

Do you remember the October 2, 2006 Amish school shooting of eight young schoolgirls in a one-room Amish school (**picture**)? Gunman, Charles Roberts (**picture**) took hostages and shot eight out of ten girls (aged 6–13), killing five, before committing suicide in the schoolhouse.

In the midst of their grief over this shocking loss the Amish community didn't cast blame, they didn't point fingers, they didn't hold a press conference with attorneys at their sides. Do you know what they did? They reached out with grace and compassion toward the killer's family. The afternoon of the shooting a grandfather of one of the girls killed expressed forgiveness toward the killer. That same day Amish neighbors visited his wife and the Roberts family to comfort them in their sorrow and pain.

Later that week the Roberts family was invited to the funeral of one of the girls who'd been killed. And Amish mourners outnumbered the non-Amish at the funeral of the killer, Charles Roberts. After he cold-bloodedly shot eight innocent schoolgirls, the Amish almost immediately forgave him and showed compassion toward his family.

Reporters and followers of the story asked, "How could they forgive such a terrible, unprovoked act of violence against innocent lives?" Grace. **Grace is scandalous. God's grace is scandalous.**

Grace is hard to accept, hard to believe, and hard to receive. It shocks us in what it offers. It's truly not of this world. It frightens us with what it does for sinners. Grace teaches us that God does for others what we'd never do for them. While we'd save the not-so-bad, God starts with murderers, perverts and works downward from there.

Grace is a gift that costs everything to the giver and nothing to the receiver. It's given to those who don't deserve it, barely recognize it, and hardly appreciate it. That's why God alone gets the glory in our salvation. Jesus did all the work when He died on the cross. Grace means that no one is too bad to be forgiven. God specializes in saving really bad people. It's **the scandal of grace**.

Christianity is supremely about grace. We sing about grace, write poems about grace, and name our children and churches grace. Yet, for all that, grace is not well understood and often not believed. We use the word but really don't know what it means. Most of us rarely think about God's grace at all. While we say that we believe in grace, outside of church world, the word grace is very rarely on our lips.

We're skeptical when a telemarketer tells us, "I'm not trying to sell you anything. I just want to offer you a free trip to Hawaii." We wonder, "What's the catch?" With God, there's no catch. Grace is real. Ephesians 2:8-9: *"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."* Salvation is by grace through faith totally apart from good works. To get a grip on this text, we must understand five key concepts: *saved; grace; faith; gift; and boast* (or, glory).

1. To be saved by grace means that the Lord Jesus Christ has rescued us from God's wrath and judgment.

Judgment...wrath...those words sound archaic. Is that medieval theology? God's wrath and judgment aren't popular. To put this in perspective, let me retell a familiar fairy tale with a contemporary perspective:

Once upon a time, there lived a little girl called Red Riding Hood (**picture**). One day her mother asked her to take a basket of goodies to her grandmother, who'd been ill and lived alone in a cottage in the forest. It happened that a wolf was lurking in the bushes and overheard the conversation. He decided to take a short-cut to the grandmother's house and get the goodies for himself. The wolf killed the grandmother, then dressed in her nightgown and jumped into bed to await the little girl.

When she arrived, he made several nasty suggestions and then tried to grab her. But by this time, the child was very frightened and ran screaming from the cottage. A woodcutter, working nearby, heard her cries and rushed to the rescue. He killed the wolf with his ax, thereby saving Red Riding Hood's life. All the townspeople hurried to the scene and proclaimed the woodcutter a hero.

But at the court inquest, several facts emerged: The wolf was never advised of his rights. The woodcutter didn't make any warning swings before striking the fatal blow. The ACLU pointed out that though the act of eating Grandma may have been in bad taste, the wolf was only "doing his thing" and didn't deserve the death penalty. His lawyer argued that the killing of Grandma was self-defense as she was over 30 and, therefore, couldn't be taken seriously. The wolf was just trying to make love, not war.

On the basis of all these considerations, it was decided there was no justification for charges against the wolf. Not only that, the woodcutter was charged with aggravated assault with a deadly weapon. Several nights later, the woodcutter's cottage was burned to the ground. One year from the date of "The Incident at Grandma's," her cottage was made a shrine for the wolf who'd bled and died there. All the village officials spoke at the dedication, but it was Little Red Riding Hood who gave the most touching tribute. She said that, while she'd been selfishly grateful for the woodcutter's

intervention, she realized in retrospect he'd overreacted. As she knelt and placed a wreath in honor of the brave wolf, there wasn't a dry eye in the whole forest. While that revision may be PC, it won't fly in the courts of Heaven.

Ephesians 2:1-3: *And 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.*"

Why do we need God's grace? Because everyone of us is by nature spiritually dead and separated from God. When God looks down from heaven, the whole world looks like a cemetery to Him. All He sees are dead people. Above every corpse is a three-word epitaph: "DEAD THROUGH SIN."

In what sense are human beings "dead" even though they're alive? Because of sin we're separated from God. We're unable to know God personally and can't do anything about our condition. To make matters worse, we're dead and don't even know it.

Consider this scene. You are at a party with lots of laughter and plenty of frivolity. Next to you is a renowned doctor. Pointing to a man in the middle of the celebration, he says, "That man doesn't know it but he has an incurable disease. He'll be dead within a week." What would you think of him then? And what do you make of his antics at the party? He's a dead man and doesn't even know it.

To be dead is a hopeless condition. You can't say to a dead man, "Walter, get up!" and expect him to do anything. You can't talk the dead back to life. When God looks down from heaven, He sees our world as a vast graveyard filled with the living dead. Unbelievers appear to be alive. They laugh, they talk, they plan, they fight, they marry, they dream of the future, and one day they die. But they're dead even while they are alive.

That's the human condition apart from God. It's true of all of us without exception. Apart from God's grace, we're all born dead. Which is why, when God wants to save someone, He first finds a dead person.

The point is that if we're not under God's wrath, then Jesus didn't need to go to the cross and we don't need to be saved. By going to the cross, Jesus paid the penalty that we're under because of our sin. Paul here says, *"For by grace you have been saved."* Either you've been saved or you haven't. There's no middle ground. Either Jesus has rescued you from God's wrath or you're not saved. The next word to understand is, **grace**.

2. Salvation by grace alone means that we did and can do absolutely nothing to earn or merit salvation. Grace is God's unmerited favor. If you did anything to earn it or deserve it, it's not grace. If God owes it to you, it's not grace. Grace means that we get the opposite of what you deserve. We deserve God's wrath because we've sinned against Him. Instead, He saves us by His grace. Grace cuts directly against the grain of human thinking because it's not fair. We value fairness. If someone does wrong, he should get what he has coming. If someone does right, she should be rewarded. But if someone does wrong and gets rewarded in spite of it, we protest, "That's not fair!"

Take a guy who's a thief. He's stolen from hardworking people. He's hurt his victims or even killed them. But he shrugs it off and continues his life of crime. Finally, he's apprehended and convicted. On death row, he hears that God will forgive all of his sins if he will trust in Christ, even though he does not deserve it and he cannot make up for what he has done. At first, he can't believe it. It sounds too good to be true. But then he does believe it. He trusts Christ to save him from eternal judgment. He dies and goes to spend eternity with God in heaven. Is that fair?

Or take the case of a guy who's very religious. He prays several times a day, fasts twice a week. He gives 10% of his income to charitable causes. He doesn't swindle people out of money. He treats others fairly. He's been faithful in his marriage. He thinks doing all of these things will commend him to God. But he dies and goes to hell. Is that fair?

But I didn't make up these stories, they're Jesus' stories. The thief was hanging next to Jesus on the cross. Jesus paid his debt and the thief went to heaven that very day. The religious man was the Pharisee in Jesus' parable who thought himself to be righteous (Luke 18:9-14). He wasn't justified from his sins, because he was trusting in his own good works to save him.

If God were fair, we'd all go to hell because all of us have sinned. God didn't compromise His righteousness or justice to forgive us. His justice demands that the penalty be paid. And Jesus paid the penalty on the cross for all that trust in Him. In that way, as Romans 3:26 states, God can be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Someone has described G-R-A-C-E as, *"God's Riches At Christ's Expense."* There's no other way of salvation. It's by grace alone. A.W. Tozer (picture) said, *"Grace is the good pleasure of God that inclines Him to bestow benefits on the undeserving."* We also need to understand, **faith**.

3. Salvation by faith alone means that we receive salvation by trusting in what Jesus did for us on the Cross. Many misunderstand the nature of saving faith. Some have a sort of general, vague faith in God. It's kind of like positive

thinking. "I believe for every drop of rain that falls, a flower grows! I believe in the basic goodness of people and the goodness of God. Everything will turn out for the good in the end." That's not saving faith.

Some think faith is just the mere assent to certain facts. In other words, they think that making a decision to accept Christ is saving faith, even if there's no repentance and subsequent obedience to Christ as Lord. That kind of mere assent to the facts of the gospel isn't saving faith. To understand saving faith, you need to understand that saving faith includes *knowledge*, *assent* and *trust*.

a) There must be knowledge. There's content that must be understood. Some say, "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you're sincere." That's like saying, "It doesn't matter what medicine you take, as long as you're sincere." It matters greatly that you take the right medicine in the right dose, or you could die! To be saved, you must know something about God. That He's righteous, holy, just and loving. You must know that you've sinned against God and stand guilty and condemned before Him. You must know that Jesus is the eternal Son of God, who took on human flesh, born of the Virgin, lived a perfect life and died on the cross as the substitute for sinners, paying on their behalf the penalty that God demands.

But God raised Him from the dead and He ascended into heaven. Someday He'll return bodily to judge the living and the dead, and to save all who have trusted in Him. These are basic facts, revealed in the Bible, that you must know to be saved.

b) There must be assent. But you must also give assent to these facts, or agree that they're true. A student could know all of these facts well enough to pass an exam, but not affirm that they're true. Saving faith includes intellectually assenting to the truth of the gospel.

c) There must be trust. Yet, if that is all that saving faith entails, then Satan and his demons are saved (James 2:19). They know all of these things and know they're true. The third essential element in saving faith is personal *trust*, or commitment.

For example, you might be an expert on aircraft. You know a certain plane is well constructed and mechanically sound. You agree that the plane will fly. You've watched it fly many times. You affirm it's a good plane. But knowing these facts and agreeing to them won't get you anywhere. To get to a destination, you must commit yourself to get on board the plane.

Saving faith is personally trusting Jesus Christ, committing your eternal destiny to what He did for you on the cross. As you entrust your life totally to the pilot when you get on board a plane, you entrust your eternal destiny totally to Jesus and His death as your substitute on the cross. You trust God's promise that He'll justify the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:26).

Implicit in "getting on board" with Christ is that you can't keep one foot on the "terminal" of sin, and the other on board with Christ. You must commit yourself completely to follow Him as your Lord.

So, salvation-being rescued from God's wrath-is by grace alone through faith alone in what Jesus did for us on the cross. Also...

4. Salvation by grace is God's free gift to us. *"It is the gift of God, not as a result of works."* Paul goes to great pains to show that the entire process of salvation comes to us apart from anything in us or anything we do. If we could do anything, salvation wouldn't be a free gift. Yet, all of it is the gift of God. Even our faith is not of us. It too is part of God's gift.

As Martin Luther (**picture**) said, our situation is so hopeless that salvation must come from "*another place*." It's why the Reformers talked about "alien righteousness." That means a righteousness that comes from outside of us. We're not saved by what we do. We're saved by what Jesus has done for us. Here's Luther on faith: "*God creates faith in the human heart the same way that He created the world. He found nothing and created something.*" Every part of our salvation is a work of God from first to last.

God's gift is "*not as a result of works.*" It's completely free, stemming from God's grace alone. Some muddy what Scripture clearly teaches, teaching that we're saved by grace through faith, but not by grace alone, rather, we must cooperate by adding our works. But the tense of the Greek participle shows that salvation has happened in the past with continuing results. In other words, it's a done deal! As the Reformers rightly said, "*we're saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.*"

A student in a youth ministry class at Hannibal-LaGrange College in Missouri learned this lesson from his professor. This student had left work early so he could have some uninterrupted study time before the final in his *Youth Issues* class. When he got to class, everyone was doing some last minute studying. The teacher came in and said he'd review with them for just a little bit before the test. They went through the review, most of it right out of the study guide, but there were some things the teacher was reviewing that this student had never heard before. When questioned about it, the teacher said that this material was in the book and they were responsible for everything in the book. The class couldn't

really argue with that. Finally, it was time to take the test. The professor instructed the class to leave the exam booklets face down on the desk until everyone had one and then he'd tell them to start. When the students turned the exam booklets over, every answer was already filled in!

The bottom of the last page said the following: *"This is the end of the Final Exam. All the answers on your test are correct. You will receive an 'A' on the final exam. The reason you passed the test is because the creator of the test took it for you. All the work you did in preparation for this test did not help you get the A. You have just experienced... Grace."*

This teacher then went around the room and asked each student individually, "What's your grade? Do you deserve the grade you are receiving? How much did all of your studying for this exam help you achieve your final grade?" This student, writing about this experience, says, "Now I am not a crier by any stretch of the imagination, but I had to fight back tears when answering those questions and thinking about how the creator has passed the test for me."

Afterward his teacher said: "I have tried to teach you all semester that you are a recipient of grace." The teacher went on to say he'd never done this kind of final before and probably would never do it again, but because of the content of many of their class discussions, he felt that they needed to *experience* grace. Not just talk about it, but experience it. All of us need to experience grace, not just know about it intellectually.

My friend, there's no test. You don't have to be at the top of your class. You're accepted. You're loved. Salvation, wholeness, healing of the inner person by God is not performance-based. To experience God's grace, we've got to forget everything we've ever learned about being good.

Sounds radical, doesn't it? We're saved not by our performance, but by our faith in an omnipotent and all-loving God. Salvation is a **gift** to receive, not a reward to earn. But there is a final point that Paul makes...

5. Salvation by grace gives all of the glory to God alone. Paul concludes, *"so that no one may boast."* Or, as he puts it in 1 Corinthians 1:31 after arguing that salvation rests on God's choosing us, *"Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."* Salvation is totally of the Lord, He gets all the glory!

Conclusion: Since salvation is by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone for God's glory alone, there's hope for every sinner. Salvation doesn't depend on you. It's all on God!

Friend, flee for refuge to Christ and these wonderful verses apply to you: *"By grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."*

It's why God alone gets the glory. Jesus did all the work when He died on the cross. In the end grace means that no one is too bad to be saved.

Are there any truly bad people here today? I've got great news! God specializes in saving really bad people. Do you have things in your background that you'd be ashamed if there were ever publicly known. No worries. God knows all about it and His grace is greater than all your sin.

So, how do you find God's grace? Ask for it. That's all. It's that simple. The more you feel your need for grace, the better candidate you are to receive it. Hold out your empty hands and ask God for His grace. You won't be turned away. It's never too late. Though your sins be as scarlet, God says they will be white as snow.

This is the miracle, the wonder, the **scandal**, the shock of God's grace. It truly is "out of this world" for no one in this world would have thought of something like this. This is great news for sinners. Free Grace! Shout it, sing it, tell it, share it. Above all else, believe it, for in believing, you'll be saved. That's why **God's grace is scandalous**.

When we get to heaven, there will be no contest to see who was the most deserving of God's grace. After all, we were all dead to start with.

There will only be one contest in heaven. When we look back and see what we were before, when we see the pit He rescued us from, and how He held us in His hand, and when we see Jesus who loved us and gave Himself for us, the only contest will be to see which of us will sing the loudest, *"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me."*