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Grace in the Old Testament



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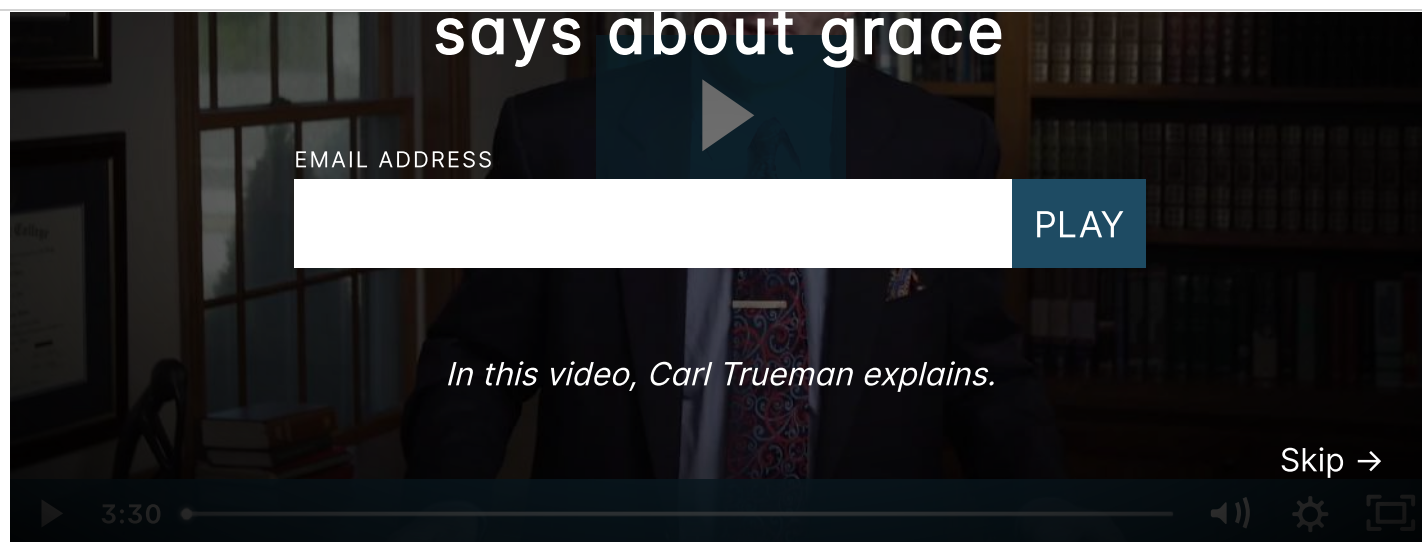
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When we talk about God's grace, it's easy to focus on the example and teachings of Jesus. Throughout his life, the Lord demonstrated grace in so many tangible and obvious ways. But God didn't suddenly become gracious. God's grace-filled relationship with creation is visible all throughout the Old Testament, too.

Today's post is adapted from Carl Trueman's book, *[Grace Alone: Salvation as a Gift of God](#)* and his accompanying [Grace Alone lecture series](#).

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Grace in the Old Testament

In English translations of the Old Testament, while the noun “grace” is rare, the adjective “gracious” is more common.¹ This is because God’s grace is not an attribute of God’s nature in the way that, say, omnipotence or omniscience are such. Grace is intimately connected to the fact that human beings are fallen and thus deserve the wrath and judgment of God. Grace, we might say, is a response, an application of God’s character and attributes, to human rebellion.

Grace is that aspect of divine action by which God blesses his rebellious creatures, whether through preservation (common grace) or salvation (special grace). It characterizes the manner in which he deals with those who through their rejection of him as their Creator and sovereign deserve nothing from him and yet whom he still chooses to bless. In salvation in particular the character of grace is manifest. A loving God, faced with the rebellion of his creatures, desires to bring them back into communion with himself. Yet his holiness cannot simply allow their sin to pass without response, for if God allows our unholy rejection of him to stand, he is contradicting his own holy nature. The answer is grace: action on God’s part, motivated by love and shaped by holiness, which takes account of the seriousness of sin yet brings sinners back into communion with him.

In short, if the world did not exist and had never fallen, God could not be said to be gracious. An older generation of theologians would have referred to this as a relational attribute of God, one

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The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and the fourth generation.

Here the Lord describes himself as gracious and merciful, two ways of saying essentially the same thing. But notice the reason he declares this. In the face of human sin and rebellion, the Lord has chosen not to exact justice, as he is entitled to do. He has chosen instead to be gracious and merciful. In other words, he has decided to show unmerited favor toward those who do not deserve it, and in his words to Moses he reminds his people of that very fact. The gracious disposition of God lies at the heart of the many biblical benedictions that have been pronounced over God's people throughout the years.²

God's merciful grace to his people pervades the Old Testament narrative, from the moment he allows Adam and Eve to live after they have sinned, through his loving preservation of his people Israel in the face of their frequent grumblings and rebellions, up to the coming of the Christ. Grace also provides the background to one of the most famous examples of prophetic petulance. When Jonah goes reluctantly to Nineveh to call the Ninevites to repentance and the Lord consequently spares the city and its inhabitants, Jonah is furious. The ground of his complaint is ironic: he claims that he knew that the Lord would do this because he understood, echoing Exodus 34:6, that God was a gracious God (Jonah 4:2). It's ironic because it was only the fact of God's graciousness that meant Jonah himself could enjoy the relationship with the Lord that he did. What Jonah took for granted he begrudged to others.

The story of Jonah is a very human one. As the great cynic Gore Vidal once said, every time he heard of the success of a friend, a little piece of him died. Vidal touches on something very true: there is a part of us as sinful human beings that hates the success of others; and to see the grace of God so gloriously displayed in the lives of the Ninevites was more than Jonah could bear. Yet Jonah's reaction is only so ugly because God's grace is so beautiful. An entire city of sleazy, corrupt, vile human beings is yet delivered from judgment and brought into joyful communion with God. The story is not so much about Jonah's bitterness of soul as it is about God's glorious grace.

Grace and Covenant

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“If we break the terms of the covenant, may we be torn in two as these creatures have been!” Yet in Genesis 15, Abram does not pass between the carcasses; only the Lord does this. In taking this action, the Lord unconditionally and unilaterally pledges himself to Abram and his descendants. As we see in the New Testament, this action prefigures the work of God in Christ on the cross at Calvary, where he takes up the penalty for our sins in the fulfillment of the covenant.

The covenant becomes the key to the administration of God’s grace at several important moments in Israel’s history. In 2 Kings 13, we read of how Hazael, king of Syria (whom the Lord had raised up to discipline his own people, 1 Kgs 19:15–17), had been oppressing the kingdom of Israel. We are told that the Lord decided to be gracious toward his people and to preserve them “because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (v. 23). In other words, the basis for God’s gracious dealings with his people in the midst of their continual sin and rebellion was the covenant promises he had made to the patriarchs. Righteous kings such as Hezekiah realized this, and in 2 Chronicles 30 we see him citing God’s gracious covenant when he called the nation to repentance. The Jews were conscious of their covenant history with God and deeply aware that these promises formed the basis of their gracious standing before him.

Given the importance of the covenant in God’s gracious dealings with his people, the narrative of God’s grace toward them was vital to Israel’s identity. It shaped what we might call the liturgical life of the nation, both in the stories that it told about itself in the home and in the great declarations that it made in public before the nation and before the world. In Exodus 12 Moses points the people toward a time when their descendants will have no firsthand memory of the events of the exodus and no immediate understanding of the meaning of the Passover meal. In this context, he instructs them to recite and retell the story of God’s great rescue of his people from Egypt. When a new generation asks, “Who are we?” the answer is clear: “We are God’s special people whom he graciously rescued from slavery in Egypt.” God’s grace forms the foundation of their national identity. They are a people formed by grace and sustained by grace.

Grace, Confession, and Benediction

We also see this when we look at the foundational Jewish confession of faith in the Old Testament, the Shema of Deuteronomy 6. In reciting the words of the Shema, the people declare that God is one, followed by the command to love him and a warning not to forget the great and

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toward them.

Israel is who she is because she is the object of divine grace, and this truth is central to the great blessing that is to be given to the people, the Aaronic benediction of Numbers 6:24–26:

**The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you**

Even today, these words are frequently spoken at the close of worship services in Protestant churches, precisely because they remind the people of who they are—sinners who have received the free favor of God and have been made his people. The benediction points people to the grace of God, by which they approach him. When fallen, sinful creatures come before God, they need to be reminded that God is gracious toward them, that he chooses to bless them not for any merit they possess in themselves but simply because he, the Lord, has chosen to be merciful to them. God does not treat them as their sin and rebellion deserve. God is a God of grace, and his grace defines what it means for them to be the people of God.

The blessing of Numbers 6 was originally given to the Aaronic priesthood, and this ties it closely to the entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament. We should note this because we have a tendency today to reduce grace to a kind of divine sentiment. This reduction of grace cheapens forgiveness. We wrongly believe that apologizing will be sufficient to cover the evil of our sin. But grace is far more than a sentimental notion. Grace is connected to God's being and God's action, especially God's action in Christ. It is therefore costly and not to be treated in a light fashion as if it were something cheap.³

Grace and Sacrifice

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supreme manifestation of which is the Day of Atonement, detailed in Leviticus 16, whereby sin might be addressed. God himself creates the sacrificial system, he regulates it via his word and elect priesthood, and ultimately, it is God who chooses to accept the sacrifices presented to him.

This fact—that God is the one who establishes and regulates the sacrificial system—should not be ignored. It's significant because it teaches us that the Old Testament sacrifices were not an attempt by human beings to find something that would placate or cajole an angry God. We wrongly imagine that God was angry with his people and they somehow discovered ways to twist his arm and earn his favor despite their sin. The Scriptures teach us that it was God who took the initiative, revealing how sinful humans could relate to him. He established the content, the terms, and the results of the sacrifices because his wrath needed to be satisfied in a particular way. This initiative is further evidence of his grace and favor toward his people. This is not humanity reaching up to God but God reaching down to humanity, an action completely founded in God's unmerited favor toward his people. He establishes *by grace* the sacrifices which serve to satisfy his justice.

The gracious activity of God does not begin with the sacrificial system instituted under Moses, of course. Hints of this are found even earlier in the Old Testament. We first see God's grace on display when God confronts Adam and Eve in the garden after the fall. Adam and his wife have made themselves clothes out of leaves in an attempt to cover their shame. When God approaches, he does not accept their coverings, yet he does not immediately wipe them from the face of the earth either. Instead, he slays animals and covers Adam and Eve with the skins of the animals so that their sinful nakedness might be covered. God deals with the immediate problem of their guilt in the manner of his own choosing. In other words, he provides the solution to the problem of Adam's sin. In Genesis 3, for all his wrath at Adam's rebellion, he is revealed to be a gracious God who saves his people through animal sacrifice. These themes recur throughout the Scriptures, as we find again in Genesis 22, for example. After God has asked Abraham to sacrifice his only son to the Lord, Abraham makes the portentous statement that God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering (Gen 22:8). Again, we see God revealed as gracious because he provides for his people what they cannot provide for themselves—the sacrifice required for sin. Grace and sacrifice are inextricably linked throughout God's dealings with his Old Testament people.

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Testament. Throughout the Old Testament narratives, Psalms, and in the Prophets, we find God's people crying out to the Lord in their prayers, pleading for him to be gracious.

Prayer is, of course, closely attached to the notion of sacrifice. We must not forget this, for to do so would be to detach prayer from its position in God's overall gracious action and also to lose that powerful, raw, existential aspect that we noted above in regard to the nature of sacrifice. If grace is not empty sentiment, then neither is prayer a sentimental action. How often on news reports do we see examples of human suffering with the response that people are praying for the victims? While the response is in a sense a good one, it is hard not to wonder whether phrases such as "our thoughts and prayers are with the victims" are really just another way of saying "we feel very badly for the victims and want to express our solidarity with them and their loved ones." That is not biblical prayer. Biblical prayer rests on God's grace and thus on God's character as expressed in his saving actions toward his people and as shown forth in the bloody sacrifices of the Old Testament.

This is why the primary place of prayer in the Old Testament is the tabernacle and then the temple, the places where God dwells in covenant with his people and where sacrifices are offered to him. The temple was a house of prayer (Isa 56:7; cf. Matt 21:13). It was also the place where prayers were answered. The existential confusion of the psalmist over the apparent prosperity of the wicked, for example, is resolved when he takes his questions to God's sanctuary (Ps 73:16–17). We can only speculate as to what precisely happened to him in the temple to solve his problem, but it was surely something to do with the sacrificial actions that took place there.

If sacrifice is the context of prayer, then once again we might note that it is the character of God revealed in these sacrifices that is of utmost importance. When Nehemiah (Neh 9) leads the people of Israel in a prayer of corporate confession, he recounts how God has saved them in the past despite their sin and rebellion and ascribes graciousness to him (v. 17), consciously echoing the words God has declared about himself in Exodus 34:6. Nehemiah knows that at this critical moment when Israel returns to Jerusalem a knowledge of God's grace will be vitally important for the people. They must be taught to remember who they are in light of what God has done for them so they can understand the significance of their actions. Nehemiah does not speak to their immediate needs; he points them back to God's great historic dealings with his people, calling them to recall how God has revealed himself to be merciful and faithful to them in the past.

Nehemiah calls both the people and God himself in his prayer, asking God to be the God he has

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these, we find them replete with references to God's graciousness as well as explicit calls for him to be gracious. Indeed, the grace of God serves as the foundation for the piety of the psalmist. It is God's grace alone that forms the basis for any salvific engagement with him. In Psalm 4 he calls on God to be gracious by hearing his prayer (v. 1). Psalm 6 asks the Lord to be gracious by not rebuking the psalmist in wrath (v. 1). Psalm 9 calls on the Lord to be gracious by saving him from persecution at the hands of his enemies (v. 13). At times, the suffering of the psalmist leads him to question whether God is still gracious (Ps 77:9), while at other times his confidence overflows with exultant declarations of how gracious God is, echoing other declarations of God's gracious character found in Exodus 34:6 (Pss 103:8; 145:8) or the Aaronic blessing (Ps 67:1). As noted earlier, the covenant is also featured as the grounds for God's graciousness. Prayer typically takes the form of calling out to God and asking him to be the gracious God he has promised to be. The psalmist does not look to his own merit but rather the character of God as he has displayed it in his dealings with his people.

What is clear from a study of prayer in the Psalms is that God's grace, his unmerited mercy in his dealings with his people, is foundational to the relationship between human beings and their Creator. Prayer is not a conversation between equals, nor is it a cooperative exercise between a servant and a king. The piety of the Psalms is decidedly one-sided, rooted in God's character and in God's response to human sin. The psalmist pleads no merit of his own but looks solely to God's grace in making his requests. As we move into the New Testament, we see this grace embodied and definitively revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ, yet even in the piety of the Old Testament we see the people turning to the grace of God. To live in the favor and grace of God has been the perennial longing of the people of God from the very start. The psalmist knows that the only answer to the deepest and most troubling questions of human existence is the grace of God.

In fact, at the heart of biblical piety as established in the Old Testament lies a cry of human desperation. The psalmists recognize that there is hope, but it is only found in God's gracious initiative. They have despaired of themselves and see no hope in a fallen creation. They know that if salvation is to come, it can only come from God himself and can only be rooted in his character and his actions. The reason is simple: human beings are in rebellion against God. The creation groans under the weight of human sin and the disruption in our relationship with our Creator. Human experience is tragic: life is not as it should be and ends in death, the penalty for sin. Death is an unnatural intrusion into the realm of human existence, and hope, if there is any hope, must be in God himself breaking into this creation from outside and acting toward it in mercy.

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I would note at this point that this understanding is quite different from what we often find today, even among Protestant churches that claim to take the Bible and the Reformation seriously. Under the impact of cultural forces that place the consumer at the center, Christianity has become a means to an end, something that helps us to realize our own goals or potential. It is a kind of self-help therapy dressed up in an orthodox religious idiom. Yet this has nothing in common with biblical piety, a grace-based piety that understands the tragedy of the human condition and knows that only God's unmerited favor can solve the problems of the human condition.

This is further evident in the writings of the Old Testament prophets. Earlier, we noted Jonah's complaint about God's grace, knowing that Nineveh deserved destruction but "worried" that God might prefer mercy to justice. Jonah relished grace for himself but was not eager to share it with others. More positively, Joel speaks of God's grace in calling the people back to repentance (Joel 2:13), as do Amos (Amos 5:15) and Malachi (Mal 1:9). Of all the prophets, however, Isaiah is arguably the greatest prophet of God's grace. Beginning with his own crisis moment in Isaiah 6, when he is confronted by the Lord in his holiness, Isaiah is driven to despair because of his own sin, a despair cured only by God's own merciful and gracious action. This awareness of God's grace carries through his writings, into the magnificent Servant Songs, where Isaiah looks to the grace of God as the ultimate hope for the people's salvation.

Isaiah 53:4–6 famously offers a pointed and powerful statement of this grace:

**Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,**

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the iniquity of us all.

Here we see the culmination of God's gracious action focused on the Servant. Our griefs and our sorrows have been borne by him. Our peace is bought as he is crushed and chastised. Our sins and transgressions have been laid on him by the Lord so that we might not have to bear their consequences ourselves. God is the agent in this work on our behalf. It is not a response to any good actions we have performed. Rather, it is the opposite: this is how God responds to our sinful rebellion. God's graciousness finds fulfillment in the work of the Servant. Here God's unmerited salvific favor is enacted and displayed for all to see. Isaiah's prophecies of the Servant and his gracious activity point us forward, to the fullness of God's grace revealed in Christ in the New Testament.

Learn more in the [Grace Alone Video Lectures](#).

Footnotes

1. The Hebrew term *khen*, which is typically translated as "grace," carries the meaning of "favor," as does the verb *khanan* and its cognates.
2. Theologians typically make a distinction between "mercy" and "grace." They regard "grace" as the goodness of God shown to people irrespective of what they actually deserve. "Mercy" is the unmerited goodness of God toward those who have sinned and are guilty. The distinction is a fine one and perhaps not greatly significant. Mercy, we might say, is a specific form of grace.
3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer memorably distinguishes between cheap grace and costly grace: "Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. We are fighting to-day for costly grace. . . . Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner. . . . [Costly grace] is costly because it cost God the life of his Son" (The Cost of Discipleship, trans. R. H. Fuller [New York: Touchstone, 1995], 43, 45).