

Chapter One
Defining Grace

“And after you have suffered a little while, *the God of all grace*, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.”

I Peter 5:10

I do not enjoy suffering. I do not even like to think about the possibility of suffering. Whether the pain affects me or someone I love, it does not feel like a kindness to undergo hardship. But after reading I Peter 5:10, we know all those in Christ will suffer for a little while. Trials are a part of the reality of living in this place between our intended perfection and our promised eternal glory. The price for man’s sin took us from walking with God in complete freedom to being placed in bondage to the very things we thought would free us. Our sin created this paradox we find ourselves in between a place of rest and wrestling. The miraculous word that allows what was broken with God to be completely restored and renewed is *grace*. There is no solution we, as created beings, can offer to repair our sin-wrecked fellowship with God. An end to suffering is only possible through trusting in the “God of all grace”. Grace illuminates the character of God and reveals who we are and will become. This is the unmerited kindness of God. This is defining grace.

Most of my life I have thought of the word grace as an abstract concept with little practical application. My family said “grace” before we ate, talked about being gracious to other people, and believed we were saved by grace through faith in Christ. Yet grace encompasses more than the parameters these phrases and actions imply. As I studied the meaning of the word grace, I saw there are many different uses throughout the Old and New Testaments. In the New Testament, the Greek word for grace is *charis*. But this little word can hold different meanings depending on the

context in which it is used. I realized part of my confusion came from misapplying the differing definitions of grace equally to all passages, and I needed to study to sort it out.

Grace can be used to mean **gratitude or thanks for the benefits we receive from God** as in 2 Corinthians 9:15: “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!” This is the reason we refer to praying before a meal as “saying grace.” We are acknowledging and giving thanks for God’s provision. But this thankfulness stems from the ultimate grace given to us through Christ’s work of redemption through His death, burial, and resurrection. His grace is powerful. It should evoke awe in us that leads to true repentance and gratefulness for all He has done to rescue us.

Grace can refer to **favor shown from one person to another**. “And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2:52). We can offer greetings for increased grace to believers and ask God to bless them in tangible ways (I Corinthians 1:3). Without God’s kind forgiveness, we would not be able to approach Him to ask for such kindness. Growing into a person of grace that has favor with God and man is reliant on God’s grace being received and practically applied in our own lives.

In terms of character, grace can mean **a person that is poised, charming, sweet, and a pleasure to be around**. To possess these gracious qualities is to reflect who God is. He exudes love, provides joy, and gives delight to those who serve Him. “And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth” (Luke 4:22a).

Charis can also be used to describe **a physical blessing or spiritual gift**. 2 Peter 3:18 encourages us to “grow in the *grace* and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”. In this context, we are maturing in our spiritual life. We can increase in our knowledge and understanding of God through wrestling to know Him as we study His word, pray, and practice quiet listening. Truth is grace. All these things overflow from the overarching definition of grace: “His uncoerced

initiative and pervasive, extravagant demonstrations of care and favor.”(5) This merciful working in our lives helps us to reconcile the tension we live in between resting in and wrestling toward Christ’s image.

A Record of Grace

The first instance of God’s boundless grace recorded in Scripture is found in Genesis 6:8 in the story of Noah and the Ark. Scripture records that God saw the increasing wickedness of mankind, and He lamented making them. Sin reigned in the world after man’s fall in the garden. The people did not serve and love God but chose to continue living separated from God through their disobedience. However, there was one man, Noah, who was found righteous. God introduced the concept of grace in terms of salvation in the sixth chapter of Genesis. Noah “found favor in the eyes of the Lord” and was spared from the flood and graciously given a way of escape. God’s grace is His unmerited kindness divinely poured out on our behalf through the power of His Spirit. Strong’s definition of grace, or *charis*, can be paraphrased as the manner or act of the divine influence upon the heart and its reflection in the life, including gratitude.¹

God’s grace is designed to benefit those receiving it. It does not require payment, only acceptance and repentance. His grace gifts us with freedom, thankfulness, and a restored relationship with God. These kindnesses are poured out on us in abundance. This grace is defined as “God’s favor (merciful kindness) that exerts influence on our souls, turns them to Christ, keeps, strengthens, increases them in Christian faith, knowledge, affection, and kindles them to the exercise of the Christian values.”¹ While we journey through this waiting place, suffering for a little while, grace leads us through the tensions! I love what James 4:6 says: “But He giveth more grace.” We can keep growing in grace! God never runs out of grace because He is grace. His resources are never depleted. The *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of the New Testament* sums it up

in these words: grace is “all that follows from humbleness and turning away from the world.”² As we humble ourselves to accept the full, merciful kindness of God and turn away from the world’s systems of thought, we grow in His likeness. We flourish in His grace. Grace defines us as His people.

Hebrews 13:9b says, “...your strength comes from God’s grace...” A Christian is strengthened by the unmerited favor of God which can be given in different measure in proportion to our dependence on God. We all receive the same grace needed for salvation. But He does give measures of grace based on levels of trust and obedience in our lives. He is not only the God of our momentary salvation but also our ongoing pursuit of growth toward righteousness. There is always more glory due Him and more joy and grace to be received to attain this level of fullness. Gifts of grace are ours for the purpose of building up the body of Christ and pursuing the good of others. He bestows these kindnesses on those who will use it to advance His kingdom; first in their own hearts and minds and then in pouring out to the Church and the world (2 Corinthians 9:8-10).

The Practice of Grace

Practically then, how do we attain the fullness of His grace? Transformation begins by loving God and loving others. Our growth helps other believers grow (Ephesians 4:16). We must let the Spirit renew our thoughts and attitudes on an ongoing basis (Ephesians 4:23). We are reminded in Ephesians 5:10 to carefully determine what pleases the Lord. It behooves us to stop and consider who is leading before forging ahead on our own. We must ask His Spirit to guide us before looking around to be aware of how our gifts of grace could encourage and help someone else.

Grace is the personal presence of God in our lives. It teaches us who He is and who we are becoming. It leads us to understanding and transformation. The transformation talked about in

Romans 12:1,2 is the process of reeducating our minds to think on truth. His faithful, kind presence permeates our thoughts and leads to righteous action. The compassion of His presence produces joy in our lives and brings glory to His name.

“You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11, ESV).

The mission to bring glory to our God is never finished. Can we ever honor Him too much? As long as we have breath, let us praise His name. Heaven is going to be an unending anthem of praise and worship for the One who saved us from our sins and eternal death. Grace is demonstrated in this earthly realm as God walking with us until we safely arrive at our eternal home. It is His compassionate, faithful presence. A promise to never leave nor forsake. Such a grand and humbling thought.

The Peace of Grace

In the book *Between Two Truths*, Snodgrass says, “The grace of God, which provides the coherence to our lives, is the power by which we live out our tensions. We live between truths”.³ If I had to choose between figuring out a way to Christ on my own or living in the tension of knowing in part and knowing fully, there would be no contest. I know that I would not have peace or joy in my life if I were in charge of reaching God or attaining righteousness through my own efforts. That task would be burdensome and draining because it is impossible. I would fear and worry. I would be constantly questioning my motives without a conscience guided by the Holy Spirit. And most devastatingly, I would be hopeless. As we live in this tension, we must remember that while we do not have to strive to earn God’s grace, we do have to strive to represent Him well. Understanding the beauty of His grace, leads us to seek, strive, and wrestle without fear and frustration. Our efforts will be driven by love. If we do not value tension in our lives and always

see it as a hindrance to living our best life, we will miss out on being used and blessed by God. He is our only shot at “a best life”. Abiding in Him is the only way to find peace because He is peace: “May the God of peace be with you all” (Romans 15:33).

Christians tend to overcompensate and lean towards legalism (lacking an understanding of true grace) when we see the tension in a negative light. If God does not deliver the way we want, we assume we will have to work it out for ourselves. If we think God is too slow in delivering on His promises, we grow frustrated and impatient. This initiates a draining cycle of working towards something that is freely gifted. Legalism elevates the law as a solution for something only grace can provide. We do not have to balance grace with works. Grace propels us to work from our secure place in the hands of God.

Kelley J. Leigh wrote these words in *The Beauty of Grace*: “No matter how dark the world becomes, no matter how broken, there is always redeeming grace, always available light and peace.”⁴ So true. He is light. He is our peace. He never runs out of good gifts for His children. His mercies are new every morning (Lamentations 3:22-23). God’s grace reminds us that the tension in wrestling can be endured by remembering the joy set before us. Jesus was our example of this: “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” (Hebrews 12:2).

Not only does defining grace lead us through tension with hope, but it also provides the power to overcome sin. God’s kindness does not leave us to sort out the old and new ways on our own. He makes us a new creation. We are not enslaved to the old ways any longer. While the old ways still pull at us, we can have victory through Christ and the new mercies He promises every day. His power is greater than the spiritual forces fighting to destroy our intimacy with Christ.

When we fail to yield to the Spirit's leading in our lives, we leave room for Satan's darts to wound us. It is like leaving our armor in the closet when the battle is outside our door. Our grace in this fight is the indwelling Spirit and the armor of God. God's primary purpose in healing us from our hurts is to introduce us to new depths of relationship with Himself. This is grace through tension.

“No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us”

(Romans 8:37).

As we draw near and God reveals Himself to us, we become holy as He is holy. Holiness is a product of grace. His kindness and favor poured out over our unrighteousness and brokenness is a gift. Not only do we receive His Spirit at the moment of salvation, but He also increasingly reveals Himself to us as we seek Him. God's grace abounds as we invest in an intimate relationship with Him through His son. Being attached to the vine leads to knowing Him and growing through all the tensions of walking in flesh and spirit. Grace allows us to rest in who we are while wrestling to become all He has for us. There is compassion and kindness gained by knowing and understanding the mind of God. When we understand this, we learn to live from that place of compassion and kindness for ourselves and others. How great is His faithfulness to us!

The Flourishing of Grace

What is the path to growing in truth and grace? The journey begins by *knowing* God. Through seeking Him, we discover the key to knowing ourselves. The Word reveals His character and studying it should be a priority in our life. It is a grace in our lives to have Scripture teach us truth about the gospel, who we are in Christ, what our future holds, and how to please God. According to Hebrews 4:12-13, the word of God pierces through the thoughts and intent of our hearts. Between searching the Scriptures and being led by the Holy Spirit, we can learn the grace

of discernment in the tough choices of life. We need this wisdom to confidently walk through the tensions.

Discernment is a grace of the Spirit needed to make sense of the biblical paradoxes we will face between the now and not yet. I have often struggled to understand how grace could allow suffering even for just a little while. My greatest personal frustrations have come when my expectations for life and faith were met with loss and pain. Believers tend to forget that while God's grace is lavishly poured out to us through His son, nothing we receive is deserved. God gives common grace to all who live on the earth. It rains on the just and unjust alike (Matthew 5:45). He gives justification by grace to those who put their faith in Christ. He promises to be with us in the land between, but He does not promise a suffering-free life. This is the reality of being a human in need of redemption. Full restoration will one day be received, but for now, we walk in a season of waiting.

One of God's greatest kindnesses to His children is the gift of the Holy Spirit. To learn to move toward grace in our understanding of the paradoxes of faith, we must realize what a blessing it is to have God's Spirit taking up residence within us. When we are confused, He brings clarity. When we are lost, the Spirit leads us home. He is a comfort to us in times of sorrow and fear. He speaks to us if we listen and utters our prayers to the Father on our behalf (Romans 8:26). "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41). Our prayer life is one place where we often wrestle when surrender is required. Unsure of what to speak, His Spirit fills us with the words we need. The Spirit seals and keeps us until we receive our full inheritance (Ephesians 1:14). The Spirit is an undeserved kindness to us. We can rest in the wrestling knowing He is on our side. He is keeping us. Our actions do not

determine His presence in our lives. But our actions do determine our growth in the knowledge of the Spirit. The gift of God's Spirit leads to true flourishing.

The Purpose of Grace

Defining grace helps us to move forward through the biblical tensions we will discuss throughout this book. It will help us to identify the weeds of frustration caused by a lack of applying God's grace in practical ways. As a result, we will desire to see greater fruits of grace in our lives that lead to rest and not frustration. It will be the foundation for building our spiritual lives while walking as foreigners of the world and friends with God. Grace keeps us through all seasons and helps us live with His kindness toward us in mind. When our minds are fixed on His good plans for us, we can walk through any season with hope and joy.

Struggling to live in allegiance to Christ while being bound by worldly cares is not easy. Jesus knew this and illustrated for us how to live in the reality of two truths. He did not compartmentalize His earthly identity from His heavenly one. He did not teeter back and forth trying to find the right balance of life and faith. Jesus did the will of the Father. He lived in the tension with humility, grace, and purpose. And we are to imitate Christ. We are equipped through faith to live abundantly (John 10:10, Romans 15:13). Faith is who we are. Grace is our story. We live what looks like a lopsided life according to the world as we surrender every part of ourselves to serving Christ. But we live with God's grace holding it all together.

Knowing Christ is grace. Having hope for a future eternal home is grace. Life and death are in His hands; this too is grace. All is grace. Repeating and remembering this defining grace will help us as we move on to learning about the biblical tensions that often confuse, frustrate, and hold us back from experiencing all the riches of His grace. God's divine presence is the solution to walking through tension without losing our hope and joy. And if *He* is our hope and joy, we

cannot lose them. But sometimes we allow Satan in our minds to make us weary in doing good which casts doubt on God's goodness and kindness to us. We allow our unchecked emotions to replace His gifts with counterfeit messages. Satan is prowling around whispering that if God really loved us, we would not feel tension or struggle to grow in His likeness. Our enemy wants us to believe that we are promised a tension-free spiritual life. The frustration comes when that expectation meets real life and faith. It causes us to believe God has failed us. We have been fooled by the prosperity gospel for centuries because we have not defined grace and understood biblical tension.

Knowing truth and living it are two different things. Building a foundation on grace is the best place to begin. As we move from understanding God's grace, we will see how He uses seven biblical tensions to guide us to wrestle in our understanding and grow from a place of rest.