

Introduction

This morning I want to return once again to our walk through Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians. In last month's sermon we gave some thought to the subject of redemption and considered most of what Paul had to say in **1:7a** and today I want to look at the remainder of that verse by considering those closing words that tell us redemption was "*in accordance with the riches of God's grace*". Consequently I want us to think about this subject of grace and the part that it plays not only in our redemption but also in our daily walk with Christ. In doing that I also want us to look at a few other verses to try and give us a fuller picture of the true meaning of grace.

The Greek word for grace is *charis* and that word appears 154 times in the Greek original of the New Testament. Such is the importance that Paul attaches to grace that of those 154 uses, the word *charis* appears 100 times in Paul's Epistles with the majority of them appearing in Romans where it is used 23 times. You may be pleased to know that I don't intend to look at each and every one of those verses!

In **1:6** we see grace described as "*glorious*"; whilst in **2:7** Paul talks of "*the incomparable riches of his grace*". The Apostle obviously thinks that it has a very important part to play in our Christian lives so I have to ask, what is this grace that Paul seems so enamoured by; what is it all about? I hope to answer those questions over the next few minutes by exploring and thinking about some of the numerous references to grace that Paul, and others, make in the various Epistles.

What is Grace?

The first question to consider has to be, what is grace? It is obviously very important as it is mentioned so many times in Scripture. Grace is quite simply an unmerited gift from God and it is a gift that He showers upon us even though as sinners we do not deserve it. Thankfully for us God has a totally unlimited supply of grace. The Commentator William Hendriksen describes grace as being: "*God's spontaneous, unmerited favour in action, His freely bestowed loving kindness in operation, bestowing salvation upon guilt-laden sinners.*"¹ Whilst I think those comments sum it up very well, even then it doesn't really go far enough since grace is so far-reaching and, in many ways, so unexpected that it is difficult for us to come up with a truly definitive answer to the question. Having said that, I listened to a video recently by John Piper, the American writer and preacher, and suggested that grace was God's disposition to save His elect based on nothing in us but purely for the good pleasure of His will.²

Imagine having a bottomless bank account from which you can draw an unlimited amount of money at any time that you wish; many of us would no doubt think that that would be wonderful. Just for a moment think about Elon Musk of Tesla fame and Jeff Bezos founder of Amazon; they are reputedly the wealthiest men in the world and yet if you added their wealth together and multiplied the result by any number you care to think about, you still

¹ Hendriksen, William, *NTC - Galatians & Ephesians*, Banner of Truth Trust: Edinburgh, 1969, page 71 (in Ephesians section)

² Quoted from a YouTube video by John Piper titled *Ephesians 1:7-10 (Part 7) - The Basis and Essence of Grace*, viewed on 22 May 2022

won't come anywhere near God's wealth. God has an even more unlimited bank account that isn't full of money but is full of something far better: grace; and He dispenses that grace as He wishes to whomsoever He wishes in quantities that only He can come up with and that are probably beyond our imagination. Whilst Musk and Bezos measure their wealth in US Dollars, God's wealth is measured in any number of ways, especially grace.

Importance of Grace

The most important aspect of becoming a Christian is very obviously that Jesus died for each of us to pay for our sins. However, we need to understand that that was only possible through the grace of God without which there would be no faith, no salvation, and no Christian church. God forgives all of our sins out of the riches of His grace. No matter what we have done God still forgives us out of those riches. Since those riches know no depth He is able to forgive all our sins, large and small, out of that grace. Many of us struggle with forgiveness in terms of forgiving someone who we feel has done something against us but God has no such qualms. In fact, God loves us so much that He looks beyond our sins to our future; a future spent with Him for all eternity and all of that comes about through the riches of His grace.

This glorious message of grace and the riches of God's grace aren't confined solely to Ephesians; the same message appears throughout Paul's Epistles. The Apostle always makes sure that grace of God is at the forefront of his thinking and teaching.

Epistles – Opening & Closing

The first and most obvious mention of grace comes in the opening and closing verses of each of Paul's Epistles except the Epistle to the Romans where there is no mention of grace in the closing verses. Whilst that final chapter of Romans contains greetings to many people it doesn't include any mention of grace.

Just as we might begin a letter by writing "Dear ..." and end it with something like "best wishes" or "kind regards", so in Paul's time many letters opened with the thoughts of peace and grace. The word used for peace was "shalom", a Hebrew word, and the word for grace was "charis" which is a Greek word. In this way the letter writer was able to wish both peace and grace be with those to whom he was writing whether they were Jew or Greek. Similarly in the closing verses where Paul wishes the grace of the Lord be with the recipient. Just as an aside, it is perhaps interesting to see that at the end of **2 Corinthians** we see mention of the trinity in the same verse when Paul writes, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." (**2 Corinthians 13:14**).

Saved by Grace

Let's return briefly to **1:7** and see where grace fits in to that verse; the verse tells us: "*In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace*". We looked at the first part of the verse last time and so this morning I want us to think about that phrase at the end of the verse where Paul tells us that redemption was "*in accordance with the riches of God's grace*"; a fascinating few words but what do they mean? First and foremost we can only be forgiven for our sins through God's grace; we cannot work our way to forgiveness; we cannot buy our forgiveness and simply being "*good people*" will not bring about our forgiveness. We learned last time that Jesus

died on the cross of Calvary and shed His blood to pay the price for our sins. This didn't happen by accident or as a last minute thought by God. It had all been planned and happened purely as a result of God's grace. God didn't really have to do anything to help us; He could have left us to our own devices, a state of affairs which would have led to an eternity spent in hell. However, God in His gracious mercy didn't do that; He exercised His great grace and sent Jesus to die for us. Let me remind you again that grace is that unmerited and undeserved gift from God and He gave us that gift even though we were far away from Him and didn't deserve it. In an early 20th century New Testament translation by Richard Francis Weymouth, he puts **1:7** this way: "*It is in Him, and through the shedding of His blood, that we have our deliverance — the forgiveness of our offences — so abundant was God's grace*". It is that word "*abundant*" that sums it up; God has an abundance of grace and gave some of it as part of our salvation. Not only does God have an abundance of grace but in **1:8** Paul adds that God, "*lavished [His grace] on us with all wisdom and understanding*". We frequently use the word "*lavish*" to mean expensive or luxurious or in the context of spoiling children by buying them expensive gifts and all the latest designer clothing. On the other hand a Thesaurus I consulted suggested that lavish could also mean generous, free, liberal, bountiful, or unstinting. It seems to me that all of those apply to the supply of grace that God lavishes upon us. You see, when God lavishes His grace upon us He is simply demonstrating His love and generosity. He lavished His grace upon us as part of our salvation because He loves us and wants us to be part of His family. It was certainly not His intention to spoil us in any way even though grace is such an amazing and totally unmerited gift.

Such is the abundance of grace that God possesses that in **2:7** Paul talks of "*the incomparable riches of his grace*" whilst in **3:8** he also talks of "*the unsearchable riches of Christ*"; the NASB uses the word "*unfathomable*" in that verse when describing the utter vastness of God's grace and I think that sums it up quite well. God's reservoir of grace is so vast that we can't even begin to imagine how vast it really is or to search it to discover just how rich and vast it is. We also struggle to grasp just how great is God's power; how far He reaches; how much He loves us; and just how deep is His treasure trove of grace. Thinking about such things is way beyond our mental capability; hence that word "*unfathomable*".

As we think about grace and the riches of God's grace, I want to digress slightly by pointing out the frequent use of the words "*rich*" and "*riches*" in connection with that grace. There are a number of mentions elsewhere in this glorious Epistle of just how rich God is. In **2:4** Paul tells us that God is "*rich in mercy*"; let's face it, as sinners we need all the mercy we can get! In **3:16-17** Paul says, "*I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.*" He is talking about God's great power which comes from His "*glorious riches*". It is that power that gives us the strength we need and builds us up in our daily walk with Christ, and I think that most of us need that power to help us draw nearer to Christ. Too many become part-time Christians by only attending to spiritual matters once a week. What Paul wants is to see us as full time Christians who are filled with God's power. Just as we receive God's grace through His "*unsearchable*" riches so we too can draw on His power to indwell us "*out of His glorious riches*".

It's important to note that receiving grace is not a one-off event in that it is only given at the time of redemption. It is ongoing and God dispenses His grace as and when we need it so that we grow in our faith and grow in our service of Jesus Christ. for instance, I'm sure that

any preacher will be able to tell you that they are filled with God's power and grace the moment they step into the pulpit to preach His word.

Faith through Grace

The most important aspect of all this is that we are saved by faith through grace; so important is it that we understand that thought that Paul repeats the simple but powerful statement "*it is by grace you have been saved*" in **2:5** and **2:8**. That is Paul's main message in each of his Epistles; we cannot earn our salvation by being good people or by doing good works but only through faith in Jesus Christ as a result of the grace of God.

Faith is a gift from God given to us through His grace. We do not have faith lying dormant within us waiting to be woken; it is a gift from God through His grace. In **2:8** Paul tells us, "*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God*". There are two ways of looking at the second half of that verse both of which are quite reasonable. Paul could be saying that we receive salvation through grace as a gift from God. It could also be read as meaning that faith does not come as a result of anything that we ourselves do but as a result of a gift from God through His grace. In **Acts 3** we read about Peter healing a crippled beggar. When the crowd displayed wonder and amazement, Peter said to them: "*It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see.*" (**Acts 3:16b**) Secondly, in his second Epistle Peter addresses the letter to "*those who through the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours*" (**2 Peter 1:1**). I would suggest that both of those verses support the view that faith is a gift from God through His grace.

Grace Apportioned

We've already seen in **1:7** that God bestows His grace upon us as part of salvation in accordance with His abundant riches. That verse helps us to understand that God gives us the grace we need to come to faith in Christ and be redeemed. All believers have been given a share of God's grace and in **4:7** Paul tells us, "... *to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.*" We are reminded in **Romans 12:6** that "*We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.*" That may seem strange as it could convey the meaning that some receive a greater gift than others and therefore more grace. With that thought in mind we should never lose sight of the fact that grace is God's undeserved gift to us and He may dispense it in any way that He sees fit. That verse in **4:7** actually refers to the gifts of the Spirit that all Christians are given at the time of their conversion. Each of those gifts whatever they may be are to be used in the service of Jesus Christ. Some of those gifts require more grace than others and so God apportions His grace according to the nature of the gift that He has given to a believer. Just as there is no favouritism in the allocation of gifts so is there no favouritism in the apportionment of grace.

Faith Abounds

This mention of grace does come with a warning though. At the end of **Romans 5** Paul states that, "... *where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*" (**Romans 5:20b-21**). In other words, the more that we sinned the more grace God bestowed upon us which could mean that we should go on

sinning to receive more grace! Does that sound logical? I don't think so and neither did Paul since he deals with that situation in **Romans 6:1-2** where he poses the questions: *“What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?”* God will apportion grace as He decides and we do not need to do anything, good or bad, to increase that supply of grace. Grace will abound anyway when we no longer sin. Paul reminds us in **Romans 6:2** that when we came to faith in Christ we died to sin. If we are dead to sin then how can we continue to live in it?

Paul and Grace

Earlier this year I spoke about Paul and his conversion on the Damascus Road. From that moment on whilst Paul served Christ faithfully and diligently for the rest of his earthly life he could never fully understand why God had chosen him to be an Apostle. Paul was happy to admit to the Ephesians that he could not “work” without God’s grace to help him and strengthen him. He told them *“I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ”* (**3:7-8**). As if to confirm that statement, Paul told the Romans that he had received grace from God to take the gospel to the Gentiles; he told them *“Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.”* (**Romans 1:5**).

We may not claim to be as spiritual or as hard working as Paul but just like him we all need God’s grace to strengthen us and to give us the power to serve Christ in whichever way He has called us.

Conclusion

As we look through Scripture and study God’s Word more and more, we see constant references to grace; that is God’s unmerited, unearned, unwarranted gift to us. We come to faith in Christ through God’s grace and that faith grows through His grace. As Paul has told us in **1:7**, *“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace”*. Continuing in **1:8**, Paul adds that not only do we receive this grace but God lavished that grace upon us with all wisdom and understanding. I’ll talk more about that wisdom and understanding at some time in the not too distant future. In the mean time Paul reminds us that God lavishes that grace upon us not just at the time of our redemption but also as we grow in our faith and walk ever more closely with Christ each day.

God’s riches far exceed what we can ever imagine or dream of. What we need to understand is that He has a limitless supply of this wonderful but unmerited gift for which we should be ever thankful.