

What Does 'Free' Grace Mean?

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Why do we speak of God's 'free grace' and why emphasise the term 'free' to describe grace? Is not all grace by definition 'free' grace? Are we merely multiplying words when we speak of 'free grace'? What point are we trying to make?

Let me begin by saying there is not a professing Christian, of whatever flavour, from Roman to Reformed, who would deny the existence of God's grace or the necessity of God's grace for salvation. Grace and Christianity go hand in glove. And yet, it is very clear that men and churches do not agree about what grace is, what it achieves and secures, or what part it plays in salvation.

The vast majority of professing Christians conceive of salvation as God's reward for man's obedience. They intrinsically feel some act must be performed, some duty fulfilled, some level of worthiness attained, to earn God's blessing. For some the duty it is an act of penance. For others the duty is an act of faith. Acceptable obedience, though imperfect, can be achieved, they imagine, by a mixture of human effort topped-up and capped-off with divine grace.

And yet the Bible tells us there is no place whatsoever for man's works, or even man's will, in the giving of grace. There is no element of human involvement in the accomplishment of salvation. Paul is very clear on this. When discussing a sinner's salvation and eligibility for grace he says, 'So then, it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy' (Romans 9:16).

Why then speak of 'free' grace? It is to emphasise that there is no sense in which any duty on the part of man is required, accepted or even possible for righteousness with God. This includes everything from good works to acts of faith. There is no effort, decision, commitment or dedication that we can offer God that will contribute to our acceptance with God or increase our eligibility for His mercy. Indeed, if any act were to be required of man to obtain God's grace then the 'freeness' of grace is compromised and it becomes no longer grace but works (Romans 11:6).

The origin of free grace

The doctrine of free grace is revealed to us in this way. God the Father did, from eternity, purpose to save some men and women from their sins and

bring them to glory. He did this to glorify Christ and for the sake of His own love and mercy. These chosen individuals He called His elect (Romans 11:5, 2 Timothy 2:10). To accomplish salvation He gave His own Son to be their Way of Life, the source of all their holiness and acceptance and the appointed Means to cleanse them from sin with His own blood (1 Peter 1:2).

God knew His elect would fall in Adam and come under judgment and condemnation for sin. He could have, in all justice and purity, left them in that corrupt state. Indeed, holiness would have required this had not His pleasure settled upon a better way; a covenant of grace to honour His mercy, vindicate His love and accomplish His greater glory.

God the Father covenanted with His Son and His Holy Spirit to ransom and save that which would be lost in Adam's fall. He gave the elect to His Son, committing them to His care. Christ became their Surety. Each Person in the Godhead had a role to fulfil. The Lord Jesus undertook to redeem His people from sin by His substitutionary death. The Holy Ghost undertook to create in them new life by the quickening Spirit of power. The Father undertook to conform them to the image of their Saviour. Though 'children of wrath' in their natural state God willed and purposed to show mercy and to reveal His grace to these certain, particular individuals having loved them before time began with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3).

The Father loved these individuals freely without reference to anything in them personally. He gave His Son for their salvation. The Son loved them, too. He delivered them from the curse of the law by shedding His blood to cleanse and redeem them. The Spirit loved these same individuals. Co-extensive with the Father's electing love and the Son's cleansing blood, the Holy Spirit reveals God's saving grace to guilty souls by the preaching of the gospel and the gift of faith in Jesus Christ.

This is the essence and heart of free grace. It is salvation freely willed by God the Father in eternity, freely accomplished by God the Son on the cross and freely applied in time by God the Holy Spirit. It is founded upon unconditional love and wholly without contribution from the sinner who benefits from it. Grace is God's gift of sovereign mercy and each divine Person engaged to secure the salvation of the sinner. The salvation of each chosen sinner was eternally settled in covenant purpose long before any experience of grace is felt.

What free grace is

God's grace is free because the Father chose the elect without reference to anything in them. It is free because the blood of Jesus Christ is the complete payment price. It is free because the Spirit makes us willing to receive it in the day of His power.

The sinner's faith is not the cause of salvation nor an instrument in its

procurement. Faith is the means provided by which God's grace is experienced and enjoyed. Faith, as salvation, is itself a gift. Believing does not fetch and bring salvation to us. Our salvation is complete in Christ and it is revealed to us at conversion. The salvation of God's elect was accomplished at the cross and predates our knowledge and experience of it. 'Wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption' are altogether God's free gift to His chosen people. Faith by which to receive God's grace is bestowed at conversion when we hear the gospel. Then we are 'filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding' (1 Cor. 1:30, Colossians 1:9).

Personal knowledge of Christ's redemption and the salvation of our soul comes by 'the hearing of faith' when the gospel is preached to us. Repentance for sin and trust in the success of the Lord's death is our response. 'We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved.' Faith is a fruit of the new birth; it is a consequence, not a cause.

What free grace is not

Today, many preach that God's grace is free because He freely gave Jesus Christ to be the Saviour of those whom He foresaw would accept salvation through the gospel ministry and other spiritual influences. But this is simply wrong and confuses God who is the first cause of salvation and man who is the mere recipient of a free gift. It is worse than wrong, it is blasphemous because it denies God's freedom to do His will and give His gift to whomsoever He chooses. It makes God's will in eternity subject to man's will in time. Man becomes the moving cause of his own salvation and eternal life. Consequently, man takes the glory!

Some teach that free grace means there is sufficient power in Christ's blood and sufficient merit in His obedience as to cleanse every sin of every sinner who ever lived should they wish to avail themselves of His good provision. But this, too, is wrong. It again makes salvation contingent upon the will of man and credits men with more creature power in their fallen state than they can possibly possess. It tells us God has relinquished the power to save and merely makes salvation available for anyone who wishes to avail themselves of God's provision.

We do not deny that the Saviour's death is infinite in value but we insist upon the authority of God's word that it was also particular in its design, purpose and application (John 10:11, 14, 15, 26-28; Romans 8:32-34; Revelation 5:9). Christ died substitutionally for the sins of that definite number given to Him by His Father and for whom He stood as Surety. All God's elect are reconciled to God by the death of His Son and they will be quickened in time by God the Holy Spirit. Salvation is wholly the work of God. It is simply wrong to interpret free grace in terms of universal atonement as though its freeness consists in its being generally provided for all everyone without exception.

Our Saviour's death on the cross paid for every sin of every person for whom He died. The benefits of His death were applied definitely and powerfully to those for whom they were intended, and no other. This is the meaning of the phrase 'particular redemption'. Our Saviour's death was limited in its scope and successful in its purpose. Its benefits are applied to those for whom He suffered. Had Christ paid the sin debt of all men then all men must be saved. There can be no need of hell for man and no condemnation yet to come since every sin of every person is already paid in full by the blood of Jesus Christ.

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