

SAVING GRACE

In a small cemetery in Olney, England, stands a granite tombstone with this inscription: "John Newton, pastor. Once an infidel and libertine. A servant of slavers in Africa. Now by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the Faith he had long labored to destroy." You may not remember his name, but all of us know the song he wrote as a testimony of his life: "Amazing Grace."

Today, we're beginning a new series called Amazing Grace. Over the next 4 weeks we are going to be looking at different aspects of what grace means. The grace of God is like a diamond, as you turn it and look at it from different perspectives you see it shine in new ways. Today we want to start off with the most basic, which is saving grace. In Jesus, God in His grace looks past our sins and we are offered the gift of eternal life.

Psalms 145:8-9 The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. 9 The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.

God is compassionate. He is a God of grace. Complete these common phrases for me:

If it sounds too good to be true... it is.
We make money the old fashion way, we ... earn it.
There's no such thing as a free ... lunch.
There is no gain without ... pain.
God helps those who ... help themselves.

Everything in the world around us teaches us that you get what you earn in life, that there is no free lunch, that you make your bed and then you lay in it. Life means competition, and that means working hard. We value effort and sweat. This is called the work ethic. The only problem with it is that it makes it difficult many times for us to relate to God because we are in this driven work mentality.

We are saved by the grace of God. I am not going to be saying anything you probably do not already know this morning, but these truths are foundational. Today I want us to look at five aspects of Saving Grace. How is it you know for sure you're going to heaven when you die? I built this around an acrostic - G.R.A.C.E.

1. God's Gift

If you were to ask fifty random people "How do you get to heaven?" you would get a lot of different answers. Basically most would say that you must earn your way to heaven. You would hear things like, "The way you get to heaven is you try to be good and do your best" or "Work real hard at being good and just try to be a good, moral person" or "Do more good things in life than you do bad things in life." If we just do that, God will see our effort and let us in.

Romans 3:23-24 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

You need to understand that God says here that salvation is absolutely free. You don't work for a gift. In fact, the moment you try earning it then it ceases to be a gift. God says salvation is absolutely free. You can't earn it, you can't learn it, you can't buy it, you can't work for it.

This is the fundamental difference between Christianity and every other religion. Every other faith or belief system on earth including Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam teaches that salvation is something that you do or earn. Christianity is different. The religions of the world teach DO, but the central message of Christianity is DONE. It's already been done for you. It was done on the cross by Jesus Christ. He paid for your salvation. He paid for your sins. It's already been done.

A young fellow came forward in a Gospel meeting, earnestly asking, "What must I do to be saved?" The Christian worker responded to the anxious inquirer, "You're too late!" "Oh, don't say that," exclaimed the distressed seeker, "I really want salvation; I'd do anything or go anywhere to obtain it." "I'm sorry," replied the other, "you're too late for that. Your salvation was completed many hundreds of years ago at Calvary. It's a finished work! All you have to do is simply receive Christ."

There isn't anything you can do to save yourself. You just accept God's free gift of grace. I'm not getting to heaven based on what I do. I'm getting to heaven based on what has already been done for me by Jesus Christ. That's the greatest gift you're ever going to be offered. If you really understand grace, you will accept it because it is a priceless gift in your life. Grace is a gift. God's gift to me...

2. Received by Faith

Salvation is a gift that can only be received by faith. Like all gifts, it is only yours when you take it. Imagine finding a gift with your name on it under the tree at Christmas but then ignoring it. You just throw it into the garbage along with the rest of the trash. Gifts are not yours until you accept them. The way we accept the gift of salvation that Jesus offers is through faith.

Ephesians 2:8-9 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.

No one can boast that they got to heaven in their own merit. Imagine if you could. Everyone bragging about how they did this or that to earn their way in. Like an exclusive country club, everyone driving up in their expensive cars to show they deserve to be there.

Imagine you are getting on a 12 hour flight across the ocean. The flight is packed. You booked late so you get a middle seat way at the back next to a toilet that is stinking. You are not looking forward to the hours ahead. Suddenly the stewardess comes and says that you have been selected at random to get bumped up to first class. She walks you to the front and gives you the gift bag with slippers. I do not imagine you are going to complain about the quality of the caviar. You are just going to sit there and be happy you are getting what you did not pay for! Salvation is a gift. You do not earn it, it is free. You can only accept it and be grateful for it.

Salvation isn't based on my performance. It's based on God's promise. It's not based on my goodness. It's based on God's grace. I'm getting to heaven not based on my merit but God's mercy. That's why He gets all the credit, all the glory. There's nothing I can do. It's a free gift that's received by faith.

One of my favorite stories in the Old Testament is from 2 Samuel 9, the story of a young disabled boy named Mephibosheth. He was the son of Jonathan, the grandson of King Saul.

Remember the story of David and Saul. Saul was the king but he was jealous of David so he tried to kill him. David spent a long time running for his life. Later on both Saul and his son and David's friend Jonathan were killed in battle.

David became the king. Saul's family feared that David would seek revenge on them for all the hardships he had gone through so they run away. One of them was Jonathan's young son named Mephibosheth. As the nurse was running with the young boy to escape, she dropped him. His legs were broken and he became a paraplegic. So here was this young disabled boy living in fear, frightened for his life that the man who was now king would retaliate against him.

Years latter, David is in his palace says and is thinking about his friendship with Jonathan. David has been blessed so much that he wants to share that blessing with others. He asks his servant if there was still anyone alive from Saul's household that he could show kindness to. The servant tells him about Mephibosheth who was still crippled and hiding in Lo Debar (not a pasture). David has his brought to the palace and offers him a place at his own table – to become part of his family as a son.

Mephibosheth, still fearing for his life, replies "What do you want with a dead dog like me?" David is offering grace. Mephibosheth just does not understand it, so he has a hard time receiving it.

We all like Mephibosheth have run from God, and in doing so were broken. We all deserve to be banished forever from God's presence. But God's invitation is to come and join His family. It is the invitation of relationship. It is grace. Grace is a gift. To receive it we must first accept it through faith. God's gift, received by faith...

3. Available to Everyone

God doesn't play favorites. Regardless of your background, regardless of your status, regardless of your sin. It doesn't matter whether you are a religious person or a non religious person.

Romans 4:16 Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring -- not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.

Who are these people who live under the law of Moses? The Jews. The Jewish people were given the law of Moses. Moses was their leader. They were given the ways of God to do the right thing before the rest of us were given them.

Have you ever thought about why the Jews were called God's chosen people? Does God love them more than He loves the rest of us? No. They were chosen for a purpose. They were chosen to spread the message to everybody else, to tell the world that there is one true God. That's what they were chosen for. They were kind of like the missionaries to the rest of us.

Romans 10:11-13 As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." 12 For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile--the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, 13 for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

If you like to underline things in your bible underline those 2 words; ANYONE and EVERYONE. There are no quotas in heaven. It doesn't say only really good people will be saved if they call on the name of the Lord, really religious people, really smart people. No. It says anyone. Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord, who has faith in the grace of God will be saved.

The sad thing is that even though many people know that God offers His grace, His unconditional gift to us, they still try to work their way to heaven. They think that something in their lives is making them good enough that they don't need to receive God's gift of grace through Christ.

You may have done some really nifty things in life, but if you think they're going to get you into heaven, forget it. Heaven is perfect and you're not. The only way you're going to get in is by receiving God's gift to you, receiving it by faith which is available to every person.

Grace is a gift, received by faith and available to everyone...

4. Christ Purchased

John 1:17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Why through Jesus Christ? Why is Jesus Christ the only way to heaven? Why not Buddha? Why not somebody else? Why Jesus Christ? Because He paid the price of admission. He's already paid for your salvation. Nobody else has done that one. On the cross, He paid for your sins.

Grace is free, no doubt about that. But it is not cheap. It cost Jesus Christ His life. He paid for your ticket.

The law tells me when I do wrong. It says, "You blew it!" But Grace says, "Here's how to get back on track. You're forgiven. Let's get going in the right direction."

Romans 8:1 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,

In the New Testament the favorite description for someone who has received the grace of God is the term "in Christ." That phrase is used over 120 times. It refers to somebody who has found salvation through the grace of God, who has received the gift of God in Christ.

Imagine a world without cars or planes or other means of travel. Now imagine that getting to heaven was like getting to Japan. There is no way that you walk that far. There is no way you can swim that ocean. In your own strength it is impossible.

There is no way we can earn our way to heaven. We are just not good enough or strong enough. To dwell with a perfect God in heaven requires perfection, and none of us measure up to that standard. You might as well be told to jump so high that you can touch the moon. In our own strength it is impossible.

But then along comes the airplane. In the airplane it is possible. It does what we cannot do. So it is when we are in Christ. Jesus offers to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Galatians 2:21 I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!

If you could be saved and could get to heaven on your own merits, the cross was a waste. If you could have gotten to heaven without any help from God, Jesus wouldn't have come and died on the cross for you. He wouldn't waste Himself like that. But there was no other way. You're either going to get into heaven in Christ, or you're not going.

It's a free gift. You just accept it in faith. Grace is all that God does for me because of what Jesus Christ did for me on the cross. Another acrostic of GRACE is God's Riches At Christ's Expense. It comes through Christ and only through Christ.

I heard the story of a pastor who dies and was standing outside the pearly gates. Posted on the gate was a sign that read "Entrance Requirements – 1000 points." He went over and was met by an angel. The angel asked "OK, why should I let you in?" He explained that he had been a pastor and missionary for 40 years, that he had preached thousands of sermons during that time and lead many people to Jesus. After listening for a long while the angel said "Wonderful, you get one point." The pastor was shocked "All that for only one point!" He went on, describing in detail all the ways he had served, how he had helped the poor and counseled the weary. After all of that the angel said "Wonderful, now you have 2 points!"

The poor man's face fell with futility, and his shoulders drooped as he seemed resigned to his fate. "I may as well give up," he said. "How can anyone be good enough to get into Heaven. In fact, it seems impossible without the grace of God." The angel smiled and said "Your right, and you are standing at the wrong gate. This is the works gate and no one has ever entered here. Right over there is the grace gate where Jesus is waiting to receive all who have put their trust in Him."

Grace is a gift, received by faith and available to everyone purchased through Jesus.

5. Extended to Eternity

Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The results of God's grace are going to go on and on forever. Eternal life is one of the benefits of grace. You could say that grace is the gift that keeps on giving. God saves the best for last and the best is yet to come. With Jesus Christ it just keeps getting better and better. The Bible says the free gift of God is eternal life in heaven.

Have you ever thought of what is heaven really going to be like? The Bible tells us that heaven is going to be like four things.

It is a place of *reunion* where we are reunited with other loved ones who have accepted the grace of God.

It is a place of *reward* where we are rewarded for the character that we developed and the way we served other people here on earth.

It is a place of *release* where we're free from all pain, all suffering, all sadness, all sorrow, all grief, all depression and loneliness.

It is also a place of *reassignment* where we are given new work that we like to do based on our SHAPE. Based on how God has gifted us, we will be given new assignments that we love to do.

It's going to be a wonderful place. And it is the gift of God.

Maybe you are here today and you have heard these truths before, or maybe you are hearing it for the first time. God offers you a relationship with Him. He offers you eternal life, but you have to accept it. Maybe you have opened a lot of gifts in the last week. I can guarantee you that this is the greatest gift you will ever be offered.

Peter Drucker was known as the father of American management. He wrote dozens of books on business management and had articles regularly in the Wall Street Journal. He was a brilliant man and was known to have a deep Christian faith. One day he was asked "How did you become a Christian?" He said, "When somebody first explained grace to me, I realized I was never going to get a better offer."

You're never going to get a better deal than we've talked about today. Open your life to the grace of God through Jesus Christ. It's your only hope and it's free. God is inviting you into His family. He is calling you to come home.