’s prevenient grace, we can be made right with Him through trusting Christ for our hope of salvation.

Are Some Destined to Accept God?

If our salvation depends on God’s prior love for us, does that mean everyone will be saved? Some answer by saying God allows only certain people to choose salvation. That is, some are predestined to be saved and others are predestined to be lost. Christians who believe in the doctrine of predestination see support in words such as, “He predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will” (Ephesians 1:5).

People today tend to interpret Scripture solely in terms of the individual, but the writers of Scripture usually considered the individual in terms of the community. In Ephesians 1, Paul was talking not about individuals, but about the community. He was describing the way God chose to restore people to a right relationship with himself. God has predestined that all who are saved (and the invitation extends to all people) will be saved by trusting in Christ. God determined how we are to be saved, not who will or will not be saved. Our problem is not that God chooses a limited number of people to be saved. Our problem is that, since the

sin of Adam and Eve, all of us have been born with a bent toward self-centeredness.

John Wesley said his meeting with Peter Böhler was no accident. God had been working in Wesley's life to prepare him for that meeting. The preparation came in Wesley's childhood training, in 15 frustrating years of not being able to be good enough for God, and in the failed missionary journey. By the time Wesley met with Böhler, God's grace had been working to prepare and enable him to trust solely in God's grace for his salvation.

So even our choice to accept God's grace is a result of God's grace. Because of our sinful tendency to put ourselves at the center of our lives, we would never volunteer to choose to live God's way. But God's grace awakens us and frees us to choose Christ.

Paul put it this way, "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 is by grace you have been saved" (Ephesians 2:4-5).

Dead people can't take initiatives. Dead people can't do much of anything. So, the living God took the initiative. We don't need to twist His arm to love us. From the very beginning, He has loved us, and His grace frees us to choose to love Him.

If We're Saved by Grace, Why Not Sin Up a Storm?

If grace reminds us that our hope does not reside in our perfect performance, doesn't this open the door to making sin acceptable among Christians? Or as Paul put it, "What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?" (Romans 6:15). His reply: "By no means!"

The evidence that we have responded to God's grace is seen in our whole-hearted desire that every thought, word, and action should reflect God's love. Grace leaves no room in the heart for calculating how much we can sin and still be Christian.

What about the opposite extreme? If we commit just one sin, does that mean we have lost our salvation? Not if repentance follows. Still, we must beware of the attitude that excuses sin because of God's grace. If a Christian decides to stop loving God and to return to a life of sinfulness, God won't force that person to be what he or she no longer wants to be. Yet, God's grace does not create a neurotic, guilt-ridden piety that is consumed with the

fear that God's love depends on our perfect performance.

Sam Harris, a contributor to this chapter, makes it a habit to regularly tell his daughters that he will always love them and that Jesus will always love them. Rebekah, his oldest daughter, came to him one day and said, "Daddy, even if you stop loving me, I will never stop loving you." He tried to convince her that he would never stop loving her, but she repeated her statement, to which her father repeated that he would never stop loving her. He said he realized later that Rebekah wasn't worried that he would stop loving her. She merely wanted to say that her love for him was unconditional.

Unconditional love makes for great relationships. By God's grace, we can live in the confidence of His unconditional love for us. And by God's grace, we can live as responsible, obedient people who love God unconditionally.