

AMAZING GRACE – Part 12
'Grace Meets our Deepest Needs'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

The first part of the good news of the New Covenant says that your position in Christ is secure and it's freely given to you at His expense. The second part of the good news is that you receive, when you're born again into this New Covenant, a power to live the life that you ought to and want to live. Grace is not a passive theological or abstract concept, it is the personal, empowering presence of God in our lives enabling us to be all that we can be and to do all that we can do.

Now we can look at our lives and see what God has done for us. The grace of God has reassured us eternally of His love and acceptance of us. He has committed Himself to us, to conform us to the likeness of Christ. We can see the promises that He has given us through His Word and know that they will be formed in us as the Holy Spirit imparts the life of Christ to us.

2 Peter 1:3 *"His divine power has given us everything that we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness."*

Through eyes of grace, we find answers to all our questions as we continue to allow God to reveal Himself to us. The effects of this grace in our lives is life-changing and life-defining. We are given the power to grow, the power to change, the power to live humble, peaceful, non-threatened, lives free from anyone's manipulation.

Here is an objective truth: no matter how badly you mess up today, you are right with God through Jesus Christ and you are accepted in Him. You might *feel* bad about yourself. You might *feel* guilty or unloved, defeated or oppressed, even accused and judged by God. You may even *feel* condemned. Such feelings are subjective; they are real and you can't ignore them; nor do you need to deny them. You can be honest about your emotions. I am not saying you will never *feel* any of those things when you understand grace in all its truth. The devil will continue to fuel all kinds of lying emotions in us while ever he is allowed to reign in this world in any way. Having those feelings is not wrong – it's inevitable; *believing* those feelings is most definitely wrong. They are not from God; they have no basis in reality and therefore you must reject them.

You might be thinking: *'That's easier said than done,'* but it all depends on what you want. If you want to be free from accusation and condemnation then you will make a choice to reject those feelings and move on. Just keep telling yourself the truth: *'This does not reflect reality. It's a direct attack from the father of lies, the accuser of the brethren, the one who comes to kill, steal and destroy. In Jesus' name, I reject these lying emotions and ask God to release peace and joy to flood my soul and wash away all of Satan's lies.'*

Now as I have said many times before, there are two things that human beings really need in life: *acceptance* and *change*. We want to be accepted as we are, warts and all, sin and all. We don't want to have to jump through any hoops to earn that acceptance. However, there is another desire at work in us - the desire to change. Whilst we want acceptance as we are, we don't want to stay as we are. Every normal human being I have met wants to change; they want to grow; they do not want to mark time and let life just pass them by. Sadly, our need for acceptance can often lead us to seek it through human affirmation and that can so quickly see us taken captive by performance-based religion which always leads us away from the gospel and its power in our lives.

So many people in this nation have grown up without the experience of a father's love. Fathers in particular have an incredible influence by whether or not they affirm and accept their children as they are, encouraging and assuring them in spite of failure. Many people never had that experience. We are also trained by an education system which affirms us on the basis of our performance. We find the same thing in our employment. It is no wonder that we see it in the Church. Coming into the kingdom of God doesn't change the fundamental pain of rejection and insecurity in us, so we may seek acceptance from the Pastor, or leaders, or those around us. Even when we gain that affirmation on the basis of our performance, we cannot relax. Tomorrow, we might get it wrong with the people who are important to us. Sadly, it was only our performance which was accepted, not us.

There is only one place to go to find affirmation which is independent of our performance, and that is to God. He will give you the same affirmation He gave His only Son that day when He was baptised. At the commencement of Jesus' ministry, before any preaching or miracles, God said: *"This is my beloved son in whom I am (already) well pleased."* That kind of affirmation from God is not only a possibility for you, it is your birth right. Your right standing with God through Jesus, your freedom from condemnation and total acceptance by Him, is an objective truth - no matter how you feel subjectively. That acceptance comes in the glorious package of the Gospel.

Paradoxically, the second thing we really need in life is the power to change. The New Covenant, the gospel of Jesus Christ, gives us acceptance *and* the power to change! That is what God wants the Church to be about! We are meant to be channels of acceptance and change. He wants us to accept people the way they are, but not let them stay that way. When the impact of God's free grace really hits home and we understand that His grace is the only thing that separates us from everybody outside the Church, then we will be able to give the same acceptance to others that God gives to us. When that happens, there won't be a building large enough to hold the people! But it won't happen until we deal with our attitude toward other people. We desperately want people to accept us the way we are, but we can often have a problem accepting people the way they are.

Through this wonderful New Covenant relationship we now have with God in Jesus Christ, we are empowered by the Spirit of God to live up to the performance that Jesus credited to us freely. The power of God, which is part and parcel of His grace and love, transforms us to be more and more like the One who kept the Covenant for us in the first place.

So as you read things like: *'Love your enemies; don't worry about anything ever; don't lust; go into all the world and preach the gospel; heal the sick; cast out demons ...'* those things that seem so impossible to you, exhortations that you just can't live up to, they are in fact wonderful promises to you! God's bidding is His enabling. What He calls us to do He also empowers us to do and He is in the process right now of training us to do just that. Let's look at what Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers:

2 Corinthians 3:3-6 *"You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a New Covenant - not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."*

This New Covenant is not just something we understand in our head. This New Covenant carries with it the very power of God who makes us competent ministers of the New Covenant. We are altered in such a way as to make us different people. When you become a Christian, when you are born-again into the New Covenant by believing into Christ, you find yourself having new desires.

The things of God are now important to you. You want to meet with the body of Christ, whereas before it was either a threat or just boring. You receive a longing for prayer, for the Word of God and for intimacy with God. Your attitude has radically changed. When you enter into the New Covenant, you are empowered to do something about the new desires which the Spirit of God has birthed in you. You long for peace; to help people; to be one with God in prayer and worship; to forgive your enemies; and love those who are unlovely. You also find the power is there to do so. You are accepted in Jesus Christ ... therefore ...

You don't know how to worship?	No problem - He did and He does.
You don't know how to pray?	No problem - He did and He does.
You don't know how to heal?	No problem - He did and He does.
You don't know how to obey?	No problem - He did and He does.
You don't know how to truly love?	No problem - He did and He does.

Jesus has done all that for you, and that is all credited to you! The New Covenant, and what should be New Testament Christianity today, gives people exactly what they really need. You will recall that the Old Covenant was unable to bring that about. In the book of Jeremiah we read this:

Jeremiah 31:31-34 *"The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a New Covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them, " declares the LORD.*

"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. (I will empower them, I will change them) I will be their God, and they will be my people ... "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

A long time ago God said through Ezekiel that the Old Covenant wasn't working. It was right, it was perfect - but it was not working for sinful people. God was so eager to have an intimate relationship with His children, that He foreshadowed the day when He would usher in a New Covenant whereby that could happen. He said He will forgive the people's sins, He will accept them and He will change them from the inside out. We read this in Ezekiel 36.

Ezekiel 36:24-28 *"For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God."*

There it is again: acceptance and change. *'I will forgive you and accept you, I will remember your sins no more, because I'm going to look at the performance of Jesus and accept you in Him, and I'm going to send the Spirit which empowered Jesus into your hearts to empower you.'* If you co-operate with that empowering Spirit you will start to change.

The Old Covenant can only ever produce guilt, shame and more sin - and it leads to spiritual death, not liberating life and joy and peace. But if we know that we can try and fail and that God is not going to punish us, then we'll try ... and try again ... and keep on trying and believing and trusting until that life-giving power bursts out like an underground stream of water and floods every part of our life and the lives of those around us.

One of the reasons people don't experience the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives is that they're trying too hard to pay for it, and that's impossible with God. We will never experience God in His fullness on our terms. When we stop trying to buy the power of God by trying to do the right thing and live the right way in order to get it - then He'll give it to us - along with the power to repent and grow to be more like Jesus. Let me point you to a powerful passage in John's gospel:

John 20:19-22 *"On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."*

(Just as the Father has sent me - full of love, joy, peace; full of power to heal, power to forgive sins, power to forgive - so I'm sending you)

"And with that he breathed on them and said, Receive the Holy Spirit."

He gave them power. He gave them authority. He gave them something real. An Old Covenant minister looks at the Bible and studies it and tells you what's in it. A New Covenant minister imparts power to you. Christianity is frustrating to many people because they hear sermons and read books which nag them to live up to a standard that they haven't been empowered to live up to. Imagine a job where you've been given responsibility for things that you've not been given authority or power to deal with, then you will know how this feels. What a frustrating situation to be in! So many Christians have that inflicted on them every week.

By contrast, Jesus empowered His disciples to live the life that He commanded them to live. He doesn't go through the Bible and expound on abstract theological notions. Jesus' Bible study on the Holy Spirit was over in one gentle blow – literally! He breathed on them and gave them substance! He imparted something to them.

The New Covenant imparts something to you more and more. When you read all the high ethical demands of the New Testament, don't shrink back and say: *'It's a good thing I'm saved by grace - I'm glad I'm not held responsible for any of that hard stuff.'* Look at that hard stuff and say: *'That's what God has empowered me for and that's where I am headed. I'm going to live up to that one day and I can see that I'm making progress.'* You'll not be proud of it because you know it's all HIM! He did it for you and He's enabled you to do it. So you stay humble even while your performance improves because it's grace from beginning to end.

The Old Covenant was conditional. *The New Covenant is unconditional.*

The Old Covenant required 100% obedience. *The New Covenant requires belief in the obedience of Jesus.*

The Old Covenant was based on fear. *The New Covenant is based on love and forgiveness.*

The Old Covenant was based on human effort. *The New Covenant is based on the grace of God.*

Under the Old Covenant forgiveness was earned. *Under the New Covenant forgiveness is given as a free gift.*

The list goes on and the contrasts are many. It's bondage or freedom – that's the basic choice. Which will it be for you? Our mind needs to be grounded in truth in order to inform our emotions and spirit. The truth is that God loves us and accepts us as we are in Christ Jesus. Whatever was owing on our accounts, Jesus has paid in full.

There is now no cause for guilt, shame or feelings of inadequacy before God. We are set free to boldly approach His throne of grace to find mercy and help in times of need. The grace of God also imparts the power to change – to be able to live the way we are inspired to live by the experience of freedom from accusation. We receive the life of Christ, and we are empowered to live a fruitful, abundant life by the Holy Spirit.

Receiving God's grace enables us to relate to others in a new way too. We can accept them as Christ accepted us. We can give them room to try, to grow, to fail, and also be changed into the likeness of Christ. Our lives only work as God intended them to work when we understand and embrace God's amazing grace. The Church which bears the name of our Lord and Saviour only works and fulfils its purpose on earth when collectively, as a community of faith, we understand grace in all its truth and let that grace have its effect in us just as it did in the Apostle Paul, affirmed in his letter to the believers in Corinth when he wrote:

1 Corinthians 15:10 *“By the grace of God I am what I am, 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.”*

When that is the personal affirmation of all believers, then, and only then, will the Church Jesus promised to build awaken from its slumber and impact the world the way it once did.

May it be so, Lord!

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?

There is only one place to go to find affirmation which is independent of our performance, and that is to God.

This New Covenant is not just something we understand in our head. This New Covenant carries with it the very power of God who makes us competent ministers of the New Covenant.

When we stop trying to buy the power of God by trying to do the right thing and live the right way in order to get it - then He'll give it to us - along with the power to repent and grow to be more like Jesus.

The Church which bears the name of our Lord and Saviour only works and fulfils its purpose on earth when collectively, as a community of faith, we understand grace in all its truth and let that grace have its effect in us.