

GRACE

Great Good News!

February 2004

And the Word (Jesus) became flesh and dwelt among us,

and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father

FULL OF GRACE and TRUTH... and OF HIS FULLNESS WE HAVE RECEIVED, and GRACE UPON GRACE.

(John 1:14, 16)

I've been thinking a lot about grace lately. *Grace* is such a beautiful and vital word. I have even titled this newsletter GRACE to convey the heart of the great good news of Jesus Christ. Yet, the meaning of *grace* can so elusive. Elusive because we are tempted to take for granted its meaning...lured into accepting its meaning second-hand instead of seeking God to personally reveal the glory of His grace.

I have heard that grace means "God's undeserved favor." And that indeed is true. This is the extent of the Old Testament understanding of grace. But the New Testament revelation of grace is sooooo much more! "*Much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through Jesus Christ*" (Romans 5:17). In this newsletter, I want to share my heart on the much more of grace.

Hebrews 4:16 has been dear to me and Joy this year as we have felt so depleted, "*Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace in time of need.*" I have not needed to go to the throne to receive God's favor to hear "Now, now, Gregg, everything is going to be all right." God's favor is once and for all settled for me. I am totally accepted in Christ, the Beloved Son (Ephesians 1:6), which is exactly why I can **BOLDLY** go to the throne! I already have God's favor, now I need God to reveal the fullness of His grace to me. So, I am now being drawn to the throne to miraculously receive Life for my next step...and the next step...and each step because I can't make another step without a life source other than my own resources. And you know what? Jesus is so faithful! At the throne, I am reminded that He is my Life source! The disciple John wrote, "*And an angel showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb*" (Revelation 22:1). Jesus Himself tells us of this continuous flow of life from Him who is in my heart, "*He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water*" (John 7:38). Wow ☺.

My friend Joye Benfield (*Grace Ministries Hickory*) recently shared with me and others that "full" in this newsletter's key verse (John 1:14, 16, above) does not mean "full to the top" but "full to lavish overflowing." Jesus overwhelmingly overflows His grace (life) and truth (reality), and we have received the fullness of His overflow! Grace is so much more than a concept. A concept doesn't overflow. *Grace is all about the abundant life of Christ made real in our lives.* Grace transforms us to truth, to be real and genuine. Sometimes we try to characterize grace as saving grace, healing grace, irresistible grace, etc. This is appropriate if grace is not divided into different types of grace. Grace is embedded in the life of Christ. I don't think we can divide grace any more than we can divide the Person of Christ.

GRACE IS A PERSON

from an article, "Grace or Jesus?" by Mike Rule, Living Covenant Ministries (www.livingcovenant.com)

Any attribute of God taken out of the context of the Person of Jesus Christ can become our god. Grace is a Person. I often hear more about grace than I ever hear about Jesus. When grace is a person's god, it is evidenced by ungracious attitudes. If you are self-righteous you are offended at un-righteousness. If you are into grace, you are offended at self-righteousness. If you are into Jesus, you love... and are offended at nothing. When you are into Jesus, grace is displayed to all men regardless of their spiritual condition. It is obvious that grace is a god when there is an attitude of being legalistically anti-legalistic, self-righteously anti-self-righteous, judgmentally anti-judgmental. I am called to proclaim what I have seen and what I have heard, but I am ever reminded that if I lose sight of Jesus in the telling, if people do not see the very life of Christ flowing through my words and my life, then I have only become part of the problem. May God have mercy on me according to His abundant provision. If I have not love, I am nothing.

from an article, "Crucial Words in the Christian Vocabulary: Grace" by Victor Shepherd, professor at Tyndale Seminary Toronto

Grace is a Person. Grace is the presence of the living Person of our Lord as his mercy and truth become effectual within us. Yet there's always a tendency to "thingify" grace. We use the word in such a way as to imply that grace is a substance, stuff, matter, something that can be packaged and passed along. To "thingify" grace is to "thingify" Him (Jesus), and this we now regard with horror. Our Lord is grace-at-work for us, grace-at-work within us.

Enclosed is a Scripture booklet summarizing the Person of grace. Also, there is more grace on the back!

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I used to claim I was saved by grace, yet my assurance of salvation actually focused on what I did in deciding to be saved, and not on God's pure grace. Grace was a nice, but vague concept to me. I think there are many like me. And that's ok...we are to grow in grace. The truth is that my decision was the means of receiving God's salvation (faith), but not the actual means of salvation...otherwise, I would have been saved by decision and not by grace. I realize now that my salvation was so much more than a passive Christ waiting hat-in-hand for me to make a decision. I was saved by a loving Christ who actively drew me to Him. Now that's grace that changes hearts! I personally encountered the living Lord. Satan tried to steal that reality from me by tempting me to focus on what I decided to do. But never again!

Now Satan tries to plant seeds of doubt regarding grace in my daily walk. The Bible calls Satan THE tempter (Matthew 4:3), deceiver of the whole world (Revelation 12:9), and the father of lies (John 8:44). Satan's goal is always to take our eyes off of the living Christ...to steal the glory of God who is the living Christ (Hebrews 1:3). I believe Satan tries to lure us to live out of our own human efforts based only on a concept of grace, instead of on the living Person of grace. This is why my heart is to teach Christ and not just about Christ.

PLAIN GRACE OR AMAZING GRACE?

When you hear the word *grace*, do you think of God's favor more than God's face?

Do you think about the beautiful place you're going to more than the beautiful Person who lives in you now?

Do you think about what Christ has done for you more than about who He is to you?

In the movie *The Passion*, do you see a passive, helpless Man, or do you see a loving God actively orchestrating salvation just for you?

Has the word *grace* become just another word among many words to generally describe your life, or...
is *grace* a specifically precious word to you that keeps you in a state of awe and worship of Jesus who now and always lives for you?

I've heard of warnings to be careful in teaching grace because some people will abuse grace by sinning just because they are forgiven. However, I am learning only a concept of grace can be abused. True grace can never be abused. Romans 6 addresses this very point, start-ing with the question, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" Paul answers with awesome boldness (I think he yells), "GOD FORBID! NOOOOO!" Then, throughout the rest of Romans 6 and all of his other 12 New Testament epistles (letters), Paul clearly presents the way and the truth that WE ARE NOW ALIVE IN CHRIST JESUS, which is the essence of grace! *Grace is the miracle of the life of Christ being lovingly applied to our lives.* To believe that grace can be abused is to be tempted to believe that the resurrected Christ Himself can be abused. But Christ is Lord of all! So, my heart is not to just teach concepts but to teach Christ in all of His fullness of grace and truth!

A TESTIMONY OF GRACE

I hope my communication of grace does not sound too theological or too impractical or too deep. I realize this newsletter is jam-packed with many thoughts on grace to consider for years to come. I think that's what eternity is for...to relish in this unfathomable truth called *grace!* This newsletter just flowed from my heart as the *throne of grace* is becoming more real to me.



So, I am compelled to share a simple yet profound testimony of grace. Here is my friend Mike. *[I share this with blessings from him and his mother.]* Mike is 44 years old. He can't read or write. He can't walk or run. Yet He has responded to an encounter with the living Jesus. And now, the life of Jesus radiates through this precious man. He prays. He watches videos. He listens intently. He asks the greatest questions in the world as God draws Him to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus (2 Peter 3:18). He loves with a pure love... the love of Jesus. What a beautiful testimony of grace...not a concept...but the living, precious Person of Jesus living through someone humble as a child to receive the fullness of His grace.

So, our finite minds really cannot grasp the infinite grace of God...you only can receive grace as a humble child. And when you do, you find grace is full indeed...full of life...full of Jesus.

UPDATE ON JOY

One set of blood test results in early February (Joy has weekly blood tests) concerned the doctors enough for them to order an MRI on Joy's back. This is the first time in 26 years that Joy has not had hardware in her back, which is why they could now do an MRI to check any infection deep in her tissue and/or bones. It was sort of a long couple of weeks waiting on the MRI results. The great news is that the MRI shows no signs of infection! Also, the most recent blood test results are all normal except for one parameter that is slowly improving. In addition, her incision is 99% healed. Joy is still so physically depleted due to the long run of IV antibiotics (almost two years), but we think we see the end of the antibiotics finally coming soon. We continue to hold on to the promise from Jesus, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness*" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Jesus is pure love and, thus, He is trustworthy. This is our prayer for you, too.

GRACE NOTE

Grace was active in eternity past, "The Lamb was slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8).
And how fitting it is that the very last words of the Bible (the culmination of God's love letter to us) ends with these words,
"The *grace* of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all...Amen" (Revelation 22:21).