

Mama, What is Grace?

My wife sings choruses to our son when she puts him to sleep. (He asks me to tell him a story about Fireman Sam but for some reason he never asks me to sing!)

One of his favourite songs is the first stanza of Amazing Grace,

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

John has practically learned it by heart, but this week he stopped his mum during the song and asked, 'Mama, what is grace?'

Now that's a good question! Grace is a common word in the Bible, and Christians often include it in their conversation. But what does grace actually mean? The apostle Paul illustrates its meaning in Romans 4:4; for clarity it is worth comparing different translations of this verse:

- Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due (ESV).
- Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt (NKJV).
- Now to him that worketh, the reward is not reckoned according to grace, but according to debt (Douay Rheims).
- A worker's wage is credited not as a gift, but as something due (NAB).

The illustration is clear. The salary that I receive at the end of the month is not given to me as a favour. I have every right to the remuneration for which I had laboured. The employer is indebted to me; he owes me the payment.

Grace is the very opposite to the debt owed to a worker. If I deserve something, it is not grace! Grace is unmerited and unearned. In fact some Bible versions translate 'grace' simply as 'gift', for indeed, grace is a free gift.

The concept of grace is easy enough to understand but it is much more difficult to accept. We readily understand the biblical teaching that God rewards his children on the day of judgement for their good works (albeit he himself helps us to perform them). But we naturally offer resistance to the truth that salvation is by grace, an unmerited favour, a free gift.

We would rather think that salvation was the reward for our good deeds. Maybe that is why the Bible insists on different occasions that since salvation is by grace and not by our works (Ephesians 2:8,9; Romans 11:6, 2 Timothy 1:9).

This truth is received only by a humble heart. When we seek God for salvation, we cannot approach him as if we deserve anything. We should come to him as poor beggars, pleading for his kindness and generosity. We must admit that we are guilty and deserving punishment, imploring only for mercy rather than justice.

But how do you explain these profound truths to a 3-year old boy? I like my wife's explanation.

'John, you know that mama and papa loves you. What do we give you when you're a good boy?'

'A present,' he replied.

'Jesus loves you much more than mama and papa. Jesus gives you a present even though you have not been good. Jesus gives you a gift simply because he loves you. That is grace'

John also liked his mum's explanation, for he told her, 'Sing, mama, sing!'

We too, when we we experience the amazing love of God in Jesus his Son, who saves us freely even though we are undeserving, we too will happily sing to the praise of the glory of his grace. His gift is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord! (Romans 6:23).