

Theology for Life

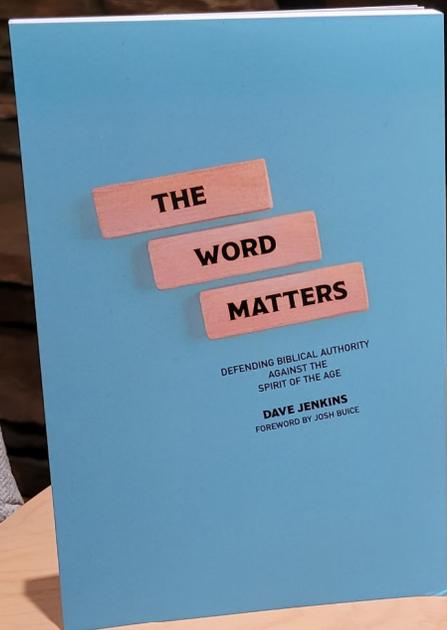
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Inside this Issue...

- **Understanding *Sola Gratia***
- **What's So Amazing About Grace?**
- **Grace, Not Works**
- ***Sola Gratia* in Scripture**

In ***The Word Matters***, Dave Jenkins takes readers by the hand and helps them understand how serious the issue of biblical authority is and how the Bible is under attack, so that they can stand with confidence on the Word of God.

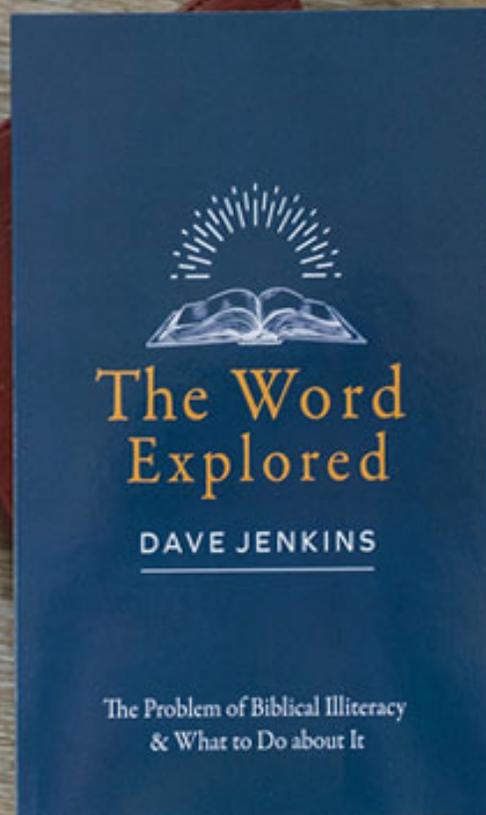


The Word Matters

DEFENDING BIBLICAL AUTHORITY
AGAINST THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE



Grow in your relationship with God!



*The Word Explored:
The Problem of
Biblical Illiteracy &
What to Do about It*
is an easy-to-read,
biblically-based work
for lay-people and
pastors alike.



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Table of Contents

Editor's Corner By Dave Jenkins	Page 6
The Means of Grace By Jacob Tanner	Page 8
Grace and the Local Church By Jacob Tanner	Page 14
The Impact of Being Made in the Image of God on the Spoken Word By David Van Bebber	Page 20
Sufficient Grace By Scott Hurst	Page 28
Understanding <i>Sola Gratia</i> By Justin Huffman	Page 35

Table of Contents (Continued)

<i>Sola Gratia</i> in Scripture By Dawn Hill	Page 40
Grace, Not Works By Kelly Benware	Page 44
What's So Amazing About Grace? By William Farley	Page 48
The Grace of God, Lawless Living, and Biblical Sanctification By Dave Jenkins	Page 55
Recommended Reading on <i>Sola Gratia</i> By Dave Jenkins	Page 61
About the Authors	Page 62

Editor's Corner

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One of the phrases most associated with the sixteenth-century Reformation is the Latin phrase "*post tenebras, lux*" ("after darkness, light"). The Reformers used these words to contrast the biblical view of the gospel over and against the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church. "*Post tenebras, lux*" has been used traditionally as a summary under the heading of the Five Solas of the Reformation. Starting with this issue of *Theology for Life*, we will be considering one of these *Solas* per year, beginning with *Sola Gratia*, "by grace alone".

For the Reformers speaking of *Sola Gratia*, this doctrine was critical for a right and fully rounded biblical understanding of salvation in Christ. Martin Luther (1483-1546 A.D.) said, "But no man can be thoroughly humbled until he knows that his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers, devices, endeavors, will, and works, and depends entirely on the choice, will, and work of another, namely, of God alone...then he has come close to grace, and can be saved."

A right and biblical understanding is vital because of the propensity of the human heart to focus on performance and human effort to get right with the Lord. For this reason, we must be clear about what *Sola Gratia* is, because the purity of the gospel hangs in the balance.

Salvation is a gracious redemption accomplished for sinners. From all eternity, the Triune God agreed in covenant to save a people for Himself. The Father chose to elect a people for the Son (Luke 22:29; Ephesians 1:3-14), the Son agreed to merit salvation for that people (Psalm 2; John 3:35; 14:31; 15:9), and the Holy Spirit applies salvation to His people (Isaiah 63:10-14; Ezekiel, 36:25-27; 37:14; John 3:5; 14:26; 15:26; 16:7-15; 20:21-23). Salvation was decreed concerning every Christian, earned for every Christian by Christ Himself, and applied to the account of every Christian because of the Lord Jesus.

To be clear here, *Sola Gratia* means that salvation

for the Christian is based on the gracious love of God in Christ. Paul explains that the salvation of the elect is not based on either our decisions or works, but instead salvation is credited to the gracious mercy of God, gifted to whomever He wills (Romans 9:15-16; 22-23; Exodus 33:19). From beginning to end, salvation is of the Lord (Psalm 3:8; 62:1; Jonah 2:9; Romans 8:29-30). The sovereign grace of God does not merely show up before conversion to transform sinners, nor does the grace of God merely show up after conversion to preserve the elect. From the foundation of the world till the never-ending age to come, the Lord holds His Beloved in His hand. Christ will raise all His people on the last day (John 6:41-46). From start to finish, whether we consider election to conversion to heaven, or any other angle of our salvation, salvation is by God's grace alone.

The people of God are saved by the grace of God alone (*Sola Gratia*). Yet, we must also emphasize, as the Apostle Paul did (Romans 6:1), that the free gift of God's grace alone is not a cheap grace, but a costly grace (as Dietrich Bonhoeffer discussed in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*). This is vital because some may think, "I can live however I want in light of what Christ has done." Yet, Paul's response to that in Romans 6:1 and 6:11 is tell us, "*May it never be*" and to "*consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God.*" The reason Paul points this out is to counter the idea that we can live our Christian life however we want, with moral recklessness, thinking we are "all good", when in fact, we are saved for a purpose—to pursue lives of holiness, honor, and service unto our Lord as bondservants of Christ.

The great hymnwriter, Isaac Watts, captured Paul's point well when he wrote in his hymn, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross", saying:

"Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small, love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

Think about that the next time you sing of the grace of God.

In this issue of *Theology for Life*, you will learn about this great doctrine from the Scriptures and the history of the Church. It is our hope that you will more fully understand just how vital this doctrine is in the day-to-day life of the Christian. In this day and age, we desperately need to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Word of God. My sincere prayer is that you'll come away from this issue of *Theology for Life* as you perhaps did the first-time you heard John Newton's famous hymn, "Amazing Grace", casting yourself afresh on the grace of God in Christ alone. Or perhaps for the first time, you'll come to Christ by repenting and believing on the grace of God, revealed in Christ alone.

In Christ Alone,

Dave Jenkins

Executive Editor, Theology for Life Magazine

The Means of Grace

By Jacob Tanner



In 2 Peter 3:18, the Apostle Peter calls us to, “*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*” This first sentence leads to a declaration of praise and wor-

ship of Christ, as Peter then writes, “*To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.*” There is, it would seem, a direct correlation between the grace and knowledge we possess as Christians and the amount of praise we offer to Christ. At the same time, there’s another direct correlation between our relationship with Christ and the grace and knowledge we possess.

In other words, to praise God more, we need more grace and knowledge. We receive more grace and knowledge from God Himself. In fact, He has appointed various means of growing in knowledge and grace which we must utilize. In theological terms, we refer to means and methods of growing in knowledge and grace as the *means of grace*.

A slightly technical definition of the “means of grace”, as understood within Protestant circles, would likely look something like this: The divinely appointed yet ordinary tools that God has sovereignly gifted to His saints, whereby they may experience the full benefits of salvation and redemption, and thus grow in grace and knowledge of Christ, leading to greater adoration and worship of Him. A less technical definition would be: The ordinary things that God has given us to use to grow as Christians.

So, what are these divinely appointed tools? The Westminster Shorter Catechism states, in Q&A 88, “The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption, are his ordinances, especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.”

The Word. Sacraments. Prayer. These are the three main means of grace every Christian is afforded. Let us take the time to briefly consider each in connection to our growing in Christ.

The Word as a Means of Grace

Second Timothy 3:16-17 is quite clear that, “*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*” The phrase “*All Scripture*” is vital here. Though we are new covenant Christians, both the Old and New Testaments are inspired by God. Every verse of all 66 books of the ca-

nonical Bible is essential for the Christian life. We need to familiarize ourselves with them in personal study, but also hear them read publicly, and hear them preached as well.

This is why intentionally reading through the Bible in a year is a good practice. It's also why it's important to join a church that practices expository, verse-by-verse teaching and preaching through the Scriptures. *All Scripture* is God's Word, and we need it all if we're going to grow in Christ. It is through the preached Word that sinners are saved (Romans 10:17), saints are edified, and God is glorified.

“Thus, these sacraments become signs of the new covenant we’ve been placed in through Christ...”

The Word is also a gift of God's grace. Think of it: the eternal, timeless, perfect, sovereign, holy, infinite God of the cosmos *chose* to communicate with us, and He did so in a way that would benefit the saints of all ages—through a written account and record of His Word. God has spoken to us! What fools we are to neglect such a gracious gift as the Bible!

The Sacraments as a Means of Grace

Many today shy away from the word “sacraments” in favor of the word “ordinances”. Some use the two words interchangeably. Within our Protestant circles, two sacraments are acknowledged: the Lord's Supper and Baptism.

The Lord's Supper, of course, was instituted by Jesus as a memorial gift to His church. *“Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ And he took a cup, and when*

he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the[c] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom'" (Matthew 26:26-29). However, the Lord's Supper is more than a memorial—it is an actual means of grace, whereby God strengthens the saints.

Louis Berkhof, in his *Systematic Theology*, explained, "The preaching of the Word (or, the Word preached) and the administration of the sacraments (or, the sacraments administered) are the means officially instituted in the Church, by which the Holy Spirit works and confirms faith in the hearts of men."

The Lord's Supper is the gospel, given physical form. We can taste, smell, feel, chew, swallow, see, and even hear the bread and wine. Likewise, baptism operates in a very similar way—it visualizes the salvation of the sinner. Consider, for example, Romans 6:3-4, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." Baptism signifies this exact transaction. The lowering of the saved sinner beneath the water symbolizes their dying with Christ, their being held beneath the water signifies their burial with Christ, and their raising above the water signifies their resurrection with Christ. The fact that they are baptized by a minister, rather than baptizing themselves, also signifies that our salvation is the work of God, and not a work we perform ourselves.

Thus, these sacraments become signs of the new covenant we've been placed in through Christ, and they also act as seals, guaranteeing us—by God's grace—that we will never be removed from this new covenant. They are reminders to us of what God has done, what He is doing, and what He has promised to

do still. They are magnifying glasses whereby we can learn to understand the gospel of God's grace more perfectly still.

Prayer as a Means of Grace

As important as the Word is, and as vital as the sacraments are, prayer is perhaps the most neglected means of grace that God has gifted to us. Surely, the Word commands us to *"pray without ceasing"* (1 Thessalonians 5:17), and to, *"not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God"* (Philippians 4:6). Yet, we pray with much ceasing and worry as though God does not listen.

This ought not to be! If the Word is God speaking to us, and the sacraments are God making His Word visible and tangible before us, then praying is our opportunity to speak to Him and make our requests known to Him. This is a clear means of grace, because Paul promises that when we pray about everything, rather than becoming anxious over anything, we find that, *"the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 4:7).

If we want the grace of peace, we must pray. If we want joy, which is closely related to peace, we must pray. If we want to have a relationship with the Lord and communicate with Him, then we must pray!

Yet, think of how incredible this means of grace is: the God of the cosmos, the King of everything, the Creator of all, has invited us to come before Him and speak to Him through the Holy Spirit in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ. As we're called forth in Hebrews 4:16, *"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."*

There is no swifter or surer way to experience the gift of God's grace than

through prayer. But, when all three means of grace are utilized—the Word, the sacraments, and prayer—we find that our gracious God supplies us with all we need to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Grace and the Local Church

By Jacob Tanner

No man is an island unto himself.

We have been designed by God for community. We desperately need one another if we have any hope of flourishing as image-bearers of Yahweh upon this earth. Yet, there's one huge stumbling block tripping up evangelicals today, keeping them from joining local church bodies and leading them into deep errors: the cult of individualism.



Especially in the West, the philosophy of individualism has run rampant across the foundations of evangelicalism. Most people today think that they're better off alone than they are within a community. In fact, many even express their disdain for communal gatherings—church or otherwise—by calling the people who join such communities mere sheep.

Likely, every Christian has heard a variety of excuses over the years from others pertaining to why they don't attend church services: "I don't need to sit by a bunch of hypocrites to learn about God"; "I can worship God just as well by myself, watching a sunrise or hunting, than if I simply gather with others"; "The church is not a building, it's wherever I am"; "Going to church doesn't make anyone a Christian"; "I don't need others to teach me about God, or lead me in worship. As long as I have my Bible, I have all I need." The excuses can, obviously, go on and on. But, at the heart of them all, is a deep-rooted misunderstanding of what the local church is and how it is, in fact, a gift from the Lord that we can actually join a local church assembly, surrounded by a body of believing Christians. Though many act as though church meetings are a burden, the truth is that they are a *grace* from the Lord, meant to establish us in the faith, grow us in Christ, and encourage us as we participate in the Christian walk alongside one another.

The Parts of the Body Must Work Together

It is undeniable that people accomplish more when they work in unity alongside others than when they work on their own. Can you imagine a nation declaring war and sending a single soldier to fight an entire army? Unfortunately, there are no real-life Rambos or 007s. And, when it comes to the Christian walk, there are no super-soldiers in Christ's army. We desperately need one another.

Some may try to make the case that they are lone wolves and super-soldiers who don't need any community, but the truth is that all Christians have been created by God and gifted by Him to operate as members within a church body. Paul, in making this point in 1 Corinthians 12:19-20, wrote, *"If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body."*

Every body needs parts: hands, fingers, feet, toes, eyes, mouth, teeth, etc. And, like a body, every church is the same way. Every church needs members to serve in various capacities. But a Christian who does not gather with other Christians, and does not join a church, is just like the eye that has said, "I'm not an eye." To refuse to join a local church is to become displaced and to weaken both yourself and the local church.

Imagine if, one day, your left hand developed sentience and the power to unattached itself from your body. Looking at your right hand, it suddenly declares, "Peace! I'm out! I don't need y'all." What happens to the fingers on that hand? They're now missing a major piece of the body that they relied on. The arm is now without a hand. The body can still function, sure, but it's not going to be going at 100% capacity anymore. The other hand will need to do the work of two. And the hand that abandoned the body soon finds itself withering away, because without a wrist, an arm, or a head to guide it, it really can't do anything at all.

So it goes when a Christian either doesn't join a local church body, or just forsakes the assembly. The one who chooses to forsake hurts both others as well as themselves. Their lack of commitment causes others to work harder, and likewise leaves them withering away.

Some, out of some wrong-minded desire to be acknowledged before others, refuse to attend church because they don't inhabit recognized positions such as elder or deacon. This too, however, is wrong. Not everyone can be an elder or a deacon. But every position is vital and important.

As Paul explained, *"Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do*

all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts" (1 Corinthians 12:27-31). What are these higher gifts? Paul says, "I will show you a still more excellent way" (1 Corinthians 12:31), before launching into the famous love chapter of 1 Corinthians 13, wherein he explains that we, as Christians, must love or else we will be useless.

"It is as though, for a few moments on Sunday mornings, we ascend to the Throne Room of God on High and worship before His very throne."

In other words, we ought to not only join a local church body and commit ourselves to it in such a way that we boldly declare, "I will purpose in my heart to regularly gather together, and church will become the reason why I must miss other events", but we must also purpose in our hearts to love our brothers and sisters in Christ and to serve them as greater than ourselves.

Church Gatherings and the Grace of the Preached Word

When we gather together to worship the Lord with brothers and sisters in Christ, something amazing happens: we participate in Heavenly Worship. It is as though, for a few moments on Sunday mornings, we ascend to the Throne Room of God on High and worship before His very throne. It is like how one may find an embassy for other countries within their own. It's as though our church buildings are Heavenly embassies, from which we not only send forth ambassadors for Christ, but which upon entering, one finds his/her feet planted on Heavenly soil.

The highlight of every worship service, then, is the preached Word of

God. When the Word is preached, God—through His Holy Spirit—illuminates His Word in practical ways so that not only do we gain a deeper understanding of who God is, and who we are in light of who He is, but we also gain insight into how we then ought to live as Christians in this world. And, as the Word is

“Our brothers and sisters in Christ are a great cloud of witnesses that cheer us along the marathon of the Christian life.”

preached, not only are saints edified and God glorified, but the gospel is proclaimed once more, afresh and anew. As this takes place, sinners are called to repentance and salvation in Christ.

While it is absolutely true that someone can be saved outside of a church building (many who practice open-air preaching and evangelism wouldn't do these things if this weren't the case), it is also true that the local assembly of saints is a vital tool in God's hand to lead sinners to repentance and salvation. According to the Westminster Confession, chapter 25 paragraph 2, “The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.”

While it is true that the Roman Catholic Church has also taught that there is no salvation outside the Church, Protestants mean something much different by this statement. Rome means that they alone have *it* right, and unless you're Roman Catholic, you can't really be saved. No Protestant means this, however. Protestants mean that the universal, true (i.e., catholic, but not *Roman Catholic*) Church is the means by which God pours out His grace upon this world. As we gather to worship and then are sent out as ambassadors on a mission, we serve

God together.

The Great Cloud of Witnesses

So, as we consider our place within our local church body, the grace of gathered worship, and the plethora of ways in which we serve God as a Church, it is also important we consider the ways in which church encourages us, and in which we can encourage others at church. Perhaps the most helpful text in this regard is Hebrews 12:1-2, *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”*

Our brothers and sisters in Christ are a great cloud of witnesses that cheer us along the marathon of the Christian life. Simultaneously, through their speech, prayers, actions, and so forth, they point us to Christ, who alone is the author and finisher of our faith. Likewise, we are to do the same for others: Encourage and cheer them on, rebuke (when necessary), disciple, and love them. As we empty ourselves in service to others, we teach them to look to Jesus.

We need the Church. We need one another. No man is an island. Let individualistic mentalities die at the foot of the cross. We need community. After all, our local churches are gifts of God's mercy and grace to us.

The Impact of Being Made in the Image of God on Spoken Words

By David Van Bebber



It does not take long when reading Scripture to recognize that the God of Scripture is a **communicating being**. One cannot get through the first chapter of Genesis

without observing the power of God Speaking. God speaks fourteen different times in the first chapter of Genesis alone. At the outset of the Old and New Testaments, one finds a high value placed upon words. The Old Testament presents God speaking things into existence. This is contrasted with the outset of the New Testament, where Christ is presented as the very embodiment of God's Word.

A person cannot separate the God of Scripture from being one who has revealed Himself through His spoken words. Yet, the God of Scripture has not only revealed Himself through spoken words, but He has also imprinted His image on human beings. There is somewhat of an inseparable element presented by the God of Scripture in that those made in His image are like Him in many ways, and this is powerfully demonstrated in that His image bearers are not entirely themselves without communication; to be human is to communicate. An impact of being made in the image of God on humans is that they must be communicating. Yet, God's spoken words not only create life, but God's words spoken in judgment against those who oppose His law, His nature, and His created order bring destruction.

Scripture clarifies that "life and death are in the tongue" (Proverbs 18:21). It demonstrates that spoken words are necessary for reconciliation with God (Romans 10:9-11). One must "confess with [the] mouth" if a person will be a benefactor of the substitutionary atonement and justification given by Christ (Romans 10:9). Those who have received the gift of salvation then are to proclaim the gospel through spoken means (Matthew 28:19-20).

"Scripture explains that the tongue is like a fire and cannot be tamed (James 3:5-6)."

Further, God makes clear in Scripture that those who speak foolish or destructive words will be held accountable for those words (Ephesians 4:29). Scripture explains that the tongue is like a fire and cannot be tamed (James 3:5-6). Therefore, one must use their words graciously (1 Thessalonians 5:11). God speaks in the form of decrees and personal address, through His prophets and

apostles, and most importantly, through His Son and His Spirit, to encourage, correct, rebuke, and to bring about edification (Hebrews 1:1-2; 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

The shared attribute of people being communicative beings, like the God of Scripture, holds particular importance to Christian Theology. It is through the spoken word most directly that Christians are called to proclaim the name of Christ (Mark 16:15; Acts 10:42). Without spoken words, others will not hear the gospel (Romans 10:14). So, one might ask, how does being made in the image of God impact one's understanding of spoken communication?

Being made in the image of God indicates multiple things about the impact of spoken words. While believers are told to be “quick to listen and slow to speak” (James 1:19), this does not mean that Christians should not speak at all. Further, great thought should be put into spoken words, whether in a public speech or a dialogue. Since humans are made in the image of God, understanding the weight of God’s spoken words and the implications of God’s spoken words should cause Christians to reflect on how being an image bearer impacts spoken human communication. There are, in the Christian Worldview, no neutral words. Thus, what being an image bearer means regarding spoken communication is paramount for Christians. Using Scripture as the guide, this article will briefly survey what being made in the image of God means about the power of words for image bearers.

Words Are Powerful

God’s words are powerful. God spoke, and the world was created. In Matthew, Christ speaks and the seas and wind obey. Upon seeing this, the disciples “marveled, saying, ‘What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?’” (Matthew 8:27). Like their Creator, the words of humans are pow-

erful too.

It is essential to realize that Christ was not merely a man, but the God-Man (Colossians 2:9-10). Yet, as image bearers, while one will not command the wind and seas literally, words can calm the storms in the lives of others. As the author of Proverbs notes, *"A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver"* (Proverbs 25:11). Like the Creator, there is an element of words spoken by humans that can shape reality.

Given the powerful nature of spoken words, image bearers must seek to reflect the creator by rightly applying words. This will help shape how others perceive and interact with the world. By harnessing the power of spoken words to encourage others to good and righteous living, one demonstrates the power of words for God's glory. A parent who praises a child for doing what is right, or a friend who speaks to correct another believer uses powerful tools to reflect the creator properly. Part of recognizing how the image of God impacts a person's spoken words is to recognize the power of the tongue.

Words Are Eternal

God's words are eternal. Jesus explains, *"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away"* (Matthew 24:35). God's words are not only eternal, but they have eternal significance. While human words will fade from memory and dissolve into the ether, there is likewise an eternal element to human words; this is shared with the creator. Human words, too, echo into eternity.

Scripture spends a great deal of time emphasizing that individuals are held accountable for the words that they speak (Matthew 12:36). *"The tongue is of great concern to James, being mentioned in every chapter of his letter."* Scripture likewise demonstrates the implications of poor words noting that there is

destruction and judgment brought upon those who do not use their words rightly (Proverbs 15:4; Matthew 12:37; James 3:6). Further, one must confess Christ before men (Matthew 10:32); this almost always means speaking.

There is also a significant eternal impact or a timeless quality to the words that a person does not say. Failure to speak the gospel impacts the eternal destination of individuals. Just as the creator is intentional with his words, human words are not to be spewed out wherever or whenever, only to reach the ceiling and fall to the floor; instead, they resonate into timeless existence. Because this is true, one must be extremely careful with what they say and what they don't say.

Words Change Things

“So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11). In the Gospels, Jesus uses His words to drive out demons (Matthew 8:16). As previously noted, He spoke and the storm stopped. As a result of the words of Christ, the Roman soldiers on the night before the crucifixion fall to the ground (John 18:6). Jesus' words anger those who oppose Him (Luke 4:28). Paul's words enrage the crowds (Acts 13:45). But likewise, spoken words become the very means through which one's heart of stone is changed to a heart of flesh (Acts 2:41).

If words did not change things, then preachers would not preach. And if preachers did not preach, people would not know the message of salvation. God has entrusted His creation with the ability to use their spoken words to make eternal changes. This similarity is not to be taken lightly. Therefore, when Christians speak, they cannot forget that words truly change things in this timebound world and in eternity.

Words are Assets

Often, individuals fail to recognize that spoken words are an asset to the Christian faith. By that, the testimony of witnesses becomes how one is freed (Deuteronomy 17:6). Further, words are how the Kingdom expands (Acts 4:31). God's words were an asset to His people as the Psalmist would note: *"How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth"* (Psalm 119:103). Likewise, Jesus would state that God's Word was the truth and thereby possesses the ability to make men free (John 17:17, 8:32). Like the Creator's words, in the mouth of one who is wise, words have the power to change eternal destinies and to empower kingdom laborers to the service of their king.

"God was communicating before creation."

Words are not to be taken casually, as they are resources for much good. Just as believers should hunger for God's Word because it sustains them, God has allowed humans to accomplish much with well-spoken words. *"Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel"* (Proverbs 27:9). As Ronald Adler notes, "personal communication is essential to our well-being." Because *"[g]racious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body"* (Proverbs 16:24), believers follow the example of the Lord and use their words to benefit others and see words as a means of expanding the kingdom.

Words Connect Us with God

God was communicating before creation. When Jesus says, *"Now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world*

existed" (John 17:5), the implications are that within the Triune God, before creation, God was in a relationship as three Persons in the One being. While Scripture does not state specifically that three Persons of God were speaking to each other before creation, there was community, and community is only possible through the exchanging of symbols, and that is communication.

God spoke to Adam shortly after creation (Genesis 2:16). He gave Adam the ability to name animals (Genesis 2:19-20). God gave man the ability to connect with Him through spoken words (Genesis 4:26). Whether it is words sung, written, or spoken, the power of oral communication demonstrates man's likeness to God and allows humans to connect with Him. Further, it enables humans with the ability to direct others to connect with Him.

Conclusion

In this digital age, some might wonder why it is so important to think about spoken words. Spoken words become the very root through which people have the most meaningful encounters. That is not to say that digital or mediated communication is not a powerful tool. Still, the beauty of an interpersonal dialogue with a dear friend—whether it is consultation after grieving the death of a loved one, or congratulations after receiving a promotion or accomplishing something—spoken words cannot be removed from human existence.

Spoken words cannot be discounted because they point people back to the Creator. He is a God who speaks. As Francis Schaeffer stated, He is a God who is not silent. Therefore, if one does not speak in praise of God, or speak as a means to share with others who Jesus is, they fail to live out who God meant them to be as image bearers. The God of the Christian faith uses the power of words; He allows people to connect with Him through spoken word. He sees words as assets. It is words that have eternal significance and that change men's

hearts. Therefore, one must be careful with the words one uses, because they are often the means through which others will comprehend and understand the one whose image humans bear.

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Sufficient Grace

By Scott Hurst

What does God accomplish by His grace? Grace is a high-traffic word among Christians, commonly defined as His unmerited favor towards sinners. In the New Testament, however, grace doesn't seem as narrowly defined. God's grace speaks of His loving disposition towards us in Christ, and also of His power at work in us. He saves us by His grace, transforms us by His grace, unites us to Christ by His grace, gives the Holy Spirit as our Helper by His grace, and brings us to glory by His grace.

So, what does God accomplish by His grace? All of salvation. The sufficiency of His grace means that He will accomplish all He promises to



accomplish.

In this article, I want to explore the sufficiency of God's grace by examining a short passage from Paul's letter to Titus. In Titus 2:11-14 Paul says:

"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works."

In this passage, we see that God's grace is sufficient to save, to transform, and to guarantee the hope of glory.

God Saves by Grace

Someone once illustrated salvation to me as "God getting us on the court

and passing us the ball. It's on us to put it in the net." In this example, God gets us in the game, but we need to finish the job. The grace of God toward us in Jesus Christ starts but cannot finish the work.

When Paul says, "all people", he means *all people*.

Paul, however, describes it very differently. *"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people"* (Titus

2:11). God's grace is *entirely* sufficient to bring salvation to all people. When Paul says, "all people", he means *all people*. Anyone who comes to a saving knowledge of God, anyone who receives the forgiveness of sin, anyone who is counted righteous in Christ, is saved because the grace of God has appeared.

God's power to save is the power of His grace.

God accomplishes everything necessary for salvation by grace. In Romans 3:24, Paul says we "*are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*" To be justified is to be counted righteous before God. It is God's declaration of innocence because Christ has borne our sin and imputed to us His perfect righteousness. This is a gift of grace.

The second verse of the Hymn, *Grace Greater than Our Sin*, beautifully captures the sufficiency of God's grace to save:

"Sin and despair, like sea waves cold,
Threaten the soul with infinite loss;
Grace that is great - yes grace untold -
Points to the Refuge, the mighty Cross."

Sin and despair are no match for the grace of God. When God's grace appears, salvation comes. Our hope as Christians rests on the sufficiency of God's grace for salvation.

Since He can save completely by grace, then we have true rest when we rest in Christ. Grace doesn't make salvation possible; it makes it certain:

"I need no other argument,
I need no other plea,
It is enough that Jesus died,
And that He died for me" (My Faith Has Found a Resting Place).

God's Grace Transforms

What is a Christian? The New Testament says a Christian is someone who is in Christ (Romans 8:1 and Colossians 3:1-4). I love the image of being *in Christ*. It's an image that confronts our very human tendency to see the day-to-day ele-

ments of Christianity as our way of paying God back for forgiving us or maintaining our spot in His kingdom. It confronts our tendency to see justification as a gift from God, but sanctification as our work to keep the gift. Paul confronts this mistake in Titus 2:11-14.

Paul tells Titus the grace that brings salvation trains *“us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age”* (Titus 2:12). There is no break in the chain between salvation and transformation. Warren Wiersbe, commenting on this passage, says, “The same grace that redeems us also reforms our lives and makes us godly... We are disciplined by God’s grace, trained to be the kind of people that glorify Him.” Justification and sanctification are not the same. They are different, but they are connected and the link between them is God’s grace.

“Likewise, God trains us to renounce ungodly habits and affections.”

Paul describes the “training” in both a negative and a positive way. God trains us by grace to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions. High-performance athletes cannot eat whatever they want. They have to train themselves to say “no” to certain foods so they can compete at the highest level.

Likewise, God trains us to renounce ungodly habits and affections. He also trains us to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives. He not only trains us to say “no” to sin, but also to say “yes” to godliness. Calvin says, “Accordingly, when we would express the sum of blessedness, we have mentioned the grace of God; for from this fountain every sort of good thing flows unto us.” By grace He transforms us, conforming us into the image of Christ and producing in us the

fruit of the Spirit.

Life transformation is as much a gift of God's grace as the forgiveness of sin. In his benediction, the author of Hebrews prays for his readers. *"Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen"* (Hebrews 13:20-21).

God supplies everything necessary to do that which is pleasing in His sight. He gifts us all we need to live a godly life in Christ. His grace, that is sufficient to save us, is the same grace that is sufficient to train us to please Him in all things.

God's Grace is Sufficient for Hope

Salvation and transformation are born from God's grace, so our hope in Christ is not in vain. God will finish what He started. Paul makes the move to hope in verse 13, *"waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great*

"In two places, very close together, Paul reminds Titus of the sufficiency of God's grace to save and, therefore, the certainty of our hope in God."

God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works" (Titus 2:13-14). This is not waiting on a fool's hope. There is no hint of anxiety in Paul's words, as though a day may come that proves his hope in Christ was nothing more than smoke.

The hope all Christians wait for is certain because God finishes what He starts.

Paul also connects God's grace and our hope in Titus 3:7, *"so that being jus-*

tified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” In two places, very close together, Paul reminds Titus of the sufficiency of God’s grace to save and, therefore, the certainty of our hope in God. As he says in Philippians 1:6, “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”

“To know the God of this grace cannot do anything less than cause us to praise Him.”

What impact might this have on our daily lives? First, it should fill us with wonder and lead us to worship the Lord. John Owen likened the abundance of God’s grace to rivers flowing into oceans. “It is in the nature of this grace to grow and increase unto the end. As rivers, the nearer they come unto the ocean where they tend, the more they increase their waters, and speed their streams; so will grace flow more freely and fully in its near approaches to the ocean of glory.”

God’s grace is certainly not less than the forgiveness of sin, but it is much more. It is the ocean of all of God’s love for us. To know the God of this grace cannot do anything less than cause us to praise Him.

Second, it creates a devotion to good works. This is Paul’s application in Titus 3:8, “*The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works.*” We rest in the sufficiency of God’s grace by carefully devoting ourselves to good works. Not because good works earn God’s favor, but because good works are the fruit of saving faith. The sufficiency of God’s grace leads to a careful devotion to good works and joy-filled praise of God Himself.

The entire Christian life is a gift of God's grace. Paul reminds Titus of this grace that brings salvation, trains us for godliness, and assures us of a glorious hope. Our life in Christ begins by grace, is sustained by grace, and brought to completion by grace. **Praise God for His grace!**

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Understanding *Sola Gratia*

By Justin Huffman



“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8).

Growing up in Memphis, Tennessee, I remember when Danny Thomas, the founder of St. Jude’s Children’s Hospital, died in February of 1991. Local and national cartoonists paid tribute to him in the next day’s newspapers, many of them showing him entering heaven “at the front of the line” and one even depicting him on a slip-and-slide going through the pearly gates. The clear implication was that any man who had done this much good for this many people must be on heaven’s fast-track to eternal happiness.

But Paul here in Ephesians teaches, in accord with all of Scripture, that if we are saved from the eternal judgment we deserve, it will only be because of God's amazing grace. It will not be because we were smarter, or more generous,

"No, God has engineered our salvation intentionally in such a way that there are no grounds for glorying, except in Him."

or better connected, or more spiritually aware than our neighbors. Paul insists that it is only by *grace* we are saved.

During the 16th century Reformation, this doctrinal truth of salvation—*Sola Gratia* ("by grace alone")—became one of the key distinctives of the Reformation in contrast to Roman Catholicism. Let's consider

together what this means and its continuing relevance for us today.

You're Not Good Enough

Despite the very plain New Testament teaching, this declaration flies in the face of our culture's prevailing view of the afterlife. If you were to go door-to-door in almost any neighborhood in West and ask, "Are you going to heaven?" and, as a follow-up, "How do you know?"—the vast majority would respond in the affirmative and would insist that it is because "I'm a pretty good person."

But that is not the message of the gospel. The message of the gospel is not that those who are good enough are saved, but that Jesus Christ was good enough on our behalf in order to save us. Heaven will not be like the Pharisee in Luke 18:11, who thanked God that he was "not like other men." Heaven will be spent thanking God that Jesus Christ was not like other men!

If you are trusting in your kindness or generosity to get you to heaven, you are trusting in the wrong thing. You can't lend enough tools, shovel enough driveways, bake enough cookies, or pick up enough hitchhikers to earn God's

favor. Only the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, taking your place and paying for your sins, can possibly save you from the real and just judgment of a holy God.

The ancient builders of the Tower of Babel, which God condemned to failure, said to themselves, *“Let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens”* (Genesis 11:4). And any suggestion that we can earn salvation by works is like trying again to build the same tower, this time using beliefs for bricks and morality for mortar.

No, God has engineered our salvation intentionally in such a way that there are no grounds for glorying, except in Him. This salvation is *“not a result of works, so that no one may boast”* (Ephesians 2:9). So, the skyscraper of salvation is emphatically *not* the rebuilding of Babel’s tower. In this building, which *does* successfully reach to heaven, there is no basis for bragging, no vacancy for vanity, no place for pride.

Your Good Works Aren’t Good Enough

The shocking reality of our can-do culture is that works—even good ones—which are performed without genuine faith, are themselves just so much more sin, *“for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin”* (Romans 14:23). We are purposefully shut out of any plan for self-salvation, and shut up to the grace of God.

In the opening verses of the second chapter of Ephesians, Paul describes us by nature as *“the walking dead.”* We are—outside of Christ’s work in our heart— *“dead in the trespasses and sins”* (1). And what does this spiritual death look like? It looks like *“following the course of this world”* (2).

This is crucial for us to understand! Sin is not against people, but God. In fact, *people* may not be offended at all! Sin is described in Scripture not only as

murdering, thieving, and committing other anti-social sins, but also as following the course of what other people will like. It is pleasing to people, and that is the problem! Liam Goligher observes:

“The Nazi who marched people into the death camp could go home to play with his children...What does it mean to say that no one has done good? We all know people that we would describe as good. The issue is: who are we comparing them with? The standard of goodness is God.”

Jesus, in condemning the Pharisees, charged them in this way: *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness”* (Matthew 23:27-28).

Don’t miss the surface-penetrating, heart-revealing nature of what Jesus is teaching here. The Pharisees were extremely religious people, and they appeared beautiful and righteous to others. But in the eyes of God—who is looking for *“truth in the inward being”*, and to whom any action without true faith is sin—these same religious leaders were seen as dead, hypocritical, and filled with lawlessness.

The reason we fool ourselves into thinking our good works can save us is that we have a small view of God’s holiness and a small view of our own sinfulness. In reality, there is no real goodness that does not come from Christ. That is why Paul would insist on the necessity of Christ: *“Let it be known to you therefore...that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses”* (Acts 13:38-39).

Grace is Good Enough

We so easily water down the idea of biblical grace to be little more than someone doing a favor for another. Others go farther, describing grace at least as “unmerited favor”. But it is really more than that—it is *demerited*, love! In other words, we were not only undeserving of God’s goodness, we actually deserved its opposite—the eternal wrath of God’s holiness.

We were God’s enemies, not just undeserving; and His love did not just require “a favor”, it required His Son. So that we might better define biblical grace, in relation to salvation, as “overcoming opposition with overwhelming love”.

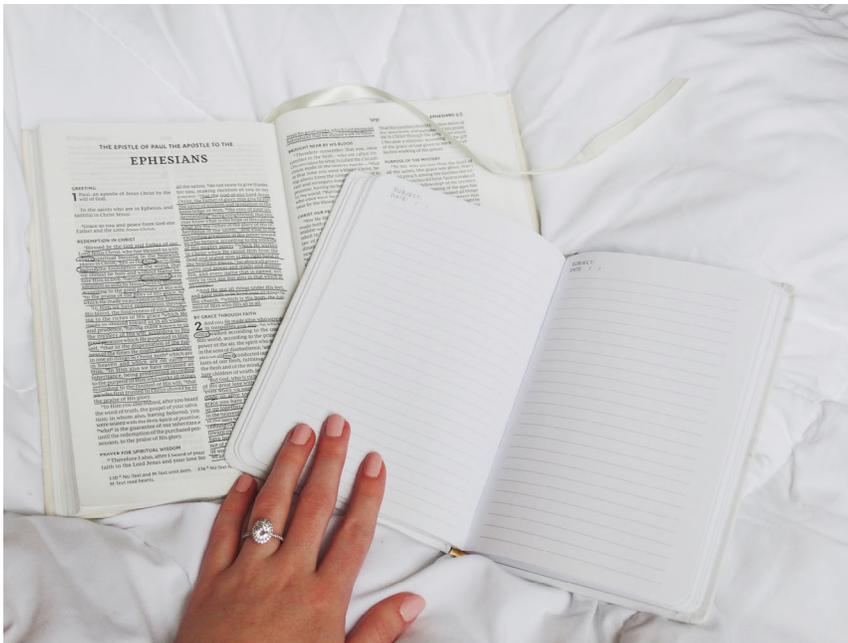
There are many pictures of this grace elsewhere in Scripture, but no true parallels. The king holding out his scepter to Esther was an unmerited favor, but it was still his wife. David’s protection of Mephibosheth was unmerited favor, but it was still the son of a friend. David’s weeping over Absalom was unmerited favor, but it was still his flesh and blood. Barnabas reaching out to Saul of Tarsus was unmerited favor, but it was still a repentant man. Peter preaching the gospel to Cornelius was unmerited favor, but it was still a receptive hearer. And Stephen praying for those that stoned him was unmerited favor, but it was still an ineffective witness.

Only God’s saving grace through Jesus Christ is overcoming opposition with overwhelming love. Only God’s grace is truly irresistible grace, out of demerited love. This is why divine salvation must be *Sola Gratia*, by grace alone.

To tell someone to “accept” this kind of grace is like saying receive this tidal wave as you stand on the shore—you have no control over the matter. And to take any credit for being the recipient is to pretend to have stirred up the storm.

Sola Gratia in Scripture

By Dawn Hill



“In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our transgressions, according to the riches of His grace...for by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not of yourselves, it is the

gift of God; not of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 1:7, 2:8-9).

The grace of God is a rich and beautiful gift that Scripture reminds us of continually. It is vital that we understand the salvation we receive by merit not our own, because it is this very grace from God that distinguishes it as the true gospel of Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, we are reminded that it is God

who seeks us, and it is Christ Jesus who died for our sins, affirming that it is by His mercy and grace we are saved. Romans 3:10-11 tells us the condition of all mankind apart from Christ, *"None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God."* There are many who may believe they are deserving of grace because of their perceived measure of personal goodness. But Scripture reminds us that we are not good, and our righteousness is like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6).

If we continue along the Romans road, we find that all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and for those who are in Christ Jesus, we are justified by His grace as a gift, through His redemption and propitiation by His blood. This is received by faith (Romans 3:23-24). *"We know that the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Romans 6:23). The wonderful gift of eternal life is only attainable by the grace of God. As born-again believers, the things we are able to do for the glory of God are only by the grace of God (Romans 15:15-16).

Romans 5:8 assures us that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. For those in Christ, He has justified us with His blood, and we have been saved from the wrath of God (Romans 5:9). There is nothing we did that made us worthy enough or desirable enough for Christ to come and die for us. I don't

know about you, but I cannot fully comprehend the depth of God's love, mercy, and grace towards me; but I believe that He died for my sins. I deserved judgment for my sin and rebellion against God, but He has made a way of reconciliation, and it is by grace through faith in Christ alone.

"This should bring great peace and joy to our hearts and our souls."

This should bring great peace and joy to our hearts and our souls. The God

of heaven and earth sent His Son to die for us, and being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (Ephesians 2:4-5). By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Paul reminds us that it is by grace we are saved. The Christian life is encompassed in the grace of God. God's grace is unmerited favor. Christ Jesus died in our place. Paul reminds those in Christ that God has set apart a remnant of Israel, chosen by grace. This grace is not dependent upon the works of man. Otherwise, it would not be grace (Romans 11:5-6).

We can see the grace of God in our coming before His throne of grace in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16). Thank the good Lord, our great High Priest, has provided a way for us to do so. It is at His throne we receive mercy and find grace, which is freely given because of Christ Jesus. We are encouraged, in the book of James, that God gives us more grace in our humility before Him. It is this grace that helps us to resist the devil. Second Peter 3:18 instructs believers to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. This is how we keep from falling into error and being led astray. As we can see, the grace of God is integral and essential in the life of a born-again believer.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is not something we "graduate" from in our lives. It is not a building block or a steppingstone. It is the foundation upon which our salvation rests, and to reject His grace for our atonement of sin is to reject Him altogether.

Galatians 1:6 brings a sobering message of not forsaking the grace of Christ for another gospel. When God's grace is traded for personal works and merit, another gospel is believed, and it is a gospel that cannot save. There is only one work which saves us, and that is the finished work of Christ on the cross. This very grace, gifted to us by God, is what gives us faith to believe in God and His salvation. It is this very grace that chose us before the foundation of the

world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him (Ephesians 1:4). Paul reminds Timothy of God's salvation and holy calling, which is solely based on His purpose and grace and not on our own works (2 Timothy 1:9). What glorious news this is for those who are in Christ Jesus!

The message of God's grace is not reserved to the New Testament. His glorious gospel and His grace are seen all throughout Scripture. We can see God's grace extended to Adam and Eve after their rebellion against God. We can see God's grace on display in saving Noah and his family from the flood. We can see the grace of God upon the life of David as he defeated Goliath, and we can see God's mercy and grace when David sinned against God. We see God's grace in Israel's continual sin and spiritual adultery against God.

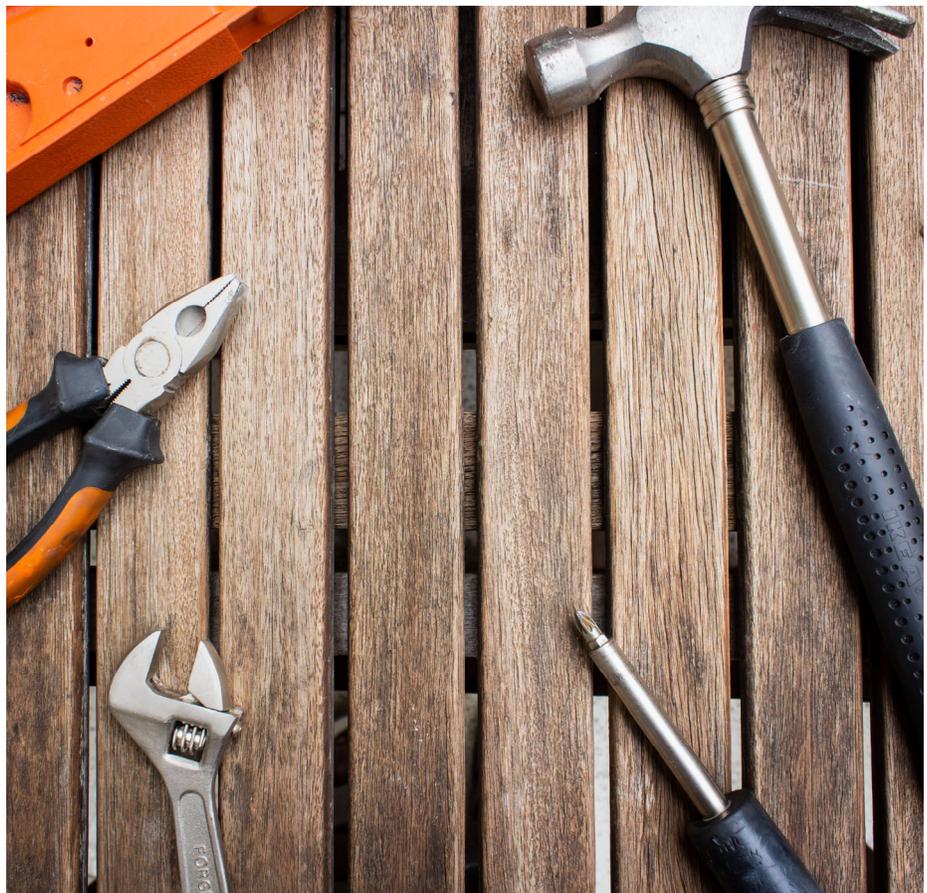
Time and again, it is the grace of God on display in the confines of His Word, testifying of Christ and His eternal promises and salvation. I encourage you to read the Word and to see God's grace at work from Genesis to Revelation. The Bible is centered upon Jesus Christ, and the gospel of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone is abundantly evident in both the Old and New Testament. Thank God for His grace. We need it daily, and because of God the Father's mercy, God the Son's atonement, and the Holy Spirit's empowerment, we have His grace freely given to us.

Grace, Not Works

By Kelly Benware

If you woke up this morning and learned that it is not God's will any should perish, would you not feel elated inside?

Jubilated, hopeful, surprised may be a better description of your internal emotions. But one may also feel reasonably hesitant. What would God require of you in order to not deserve death? Will the works pile up like your laundry in the living room? And God...who is this God that



does not desire to see anyone apart from Him?

The God of the Bible has always existed. He has no beginning or end. He created the universe and you, the little speck on earth. You, however, were made with a soul and value unspeakable, in the eyes of God. Just being made in His image gives you meaning. God desires that each of His human creations would live in eternity with Him. In fact, 2 Peter 3:9 says, *"The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."*

This is joyous; God wants you! But what does He ask of you? Romans 10:9 tells us, *"...because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."* You heard that right! Confess and believe in your heart in the God of the Bible. Works do *not* save you; Jesus saves you. His death on the cross is the payment for all your sins, past, present, and future. Being with God is that simple!

In Oxford Languages, the definition of repentance is, "the action of repenting; sincere regret or remorse." We see in 2 Peter 3:9 that God wants all to repent. Once we believe in our heart that He is Lord (notice the word *heart*, not mind), our heart will be remorseful for our wrongs that Jesus paid for with His own death. That regret and new heart will motivate change if our belief in Jesus is sincere.

Let us rewind that old VHS tape and replay the attitude and/or response we had when our parents asked us to do laundry—likely grumbling or maybe even outright defiance in saying, "No." Most individuals would look back on that scene with shame or embarrassment, from a poor attitude or response. The hope is the regret would spur on change in character. Galatians 5:22-23 reminds us, *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, faith-*

fulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law."

When we have a new heart in Jesus and our heart desires to do right, and thus change happens. We see growth and character development. We begin to respond to people and situations with grace, as grace was shown to us. John says it well, *"We love because he first loved us"* (1 John 4:19, ESV). Love will bring out those fruits of the Spirit that we see in the day-to-day change. It is not work, rather love and fruit that grow out of a new heart.

Humans will be daily reminded that though they have a new heart, they are natural sinners: *"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Romans 3:23, ESV). So, while character develops, there will be moments when poor decisions (or poor attitudes) are made. Christians will sadly misrepresent Christ at times. Believers must continuously tend to their fruit, and remain in the Word of God, growing and pruning. A farmer who leaves his fruit trees uncared for will have no fruit; eventually his fruit tree will die. A marriage lacking effort and investment will fail abysmally. A child who does not go to school to learn will be weak in knowledge and understanding, may develop poor habits, and will be limited in his/her growth, likely struggling his/her entire life.

"The good news is that God desires a relationship with you."

There is no list of works to check off to know God. But the effort is seen in developing a relationship with Christ, choosing to make good choices, tending to your new heart and righting wrongs when needed. The farmer's passion for his trees will spur on care, the husband's love for his wife will spur on nurturing of their relationship, a child's desire to learn will push him or her to put effort into

school, a Christ follower's love for Christ will spur on the fruits of the Spirit and growth in the Savior.

The good news is that God desires a relationship with you. He does not want any to perish. And His son, Jesus, already paid the price for your sins by dying on the cross. No works are required, rather grace is extended. Should you choose to follow Jesus, He will give you a new heart and that will spur on new life in Him. He replaces the old with new, the bad with good and gives grace rather than requiring works. This is a reason to celebrate!

What's So Amazing About Grace?

By William Farley

Imagine coming across a centuries-old abandoned set of ruins in the jungle and not asking why someone **built them**. We wouldn't do this because humans do everything with purpose, and so does God. In fact, we ask about purposes because God is purposeful, and He made us in His image.

With that in mind, have you ever wondered why God created the universe? What motivated Him? Does God act with some ultimate purpose in mind? My Catholic grade school nuns told us that God created people because He was lonely. But that can't possibly be true. God lacks



nothing, and that includes fellowship. He has eternally existed as a Trinity of fellowship.

Edwards to the Rescue

Maybe you have never asked this question. That was me until fifteen years after my conversion, when I purchased *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*. Perusing through the table of contents I came across this title, *A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*. That's an interesting title, I thought. Why did God create the world? I had never seriously asked that question. So having read nothing of Edwards before, I decided to start there. Edwards' *Dissertation* blew up my worldview. He replaced my man-centered thinking with a God-centered view of all reality that was intensely satisfying.

“Paul seems to assume that praising God for the display and exercise of His grace is the great reason for Creation and redemption.”

What was Edwards' conclusion? Joy, not need, motivated God to both create and redeem. God does everything to display and exercise His glory. God's glory is a catch-all term for the sum of His attributes. When we think of God's attributes, qualities like love, mercy, justice, and holiness come to mind. Edwards would say “yes” to all of these, but there was one attribute that he felt was the pinnacle, the most important, and you will probably find it surprising. It was grace! Paul seems to assume that praising God for the display and exercise of His grace is the great reason for Creation and redemption.

Grace! Really? What about love? Love is important. It motivated God to be gracious, but glorifying His grace seems to be God's ultimate energizing purpose.

"[God] chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved" (Ephesians 1:4–6).

Paul answers our question this way. God does everything to maximize our joy, and His, by praising Him for His glorious grace. In the first two chapters of Ephesians, Paul mentions grace six times. It is a major theme.

"This is what God created you and me to praise Him for..."

Dr. Tom Schreiner of Southern Seminary writes: "God's supreme aim is to display for the coming ages the *stunning* nature of his grace." (i)

And John Piper, a student of Edwards, adds: "The ultimate goal of God in initiating the entire plan of salvation before

creation was that he would be praised for the glory of his grace." (ii)

To appreciate this, we need to make a careful definition of divine grace and how it depends upon God's sovereignty. Unless we get these two ideas right, God's purpose for Creation and redemption will be diminished. He will not get the praise He deserves.

Grace Defined

The street-level definition of grace is kindness. For example, we might say, "Aunt Kathy is a gracious lady"; what we really mean she is kind, has manners, builds others up with her speech, and makes them feel important.

God's grace includes those qualities, but if that's all it is, it isn't divine grace, expressing God's holiness. It's just human grace. Attempting to clarify this definition, some have defined grace with the acronym G.R.A.C.E— "God's riches at Christ's expense. But that doesn't go far enough either."

It only becomes divine grace when we add these eleven words to the end. "Grace is God's riches at Christ's expense, lavished on His mortal enemies who deserve nothing but eternal damnation." The last eleven words in italics are the point of the spear. Without them, grace is not divine. God lavishes grace on His enemies. "It is legitimate," writes theologian, John Frame, "therefore...to define God's grace...as his 'sovereign, unmerited favor, given to those who deserve his wrath.'" (iii)

This is what God created you and me to praise Him for, and unless you feel your profound unworthiness, the fact that you were God's enemy, it will never be "amazing". We will spend an inexpressibly joyful eternity praising God for the glory of divine grace. The above definition implies that we can't understand grace without a thorough understanding of sin.

Sin

I recently attended a funeral for a relative at a liberal Methodist congregation. At one point, the female pastor boasted, "We don't talk much about sin here. We don't like to be negative. We just focus our attention on grace." Unbeknownst to her, this statement contained an oxymoron. We can't understand or praise God for His grace by ignoring sin. We need to emphasize sin. Without a robust understanding of sin, grace is not divine. It is merely Aunt Kathy's kindness. Here is how God sees us before redemption:

“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one” (Romans 3:10–12).

What is our unredeemed condition? We are unrighteous, lacking spiritual understanding, not seeking God, and “worthless”. How does God respond? He is angry. He doesn’t like us. Unredeemed, we are servants of Satan led about by various idols. We are “by nature children of wrath”.

“You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” (Ephesians 2:1–3).

In other words, God loves his enemies. In fact, Jesus died to turn His enemies into friends. Thank God He did, because if you are a Christian that was you. If you are not a Christian that is your condition right now.

In addition, Paul instructs the Ephesians that they were *“dead in the trespasses and sins in which they once walked.”* “Dead” means no ability or desire to turn to God. You must be spiritually alive to do that. But spiritually—prior to conversion—we are all dead.

You didn’t respond to the gospel because God threw you a life jacket. No! He sent a deep-sea diver to resuscitate a corpse on the ocean floor. *“Salvation belongs to our God!”* (Revelation 7:10). You did not save yourself. God saved you. He saves dead people, alienated from Him, at war with Him, to display the astounding nature of His marvelous grace.

Sovereignty

This brings us to God’s sovereignty. If we are dead in sin, then it must be true that we didn’t initiate our salvation. God did. He must resurrect a

dead person, before they can exercise faith and repentance. That is why the Bible is clear that God chose us in Christ before we had done anything good or bad.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9).

Some He chooses for salvation, and some He passes over. This is not unfair. All God owes us is justice. Those He passes over merely get what they (and we) deserve, but to some of the undeserving God shows astounding, earth-shaking grace purchased at infinite cost to Himself. Jesus went to the Cross and took the judgment His enemies deserve so that His enemies, those for whom He felt intense wrath, could enjoy the reward He deserves.

It's important to remember that God did not choose us because He foresaw that we would choose Him. No, we were “dead”. We wanted *nothing* to do with Him.

Application

How should this affect Christians? First, the reality of God's grace should deeply humble us. It should cause us to go low in humility. We all have friends who don't believe. Do we believe because we are better than they? No! We were dead. Did God choose us because we were more righteous than others? No! Therefore, we have absolutely nothing to boast about except God's amazing grace, motivated by God's astounding love. We are profoundly humbled. We don't look down on unbelievers. We look up to God.

Second, the reality of God's grace should motivate us to praise God for His infinite goodness. Everything in this article implies that this will be our employment for eternity—resounding, joyful, exuberant praise to God for His amazing grace.

Third, the reality of God's grace should make us rest. Grace enables us to "lie down in green pastures" (Psalm 23). Here is the reason for our rest. If Jesus died for you when He didn't like you, what will He do for you now that you are His friend? That's the question asked by Romans 5:10. If He died for enemies without any saving virtue, certainly He won't reject you because you are now imperfect and fallible.

Fourth, the reality of God's grace should motivate us to show that same grace to others. Be gracious as God is gracious. How can we accept this kind of unearnable, undeserved grace from God and then refuse to extend it to our spouse, children, and extended family? How can we refuse to love and forgive those that hurt or grieve us? You can't if you really understand divine grace.

Lastly, the grace of God should motivate you to exercise the love of God. Remember what Jesus said about the sinful woman in Luke chapter seven, "she that has been forgiven much, loves much." You and I have been forgiven much; do we love God much in return?

So, in conclusion, are you walking out the reason for your creation? Are you praising God for His "glorious grace?" That is the most important reason God created you. That is the reason for your existence, and you and I will only praise God this way to the degree that we understand what we deserve, how helpless we are, and how gloriously wonderful is God's Amazing Grace!

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The Grace of God, Lawless Living, and Biblical Sanctification

By Dave Jenkins



At the heart of current cultural discussions on morality and sexuality is the idea that one

can live however he/she wants. Whether from having sex outside of marriage, having multiple partners/spouses, attempting to “marry” the same-sex, divorce for any reason, or attempting to change gender, we see these viewpoints become more and more popular, even in the church. The whole idea of living however we want is not new, but rather has been around since the Fall.

When Christians speak out against such ideas, they invite ridicule and the accusation of hypocrisy and bigotry. Christians should not be afraid of such criticism, but continue to stand fast on the holiness of God revealed in the His Word (1 Peter 1:13–15). Believers are called out of worldliness to a new life in Christ—to be new creations who shine His light to a perishing world (Matthew 5:10–12; 2 Corinthians 5:17–21).

At the heart of the argument against “living however we want” is the Lord’s call on our lives; it is He who is the Creator, and we are His creation (Psalms 24, 145). People respond to such an argument with, “You can’t judge me for how I live!” Even so, the Lord will judge men because He is the rightful ruler over creation. He who creates has the right to define the terms for how we live (Revelation 1:4).

For example, even in the Christian Church, if a pastor preaches on the holiness of God, or on what God requires of man in light of Christ’s finished and sufficient work, he will get accused of legalism. During World War II, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a pastor who ministered in the underground Church in the midst of Nazi Germany, wrote the (now classic) book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer argued for the concept of costly grace versus cheap grace. Costly grace was what Jesus did on the cross. Cheap grace is living however we want because of the costly grace of God in Christ. I fear that some people think they need to out-nuance the Bible in order to avoid the accusation of legalism, but by doing so they end up compromising the truth of God’s Word. One example we have in Scripture is where Paul—after explaining when man is left to his own devices will naturally love more of his sin and not God—in Romans 1–3 shows how man can be declared not guilty through Jesus in chapters 4–5.

Romans chapter 6 opens this way after explaining how we can be declared not guilty with the question in verse one, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” Such a question is an im-

portant one and gets to the heart of our discussion in this chapter.

God's grace has made us new creations in Him (2 Corinthians 5:17–21). Christians are not to live however we want, which is Paul's point in Romans 6:1. Instead, we have a new master in Jesus. We were once dead in our trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1–5); we were once held captive to the prince of the "power of the air" (Ephesians 2:2). Now, Christ has transferred us to His kingdom at the moment of our salvation, and declared us children of God, bought by grace alone (Colossians 1:13). In light of the grace of God that we've received, we are to live a new way because we belong to the King, who tells us to put off the old way and walk in the newness of new life in Him (Colossians 3:1–18). Christians are not to walk in the oldness of life, but walk in a manner worthy of the calling they've received (Ephesians 4:1).

When Jesus taught about counting the cost, He had in mind the way the disciples would live (Luke 9:23). Jesus is the rightful ruler and covenant Lord (Revelation 1:4). In the ministry of Jesus, we see Him giving many hard words, such as *counting the cost* and following Him in all of life (Luke 9:23–27). When Jesus spoke hard words, people abandoned Him, despite the fact that it is He alone who can offer eternal life (John 6:60, 66).

Christians are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone (Ephesians 2:8–9). It is because of what Christ has done that we do not live how we want, nor by our own rules, but by the revealed Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16–17). The Creator has the right to dictate to His creation the terms of eternal life, so living however we want as the people of God cheapens the costly grace of God in Christ alone.

Some Christians think all they have to do is "repent and confess" and all will be well, but the mark of true and genuine repentance is not only sorrow but *turning away* from sin and returning to the Lord with all your heart (Joel 2:12; Ezekiel 14:6; Acts 26:20). In 1 John 1:6, the apostle says, "If we say we

have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.” What John has in mind here are those who say they can live however they want because they belong to the Lord, but these people aren’t “practicing the truth”. In the previous verse (1 John 1:5), John says, *“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.”*

John contrasts those who walk in the light with those who don’t, and yet claim to be children of light. With this comparison, he says in verse 8: *“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”* Then John tells us in verse 9 that we are to confess our sin, which acknowledges our wrongdoing before the holiness of the Lord. Only then will the Lord *“cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*

Christians do not cohabit before marriage, nor support/practice the homosexual lifestyle, nor participate in polygamy, pornography, adultery, pros-

titution, pedophilia, or bestiality because the Lord created the institution of marriage between one man and one woman only (Genesis 2:20–24). Through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, Christians put off the lust of the flesh, the eyes, and the pride of life by putting on Christ (Colossians 3:1–18; 1 John 2:16). As a result of being transferred from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of the Lord Jesus (Colossians 1:15), Christians have a new desire for righteousness, and therefore renounce ungodliness and worldly passions while they await the imminent return of the Lord Jesus (Titus 2:12–14). Therefore, we live as God requires us—in obedience to the Lord because of the grace we’ve received from Jesus—and increasingly display the

“The true Christian goes back to his/her identity in Christ because that is where he/she finds genuine assurance and confidence before God.”

fruits of the Spirit in our lives (John 15:9–11; Galatians 5:21–23).

Living however one wants cheapens the costly grace of God in Christ. Paul's response to this, as described in Romans 8, is that we are to live by the Spirit (Romans 8:5, 13). Paul's point is that if we desire to live a holy life—a life that pleases and honors God—we will live under the power of the Holy Spirit. This life, however, is possible only because of Christ and the present work of the Holy Spirit.

What should you do in light of the biblical teaching we've examined? Understand that you've been saved for a purpose. That purpose isn't just for you, it's for God's glory. The life you've been called to as a Christian is one of *sacrifice*. When the first followers of Jesus heard Him say that they were to count the cost and follow Him, many people left His side forever (John 6:60, 66). Those who are Christ's will obey Him (John 14:15). Those who refuse to obey Him give evidence that they are not His (Matthew 7:20–21). While all our obedience to God is only partial in scope, any obedience is better than none. As Christians, we should see evidence year by year—regardless of how little—that we are growing in grace (2 Peter 3:18).

If there's no evidence at all in your life that you are being conformed into the image of Christ, you have great reason to be concerned and should examine your salvation (2 Corinthians 13:5). If there is even the tiniest bit of evidence that you're changing and conforming to the image of Christ, then give glory to God. Such evidence is a means by which God is encouraging you in your faith (2 Peter 1:3–10).

The true Christian goes back to his/her identity in Christ because that is where he/she finds genuine assurance and confidence before God. The fruit of our lives will testify whether our profession is true. This is why our profession of faith must be matched by His possession of our lives. These two things—profession and possession—work together to give Christians assurance and increasing confidence in Christ. If you lack confidence before God, examine

your life in light of Christ. See where you're lacking, then repent and return to your first love—Jesus Christ. He is ready and waiting for you. His throne of grace bids you come to Him. Your Intercessor and High Priest beckons you to Himself (Hebrews 2:17–28, 4:14–16).

While proclaiming that marriage is between one man and one woman will only come with increasing persecution from a secular society, Christians must speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). We must challenge the worldview of those who reject marriage between one man and one woman, because such a rejection is not merely a rejection of marriage, but an assault on the God of the Bible, from whom this institution came (Genesis 2:20–24). Christians, we must stand firm upon the Scriptures and declare the whole counsel of God (1 Corinthians 15:1–10; 2 Timothy 3:16–17).

On topics related to gender issues and marriage, we need to understand that the truth of the Word of God matters for our faith and practice. Since the Bible is sufficient, reliable, authoritative, and trustworthy, Christians must believe that God created man in His image and likeness (Genesis 1:26–27, 2:20–24). **Ultimately, how we view the first few chapters of the Bible will have dramatic and significant implications for how we view the rest of the Bible.**

Recommended Reading on *Sola Gratia*

In this issue of *Theology for Life Magazine*, we've been considering *Sola Gratia* ("by grace alone"). We understand that we haven't covered everything on this topic, but it is our prayer that readers of this issue will grow in their understanding of it so they can stand fast on the Word of God.

If you've found this issue helpful and would like to study this subject further, please check out the following reading list. These books are at the top of their genre in both excellence and readability.

Introduction to the Five Solas:

- *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace? Rediscovering the Doctrines that Shook the World* by James Montgomery Boice
- *The Case for Traditional Protestantism: The Solas of the Reformation* by Terry L. Johnson
- *After Darkness Light: Distinctives of Reformed Theology* edited by R.C. Sproul Jr.

Sola Gratia:

- *Selected Writings on Grace and Pelagianism* by Augustine
- *The Bondage of the Will* by Martin Luther
- *Chosen by God* by R.C. Sproul
- *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* by John Murray

I hope you'll find these resources helpful as I have.

In Christ Alone,

Dave Jenkins

Executive Editor, *Theology for Life Magazine*

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Kelly Benware earned a BS and MA in Intercultural Studies and spent time working in various Christian organizations and universities. After years in a seemingly woke “Christian” environment, she noticed the diversity conversation changing. The anti-biblical message of the new “social justice” gospel forced Kelly to ask some pertinent questions, as it should do the same for all of us. Her research led to the formation of “Steadfast Truth Ministries”, a 501(c)(3) of which she is both Founder and President.



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