

AMAZING GRACE – Part 18*‘Believe, Act, Receive’*

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Throughout this teaching series I’ve been stressing that our relationship with God is absolutely secure through the work of Jesus Christ, because He paid the price for us. I have also emphasised that all the benefits of that are completely free to us. It is a sovereign gift of God’s grace which we could never earn. We can never manufacture the power, peace, joy, gifts and fruit which come with that gift – and we can never pay it back. We can only accept it as a free gift – or we can refuse it. However we must understand that if we are to experience the reality of this life which is ours free, in Christ, we have to participate in it. That may appear to be contradictory, or at least difficult to grasp fully. Let me put it this way: our life in Christ is free - we can’t work for it, but we can work in it. We can walk in it.

Some of this we have discussed at length from different perspectives, so let’s look at some stories of the lives of people like you and me who understood this principle. The Bible is a record of the experiences of men and women with God as their Creator, Saviour and Redeemer. That is why it is such a relevant and rich document, because you and I are effectively on every page!

The story of Abraham begins in Genesis 11. We are told that Abraham received, by grace, through faith a whole new life through a child born to him in his old age. In Romans 4, it says he inherited the earth by believing God. Along with his believing, Abraham acted on his belief. He didn’t work to obtain, earn or create God’s promise of a child, but he worked with God in receiving it. He would never have received the promise otherwise. Abraham acted in faith in accordance with the promise God had given him, being fully persuaded that God had power to do exactly what he promised. (Romans 4:19-20). Abraham acted as if the Word of God was true. He believed God and acted accordingly!

2 Kings 5:1-14 *“Now Naaman was the Commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the Lord had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy. Now bands from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman’s wife. She said to her mistress,*

‘If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.’ Naaman went to his master, and told him what the girl from Israel had said. ‘By all means, go,’ the king of Aram replied. ‘I will send a letter to the king of Israel.’ “So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing.

The letter he took to the king of Israel read: With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy.’ As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, ‘Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me! When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: ‘Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel.’ So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha’s house.”

When Naaman arrives at Elisha's house, with his robes, chariots and in great pomp, the prophet of God doesn't even come out of the house! He's out the back, fixing the washing machine!

“Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, ‘Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed.’ But Naaman went away angry and said, ‘I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy.’ (he was expecting something religious or magical). Are not the Abana and Pharpar, the rivers in Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?’ So he turned and went off in a rage. Naaman's servants went to him and said, ‘My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, ‘Wash and be cleansed!’ So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.”

The Word of God to Naaman was clear, through Elisha. He was effectively given healing by the grace of God through Elisha's command to wash in the Jordan seven times. Naaman could act on that and receive the healing from God – or he could ignore it and eventually die from leprosy. The Word of God was true, but he would never have experienced it unless he acted as though it was true. The irritating thing for Naaman (and every religious person that followed him!) is that it just sounded too simple!

We face the same problem today. We can fall into the trap of waiting for some flashy, miraculous sudden intervention from God to solve our problems and make us believe Him – that one thing that is suddenly going to make life work - the conference, book, preacher or experience that will fix us and unlock the blessings and reality of God.

What God gives us is so simple that we often miss it. That's why Jesus said we must come as little children, with the same child-like faith. We receive the free gifts and blessings of God by believing that they are free and then acting on that belief.

2 Kings 5:15-16 *“Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before him and said, ‘Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel. Please now accept a gift from your servant.’ The prophet answered, ‘As surely as the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing.’ And even though Naaman urged him, he refused.”*

Naaman tried to pay for something that was free. As understandable as that is for humans like us, it's an insult to God who gives freely in love. How would a parent feel if a young child started giving their pocket money back in payment after each meal? It must do something to the heart of God when His children try to pay Him back for His love and empowering grace.

The Apostle Paul tells his own story:

1 Corinthians 15:9-10 *“For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, (I don't deserve anything I have.) because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, (and I say what I say, and do what I do, and write what I write) and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them – yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.”*

Paul clearly says he didn't deserve it, it came to him freely. He got what everyone else in the kingdom got. But it didn't come to him without effect because he worked harder than everybody else. He worked in response to the resources of God's grace. He could have received God's grace and not worked and the gift would have been without effect.

Abraham could have waited forever if he hadn't acted upon God's word. Naaman could have died in his pride and disease had he not acted. You may believe in God's free, radical grace. You may affirm that you can never deserve or earn it or pay it back - but if you don't act as though that is true you will never experience the liberating power of that free gift! It will have no effect.

Jesus explained it to his disciples in Luke 8, with the parable of the seed and the four types of soil. The seed is the Word of God. It comes to you by reading the Bible, listening to sermons, discussion in a small group and directly to your spirit sometimes. The seed remains the same, but the different soils determine whether the seed will germinate and grow. The good seed sometimes falls on the path. The soil is hard, the seed cannot take root there so it blows away or is snatched by a bird. Other seed falls on shallow soil and it can't grow there either. It may fall in good soil, but weeds grow up faster and choke the seed to death. But the same seed which fails to grow in those places produces a bountiful crop in fertile soil which is rich, receptive and prepared. The power isn't in the soil, the power is in the seed; but the life and fruit within the seed will never produce its crop without the resources of the soil.

We should spend as much time as we can in the Bible, not for any religious reason to please God, or because it's a discipline we've developed, but because it contains the seed - life-changing, mind-blowing Word of God Almighty, which will produce life in you. If you read it and allow it to penetrate your heart and take root, you will find everything God has promised begin to manifest in your life and that great old hymn written over 100 years ago by Barney Warren will be your testimony. You should look it up and read the words! It's called *Joy unspeakable and full of glory!*

Does that sound like your life? That's the promise of God which will become a reality in your life as you provide the best environment for His Word of truth. First believe it - then start acting as though it's true and you will receive all the fruit God desires. Seeds don't come up overnight, and babies don't arrive the next week. Sometimes there is a time delay as the fruit forms in a hidden place, but the promise will be delivered.

All those great promises of God will in time become your experience: *"I will keep you in perfect peace ... You will be able to do all things through Christ who strengthens you ... Ask anything in my name and I will do it for you."* etc. The Word of God will produce fruit, because it has within it the power to fulfil His promises. All it needs is fertile, deep, rich, open, co-operative soil. It's never a case of God's part then our part following, we do it together all the way - or it doesn't happen.

The Bible and our own experiences confirm that the first sin that nullifies the promises, power and manifest presence of God in our experience, but not in reality, is the sin of unbelief.

Ephesians 1:3 *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ."*

If you are a believer, you now have *everything* in Christ, but if you don't act on that belief you will never experience it. The next verse tells us the most important blessing of all:

Ephesians 1:4 *"For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight."*

He has already done that. Any attempt on our part to become holy in His sight in sin, and we need to repent of that sin of unbelief. Unbelief gives rise to every other sin in life, from the Garden of Eden till now. Why do believers still covet, steal, commit adultery or lie? It is because they don't believe they already have everything in Christ. You don't need to strive for acceptance in Christ, or try to attain God's holiness by your religious performance. You don't need drugs to find peace with God. You don't need to manipulate people into liking you, because you are loved by God.

Unbelief is the first sin. All other sin that we feel bad about is our futile attempt to earn the things that God has already freely given us. God said to Adam and Eve: *"I give you everything in abundance. It is all good."* Then the serpent said, *"God is withholding something from you. If you really want to live, then in addition to all that God has given you, you need to take this forbidden fruit."* Taking the fruit was not Adam and Eve's first sin. Not believing what God had told them was their first sin.

Ephesians 1:5-6 *"In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons and daughters through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves."*

There is no more that we need. We just believe what we are told, and step out and act as if it were true. We have everything that we need for life in Jesus Christ - ALL we need for godliness, ALL we need for happiness, ALL we need for authentic life, ALL we need for our Church to look like the Church Christ intended. If we have prepared good, rich, open, receptive soil, meditate on the fact that we have everything in Christ and act as if that fact were true, we will begin to experience what the Word promises to us. If we don't, we won't – it's that simple.

Our lives are full of all kinds of sins and we tend to put them in different categories, and we repent of them as we feel convicted, but until we repent of the first sin of unbelief, our lives will never work, and we will go on committing many other sins which flow from unbelief. God told Abraham that he and Sarah would have a son. Abraham's unbelief caused him to try to help out by having a son with Hagar. He then had to repent of his second sin as well as the sin of unbelief.

I have endeavoured in many ways to demonstrate your complete freedom in Christ; that you are ok with God; and that His life is given to you freely, and you never have to earn it. Why have I done that? Why has this seemed like a cracked record? There are a number of reasons:

Firstly, it's New Testament truth, and we all need to hear it often. Secondly, I love you and brothers and sisters and I want you to become increasingly more free, full of joy and confidence, experiencing more and more of the abundant life which is yours in Christ. The third reason is that if you really believe and act on what I have been telling you every week, sin won't be an issue. Romans 6 says we are no longer slaves to sin. Hebrews 10 tells us that we have been made holy and presented to God, perfect in Christ. Paul sums it up well in Romans 4.

Romans 4:13-16 *"It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression. Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace. "*

The promise comes by faith so that it may be in accordance with grace. Grace means you don't have to work for it – you get it free. If it's by faith, anyone can do it. Religion says: *'You reach God's highest purposes if you are a good pray-er. You need to live a life of holiness and purity to reach spiritual maturity. You will only stand in the end-times army of God if you clean up your act.'* No, no, no!! You get it by faith, by believing what you've been told and acting on that, according to grace. Anybody can believe, you don't need super intelligence, you don't need the right connections, you don't need to be wealthy or good-looking. Anybody can act on belief in God's Word.

Jesus' disciples asked Him: *"What must we do to do the works of God?"* (John 6:28,29) Jesus told them: *"This is the work of God – to **believe** in the One He sent."* **This is our primary work – to believe in Jesus.**

If you want to work hard for God, let that belief be translated into action: become the person you already are in Christ. Belief without action is not belief at all. Abraham believed God's promise to him, and a son was born. Naaman washed himself in a muddy river and his skin was healed. Paul expressed his wonderfully developed view of God's liberating and all-encompassing grace as he travelled all over preaching and establishing the Church, and writing his teaching down which has been preserved for us. All three were given promises which would never have borne fruit if they hadn't participated with God by faith. Part of that work of faith is repenting of those things in which we are trying to achieve for ourselves what God has already given us.

That is why it is so crucial that we understand the full implications of God's grace, and all we have in Christ. We need to know deep in our hearts that we are OK because Jesus made us OK, and therefore, Jesus plus nothing is our salvation *and* our life. That is the only solid foundation for building the Church. God will remove any other, because anything built on a wrong foundation cannot last.

In the final analysis, if our life is not working, if we are struggling, hurting, suffering physically, emotionally or spiritually, it's not because of our mother or father or anyone else's sin against us – past, present or future – it's not even ultimately because of the secondary sins in our own life. Our problems arise from the primary sin of unbelief. When we know that we are totally, unconditionally loved, accepted and made holy before God and empowered by His free grace as given in Christ, we are no longer intimidated by anything, either from without or within – even our own sins and shortcomings. We can hand them over to God once and for all.

The Bible is the account of men and women's experiences with God. It is His story, rather than ours. God is the central character – Creator, Author, Hero and Finisher of this long narrative, and as the story unfolds, so does the revelation about Him. From the beginning, He is a God of grace, choosing people and making promises to them, blessing them, and keeping His promises despite their failure. Such is His love that He always treats His people with dignity and respect, allowing them to respond to Him by their own choice. Those commended by God in Hebrews 11 are the ones who chose to believe His word, take part in His plans, and see the fruit emerge in their lives.

Hebrews 12:1-3 *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”*

How then shall we live?

Believing, acting and receiving ...

By His grace – for His glory!

1. Read through this week's sermon once without taking notes or highlighting anything ... just to get the big picture. Go through the text more closely. Highlighting or underlining key phrases or paragraphs which stand out as significant to you. What single statement impacted you the most? How will that now change your life? Write down what you need to do to respond to God's truth today.

2. Ponder the following statements from this week's sermon. What practical implications could or should flow from each of these statements? If you ask "How then shall I live?" in light of each of these truths, what would be your answer?

We must understand that if we are to experience the reality of this life which is ours free, in Christ, we have to participate in it.

'Joy unspeakable and full of glory!' Does that sound like your life? That's the promise of God which will become a reality in your life as you provide the best environment for His Word of truth.

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