



# No Strings Attached

## Is There Anything Greater Than Love?

Almost ten years ago my office was not very attractive. The carpet was old and worn, the walls were cinder block and gave the office a jail cell feel. It was the ceiling though that bothered me the most. It was slanted and rose from the east end of the office to the west at a 45 degree angle. The wall on the south side had a piece of wood panel cut in the shape of a large wedge like the Lincoln log pieces that became the supports for the roof when we used to build cabins from them. The ceiling had no insulation, so it was cold in the winter and hot in the summer. I mentioned to a couple guys one time that I wished my office could be redone and they formed a group who made that their project. A contractor was invited to help, and he volunteered his time to build a new ceiling for the office. He put in the crossbeams to support the sheetrock and got the space between the old and new ceilings insulated. I cannot remember this man's name; he went to a few church services to be polite but after he was finished, he disappeared. None of us knew how to drop the ceiling; his help was critical to the project. We thanked him profusely several times, but the contractor wanted nothing in return for his expertise and work. He did the job for free and we were not even his church. The truth is, everyone who put so much time and effort into rebuilding my office did so expecting nothing in return. There were no strings attached.

You could make the case that when it comes to your salvation, the greatest gift you will ever receive, it comes with no strings attached. Our verse today, perhaps the second most famous in the Bible, makes this abundantly clear. **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—** (Ephesians 2:8 NIV) In this powerful statement are two terms that are similar in nature: gift and grace. We all know what a gift is, it is just what it says, something given without having been earned. Grace is a bit more complicated. It is a translation of the Greek word charis. Charis comes from the same root as the Greek word for joy. Joy is an underlying feature of charis or grace. Grace implies the spreading of joy, the giving of real happiness. Charis is known primarily as a charitable act, a generous bestowal of favor. Charis is a no strings attached gift, not having been earned and frequently undeserved. Grace can come to either the monster or the saint because it is not tied to how worthy the recipient is. You receive grace, not because of how good you are but due to the generosity of the one bestowing it.

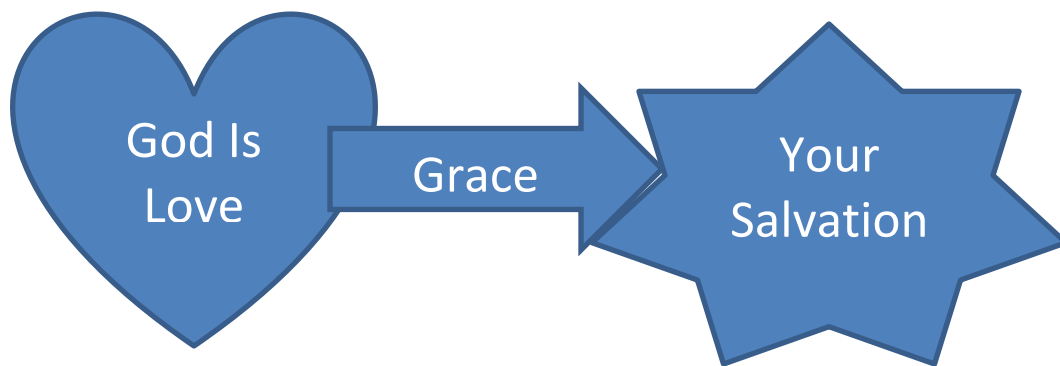
We often see gifts at the human level of life. Every Christmas is filled with them. Some kids receive too many gifts and don't appreciate what they get. Grace however is rare. We don't see it much being exhibited by people around us; there is something of the supernatural to it. There are several examples of grace practiced by various ones described in the Bible, but it isn't as often as you might think. A rarely noticed encounter noted in 1 Kings 17: 7-15 puts grace on display. There was a famine in the land of Israel and the LORD told the prophet Elijah to go camp at a small brook where ravens would feed him bread and meat morning and evening. When the drought dried up the brook, the Lord sent Elijah to the home of a poor widow whom God said he had told to feed Elijah. Arriving at her village in the region of Sidon, Elijah

discovered the widow was not well off herself. He asked her for some bread, but she told him of her own plight. **"As surely as the Lord your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any bread — only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it — and die."** (1 Kings 17:12 NIV) Undeterred, Elijah promised that if she fed him, the Lord would not let her jar of flour or jar of oil run out until the drought ended. **She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah.** (1 Kings 17:15-16 NIV)

That widow didn't owe Elijah anything. He had done nothing for her, and she did not even know him before that day. Yet by grace, she made bread for him, trusting God in His care to provide for her and her son. She was not expecting anything in return from Elijah. He didn't have anything to offer her in a tangible way. Grace is generosity given purely out of kindness and love. We find this at God's level when Jesus promised the thief on the cross that he would be joining Him in paradise that same day. What is often forgotten is that both thieves crucified with Jesus were belligerent and insulting toward Him. **In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.** (Matthew 27:44 NIV) Whether it was a change of heart or just the pure desperation flowing out of imminent death, one thief famously asked Jesus for a favor after they died. **Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."** (Luke 23:42 NIV) Jesus did not owe that man anything. He had insulted Jesus, mocked Him and even worse, committed horrible crimes that he admitted deserved crucifixion. Yet divine grace gave this thief an eternal reprieve. Undeserved, no strings attached grace came and that man's destiny was changed instantly. The Bible would say he was saved.

Let's consider the relationship between grace and salvation. The Bible tells us that if we are to understand God and know what to think of Him, we must realize above all that God is love! **And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love.** (1 John 4:16 NIV) Any ideas we have about God and salvation must develop out of this one axiom. God is love. It is not a mere trait of His. It is who God is. It defines Him in every way. There is not a single action of God's not based in love. In turn, grace is the flow of God love out of Him and into those who can never earn it and don't deserve it. The Bible insists Jesus is "full of grace". **The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.** (John 1:14 NIV) God is full of grace but He is not grace. Grace is the mechanism by which God's love goes out of Him and into the world. Grace is God's hug embracing you. It is Him reaching you and bringing you eternal life.

Salvation is what it looks like when God's grace finds you. It is the outcome of grace getting to you. Remember our verse reminds you that it is by grace you have been saved. Saved is the complete result of Christ getting God's love to you by grace. It is a forever transformation that God's love works in you.



Our verse tells us that your salvation happened at a particular moment and continues forever. It is not a momentary outcome; it is always taking place and occurring. Salvation doesn't stop once you become Christian. That is just the beginning of it. God's love, poured into you by grace and resulting in salvation, continues to make you better, stronger, more joyful with greater peace and goodness. Salvation is a never ending perfection of you. Forever.

God's love is always moving outward through grace, transforming lives that were broken and lost in sin. When the cultural revolution began in China, the Christian missionaries were forced out. House churches were shut down by the government. It was illegal for parents to give a Christian education to their children. Pastors and Bible teachers were imprisoned, tortured, and executed. Seminaries and Bible colleges were closed, and the distribution of Christian literature was illegal. The printing of Bibles was stopped. There were some 750,000 Christians at the beginning of the cultural revolution. Forty years later, there were more than 35 million believers. It was perhaps the largest revival in the history of the church. God's love cannot be held back by governments or enemies of Christ. Grace is always reaching, touching, and transforming lives.

I recently read of a Korean woman who had been abandoned by her mother at a train station when she was three. She survived in villages and in the countryside by stealing bits of food and getting handouts. She ate rats she caught and scraps she found in garbage dumps. When she was seven she wound up in an orphanage. The little girl was nine when her life changed forever. She weighed less than thirty pounds. She had boils all over her. The worms in her stomach were so bad that sometimes when one of them got hungry, it would crawl out of her mouth. The girl's hair was filled with lice and she had a lazy eye that roamed around in the socket. Her face was expressionless. It was at this point that a missionary couple came to the orphanage wanting to adopt a child. They were planning on getting a baby but when they came upon this girl, they knew the Lord was wanting them to choose her. Our Lord is like that. Reaching out for us, choosing us, making us His own. Above all else, you must know, you are wanted, and Jesus has always wanted you. Grace has a way of finding you because God's love is relentless and will not quit until you have found you have a Savior.