

GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

January 11, 2015



(grace) the stuff of life

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Discussion Guide

Amazing Grace

Ephesians 2.1-10

Connecting:

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- In what ways did God move in your life this week? In what ways did you respond to him?
- What was your biggest challenge this week? In what ways, if any, did you invite God into this challenge?
- How honest have you been with us? (Graciously thank group members for their honesty if they answer that they have held back.)

Getting Started:

10 minutes

- When you hear the word “grace,” what, if anything, comes to mind? Would you elaborate?

Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Explain the context and background of Ephesians using the notes.
- Read Ephesians 2.1-10, slowly. Reread Ephesians 2.1-10 once more, seeking to hear it as if you were hearing it in a congregation for the first time.
- As you hear this text, what are the amazing aspects of God’s grace? Seek to find as many as possible.
- To what aspects of God’s grace do people gravitate? Which do people ignore or forget? Why might this be?
- What aspects of God’s grace readily come to your mind? Which aspects do you find you easily forget?

- Considering Paul’s description of grace in Ephesians 2.1-10, reflect upon the statement, “All is grace.” In light of what Paul says, what might this statement mean?
- Conclude by taking some time to thank God in prayer for the undeserved gift of grace. You might consider concluding by singing the hymn *Amazing Grace* as part of your prayer of thanksgiving.

Context and Background

Grace

Grace is an essential component of Christian theology and a central aspect of the daily life of those who follow Christ. In its most general sense, grace might be defined as God’s effective power, which he directs for the good of people. As God’s power, grace cannot be stopped, but it remains completely efficacious, accomplishing whatever God desires it to accomplish (Isaiah 55.11). Within this broader concept of grace, two distinct types of grace emerge: common grace and special grace.

Common grace is God’s effective power directed to bring order and blessing to all people and creation. People do not ask for common grace, but God freely grants this grace to all people, making life possible. Through this grace, God orders and sustains the world (Hebrews 1.2-3; John 1.1-4; Matthew 5.25). God’s common grace is what upholds governments, as they are part of God’s means of bringing order to the world (Romans 13.1-7). It is God’s common grace which makes God knowable through the elements of creation (Romans 1.20).

Special grace is God’s power, which he directs to redeem, sanctify, and glorify those he has chosen (2 Corinthians 5.18; Ephesians 1.4-6). There is some discussion among theologians as to whether God’s special grace can be rejected, but this seems to deny the very nature of grace insofar as the rejection of grace is aimed at stopping/hindering God. While God may be resisted, he will not be stopped in his desire to redeem creation and people (Acts 5.39; Philippians 1.6). The story of Saul is a wonderful example of the inability of people to stop God (Acts 9).

God's grace moves forward, and at times, out of necessity, it moves people forward (sometimes forcefully!) with it in order to accomplish its purpose. This special grace of God is what moves people from a state of spiritual death to life (Ephesians 2.1-5; Titus 2.11). God's special grace transforms people from who they are into people who bear the image of Christ, empowering them to live as Christ has commanded (1 Corinthians 15.10; Ephesians 2.10; Titus 2.12). It is God's special grace which makes it possible for people to experience God's presence for eternity, moving into an increasing state of union with the one who made them (John 14.1-4; Ephesians 2.6-9). In the end, all that occurs within the life of the believer has its beginning and completion in God's grace. For the child of God, all is grace.

The Text

Ephesians 2.1-3: *People of wrath*

Paul's Ephesian letter is the apostle's most general letter, a letter which he probably intended to circulate among the fledgling churches of Asia Minor. This can be seen in the absence of "in Ephesus" in many early manuscripts (Ephesians 1.1) and the allusion to readers whom Paul does not know (Ephesians 1.15; Acts 19). It seems that Paul desired to write a letter to these new congregations, many which he did not start (Colossians 1.7-8), in order to shepherd them toward right living as followers of Christ since many previously had little or no experience with Judaism or Christianity (Ephesians 4.1). In order to accomplish this desire, Paul begins Ephesians with an explanation of God's redemptive acts in the person of Jesus (Ephesians 1-3), which he then practically ties to the common life, including congregational life, of the believers (Ephesians 4-6).

Paul begins his discussion of God's redemptive movement by describing God's character, which interestingly is revealed in the way he relates to people. God is one who blesses (Ephesians 1.3). He plans for people's lives (Ephesians 1.5). God gives freely to people (Ephesians 1.6). God forgives people (Ephesians 1.7). He lavishes grace (Ephesians 1.8). He reveals himself (Ephesians 1.9). He unifies people (Ephesians 1.10).

He reveals himself (Ephesians 1.9). He unifies people (Ephesians 1.10). God does all of these things through Jesus whom he raised from the dead and put in a position of honor and authority (Ephesians 1.19-23). It is God who has chosen to direct the same power he used to raise and glorify Jesus for the well-being of people (Ephesians 1.18-19). This movement of God is necessary because of people's true nature.

According to Paul, the essential nature of people is that they are spiritually dead. People are dead because they engage in transgressions (intentional crossing of lines which should not be crossed) and sin (willfully living contrary to the creative intentions of God). This way of life allows a person to physically live, but it denies them of spiritual life; that is, life as God intended is not experienced. All people live in this way quite naturally, for it is the way of the world, which is under the power of the one who himself disobeys God. Paul later identifies this one as Satan (Ephesians 4.27; 6.11, 16). No one has to teach people how to live in ways contrary to what God desires. It happens as we live to satisfy our own desires and to accomplish our own thoughts. It seems that we are essentially and fundamentally bent away from God at the core of our being in such ways that our everyday choices takes us away from what God meant for us. Because we have chosen (unwittingly) to live apart from God, we are dead because God is the source of life, and we deserve (because of our choices) God's wrath. Here Paul uses wrath as he does in Romans 1.18-32; that is, God should take his protective hand off us and allow us to destroy ourselves. In the present, God's common grace prevents us from completely going to extremes. (See Grace.) However, the essential nature of Hell is God removing even common grace, thus allowing us to completely destroy ourselves, an image much more severe than any image of flames and demons with pitchforks.

Ephesians 2.4-10: *The God of grace*

While we might have earned God's wrath, God refuses to abandon us to ourselves. God has great love for people and has an abundant supply of mercy (compassion). He sees people in their state of spiritual death and his love and compassion move him to act.

He sees people in their state of spiritual death and his love and compassion move him to act. He does not wish for people to experience this state. Therefore, he moved in the person of Jesus to make people alive. Somehow (Paul does not explain here) in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God made it possible for people who are dead because of their choices to experience life. Paul defines this as a movement of grace; that is, spiritual life is possible only because of God's power directed to people in the person of Jesus. What makes this grace amazing is its undeserved nature. It is given freely and when it is undeserved.

Paul goes on to state that God was not content to make people spiritually alive, but he wished to live with them. Therefore, in the person of Jesus, he made it possible for people to be in the heavenly realms with him. One cannot help but hear the echo of Jesus' words in John 14.1-4. Paul is clear that God did this not because we deserved it, nor because we were to be pitied. We deserved wrath, but God wished to show how glorious his power truly was, not just in the present but for all time. Basically, he gave grace because of who he is and not who we are. This means that our redemption begins and ends with grace. Even the act of faith, which directs our attention toward God and then orients our lives around him, is a gift from God. It is nothing we could earn, nor in our natural state would we aspire to achieve.

While grace makes us alive and secures our eternal place with God, God's grace also makes it possible to live our everyday lives. Under the influence of grace, we become the handiwork of God, enabled and empowered to do the very things God meant for us to do in this world.

Real life with Blake:

Grace is one of those essentials. Remove grace and you cease to have anything that resembles Christianity. We talk about grace. We sing about grace. We pray for grace. In my life, grace has become so essential, so common, sometimes it loses some of its shine. I forget (and need to be reminded) how truly amazing grace really is. I forget how personal and costly grace is, not for me, but for God. I forget that apart from grace, I would be someone quite different. I begin to think that I am someone other than I am, that I have what I have because of what I have done. I grow a little bit proud of my accomplishments, of how I have kept my nose clean or how I responded to that ugly person.

It is when I find my chest sticking out and my head held a bit higher than it should be held, that I have forgotten what is amazing about grace. Grace is the stuff that got me where I am. Grace is the stuff that made me who I am. Grace is the stuff that is making me into who I am meant to be. Grace is what brought me close to God and it will be grace that makes my permanent home with God. It is grace, all grace. What makes it all so amazing is that it is all undeserved. When I would not (when I do not) think of God, he cannot stop thinking of me. When I cannot (will not) turn to him, he will not turn away from me. He refuses to give me what I deserve, a big "See you later!," but rather, he chooses to draw near and do for me what I could not do nor would I aspire to do on my own. This is when I remember what is so truly amazing about grace.

Real life with you:

Grace. Hang around Christians long enough and you will hear the word batted around, but what is it really, and what makes it so amazing? Simply put, grace is God's effective power directed to us, a power which moves us from life to death. Grace is God's power, lavished upon you and me to make it possible for us to be with him forever. Grace is God's power, given daily beyond measure, making it possible to live, to really live as Christ lived. What makes it so amazing is that none of it is deserved. The life of the follower of Christ is grace from beginning to end, and none of it is deserved. It is simply freely given, an outpouring of God's love and mercy. This is what is so amazing about grace. This week, consider taking some time to memorize and meditate upon Ephesians 2.8-10. As you ponder these words, allow God to speak to you about how your live began, is sustained, and is propelled into the future by grace. Spend some time thanking God for his grace, verbalizing the many wondrous gifts you experience in life, gifts of undeserved grace.



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