

What is grace?

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Bible › Biblical vocabulary

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‘Grace’ is at the core of the Christian faith. Christians believe that God is gracious, that grace is an essential part of God’s character, and that our salvation is by grace. In this sense, grace is almost synonymous with the Gospel, God’s gift of undeserved salvation through Jesus Christ. But what is grace actually? What is the origin of this word and what does it mean? In this article, we will examine how the Bible uses the term ‘grace’. We will discover that it has a deeper and more extensive meaning than is sometimes assumed.

Old Testament

The Hebrew word that is usually translated ‘grace’ is חֵן (chen). Chen means not only ‘mercy’, but also ‘favor’, ‘affection’, ‘beauty’, just as the English word ‘gracious’ is derived from grace. Chen occurs some seventy times in the Old Testament, 43 of them in the expression ‘to find grace in the eyes of’. Usually this expression is employed for individuals who seek or receive favor from

someone else, such as Jacob from Esau (Genesis 32:5), Joseph from Potiphar (Genesis 39:3-4), or Ruth from Boaz (Ruth 2:2). The Bible writers also use this expression to indicate that certain people receive God's special favor.

Examples of these people include Noah (Genesis 6:8), Moses (Exodus 33:12-19) and Gideon (Judges 6:17). They had a close relationship with God and received an important mission from Him. The corresponding Hebrew verb חנן *chanan* carries the meaning 'to turn to someone with love and help them'. The psalmists often pray to God for such an attitude towards them (Psalm 4:1; 6:2; 25:16, etc.).

In addition to *chen*, the Old Testament has other words to denote grace in the sense of 'undeserved love', notably mercy (רחם *racham*), and steadfast love/covenant faithfulness (חסד *chesed*). These words are often combined in a praise and character description of God based on God's self-revelation in Exodus 34:6. The Old Testament has much attention for the law as a rule of life that God graciously has given to His people. Therefore,

the author of Psalm 119 cannot stop praising God for this gift. Yet already in the Old Testament the idea is present that keeping the law is not sufficient to gain God's favor (Deuteronomy 7:7-10; 9:4-6; 2 Samuel 7:14-16).

This becomes all the more evident the more often Israel fails to obey God's law. Consequently, prophets such as Hosea declare that Israel, because of its unfaithfulness and covenant breaking, has no privilege over other nations. It is solely due to God's grace and mercy that He wants to make a new beginning with this people. Grace, then, is not to be taken for granted. It is received only after repentance and conversion (Amos 5:11-15, Jonah 3:9).

New Testament

In order to appreciate the rich meaning of grace, the Old Testament is not sufficient. The content of God's grace is only fully revealed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Greek word χάρις charis underlies most translations of 'grace'. Charis occurs more than 170 times in the New Testament. It was also a common word in non-biblical

Greek. In its most basic sense, it referred to a person's pleasing appearance or character, as in 'charm' or 'charisma' (Luke 4:22). As a character trait, charis also means 'kindness', or when directed towards certain individuals, 'favor'. We find the latter meaning for example in Luke 2:52: "Jesus came more and more into the favor of God and men".

Charis, then, was the attitude and character of a benefactor toward a needy person. Charis can also express the feeling that a benefactor evokes in such a needy person, in which case we translate it in English as 'gratitude' (Luke 17:9). After a slight shift in meaning, charis can even denote the words or actions by which gratitude is expressed (Romans 16:7; 1 Corinthians 16:3). All these meanings often blend together, making it difficult to distinguish them. Luke in particular, as a Gentile writer, often uses the various meanings of charis/grace.

Our understanding of 'grace', however, is especially influenced by Paul, who uses charis more than twice as often as all other New Testament writers combined. This

specific Christian meaning came about by conflating charis in the sense of 'gift' and of 'attitude'. God's gracious attitude is never inactive but has beneficial effects on those to whom it relates.

So grace is a power of God that always has a particular effect, for example, in a congregation (2 Corinthians 1:15), for a ministry (Ephesians 4:7), in the apostleship (Romans 1:5; 1 Corinthians 15:10), to eternal life (1 Peter 3:7), or in temptation (2 Corinthians 12:9). In this sense, grace is virtually synonymous with the Holy Spirit, the power of God (Acts 6:5; 6:8; Hebrews 10:29). So Paul can say on one occasion 'gifts of grace' (Ephesians 4:7-13) and on another, 'gifts of the Spirit' (1 Corinthians 12:4-11), actually meaning the same thing.

Although charis does not necessarily mean 'undeserved favor', Paul did make this word key to his theology in that sense: "But if [God's election] is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace" (Romans 11:6). Grace has its origin in God, not in its recipients. It is a pure gift from God and thus stands

in sharp contrast to the works of the law (Romans 3:24). God elects His people not based on their merit, but guilty people receive grace and are forgiven on the basis of Christ's righteousness. Grace is received by faith and goes along with repentance.

Grace as unconditional forgiveness and acceptance by God emerges as the main message throughout the New Testament. Matthew and Mark do not use the word *charis* itself, but the concept of grace is clearly present: Jesus invites the sinners and outcasts and heals the sick and vulnerable. John also emphasizes the nature of grace as a gift (John 1:17), but usually uses the word *ἀγάπη* *agape* (love) to describe God's gracious disposition towards people.

Summary

To conclude, the original meaning of 'grace' was that a person receives affection or a favor. In the context of the relationship between God and people, it refers to God's special and loving attention to a person who is called to carry out His plan. This is undeserved and unexpected

favor. In Jesus Christ the meaning of God's favor is fully revealed. Jesus was full of God's grace (John 1:14) and completely fulfilled His calling. Through Jesus, believers also receive God's grace and Spirit, and through them God's grace also comes to the fallen world. God's gracious forgiveness delivers us from ourselves, from the oppressive law, and from our desire to perform. God's gracious power, which is the same as that which raised Jesus from the dead (Ephesians 1:19-20) sets us free, makes us saints and grants us eternal life.

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