



# The First Great Word

Ephesians 1: 2 NIV

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

## What Is God Like?

After his introduction, Paul greets the Christian community in Ephesus with a hybrid form of hello. The Hebrews used “Peace” or “shalom” to say “Hi!”. The Greeks had “Grace” or “Charis”. Charis also could mean charm, a charitable gift or acceptance. It was the Greek way of, without judgment, welcoming someone. The combination of the two terms was how Paul figuratively brought the two different worlds into his greeting, that of the Jews and the non-Jews. Even more than that, grace and peace are the chief elements of what life with God and the rest of the world is designed to be. Grace and peace probably are as good as any two descriptors of what we want to have as part of us. A careful reading of the Bible will show you that grace and peace are intertwined. One does not exist without the other. Today we will look at grace.

One of the greatest verses in the Bible is found later in Ephesians and grace is at the center of it. **For by grace have you been saved through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works so that no one can boast.** (Ephesians 2: 8-9 NIV) Our daughter’s middle name is Grace because it is perhaps the most beautiful word in the English language. Imagine a God without grace ruling the universe. That is what many world religions think they have. Jesus however brings grace to the equation of God and His people. Unmerited favor. Mercy and kindness and genuine love for us. Grace comes to us through Jesus Christ dying on the cross to take away from us our sin. Grace is God giving us eternal life despite the pain we cost Him. Through the centuries, God’s grace has been shown to undeserving people. Someone who certainly shouldn’t have been granted grace if you or I were in charge of the universe was the second king of Israel, David. It is amazing to discover that in the Bible God does not hold back when He describes the most important people in the history of Christianity. If the Scriptures were a fabrication, it would not make any sense for them to tell the account of King David’s horrific sin against one of his most trusted soldiers.

The account is fascinating, like watching a car wreck in real time. David was on top of his palace roof and spotted the beautiful Bathsheba bathing on top of her own roof. A man of God, the writer of numerous Psalms, leader of worship and king of God’s chosen nation, David was the last person you would expect to do what came next. Lusting after her, he sent messengers to fetch Bathsheba and the two slept together despite Bathsheba being married. When she got pregnant with David’s child, David had Bathsheba’s husband Uriah killed in battle by getting his army commander to post him at the front lines where he would most likely lose his life. Finally, David came to his senses after being confronted by the prophet Nathan. His realization of just how bad he had been was profound and gut-wrenching. He wrote of the way his guilt impacted him physically and emotionally and perhaps we can feel the depths of his brokenness. **My guilt**

**has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear. My wounds fester and are loathsome because of my sinful folly. I am bowed down and brought very low; all day long I go about mourning. My back is filled with searing pain; there is no health in my body. I am feeble and utterly crushed; I groan in anguish of heart.** (Psalm 38:4-8 NIV) Later in the same poem he admits, **I confess my iniquity; I am troubled by my sin.** (Psalm 38:18 NIV)

The great mystery of Scripture is grace. What should God have done to someone like David who had an innocent and faithful soldier in his army killed to cover up his adultery with the man's wife? It doesn't seem at all fair when you read the account, but David begged God for mercy, knowing he didn't deserve it. **Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.** (Psalm 51:1-3 NIV) What is amazing is that the Lord granted him grace. Nothing within our sensibilities can account for God's response. It feels almost absurd; and yet it is precisely what God did. He forgave someone who did not deserve it.

Don't we see the exact same story played out in the case of Paul the future apostle? What was he known for doing before God took his sin from him and gave him eternal life? Do we read of his scholarly studies as he went to school in Jerusalem? Do we hear of how he went about teaching the scriptures in his hometown of Tarsus? Is there an account anywhere of what a great son he was to his mom or how helpful he was in providing for orphans? There is none of that! All we have is the story of Paul leading a great persecution of Christians, going house to house, having men and women dragged off and put in prison. Yet Christ in His grace went directly to Paul and gave him the opportunity to become Christian and receive the forgiveness of his sins. All around the world, that is what God is doing now, showing grace to anyone, the worst and meanest of us and giving eternal life to those who want it. No questions asked, no accusations made...just free and clear salvation to all who choose it. Grace.

I recently read the story of football player Ben Roethlisberger. He was a week ago speaking at a Christian conference carried out virtually. If this presentation had taken place ten years earlier, no one would have listened. In 2010, he was twice accused of sexual assault and was suspended by the NFL for what he had done. Roethlisberger admitted that he was addicted to both alcohol as well as pornography, he was a bad father and husband. Three years ago he was baptized for his faith in Christ as Savior. What sort of person did Ben Roethlisberger need to be for Jesus Christ to show him grace, to forgive his sin and make him a child of God? He only needed to be the type who wanted salvation. Grace is the beauty of Christ loving you enough to die to take away all of your sin. Grace is God's kindness to you.

Grace, when it gets inside God's people, is the most powerful force on earth. It changes the course of history and has been the source of miracles. When Joseph, the eleventh son of Jacob, the founder of the nation of Israel was sold into slavery by his hateful brothers, he had twelve long years in a prison to think about revenge. Every waking moment was an opportunity to ponder what he would do when he found them. Grace won the day though. After he miraculously was named second in command of all of Egypt, his opportunity to pay back his brothers arrived. Seven years of prosperous crops were followed by a devastating seven year famine. Under Joseph's direction, the nation stockpiled food during the years of prosperity and then when the famine came, had plenty to sell to the people of Egypt and beyond. Joseph had been given charge over the storage of the overflow of crops in Egypt so anyone who wanted to make a deal for the food Egypt had, needed to come to him. What a shock it was for Joseph when his own brothers arrived, begging for some of the stored Egyptian grain. Joseph recognized them immediately, but they did not realize it was Joseph. Maybe it was the clothes he was wearing, perhaps he had on make-up of some sort demonstrating his authority and prestige. In any case the brothers did not know who they had before them, the very same Joseph they sold into slavery twenty-one years earlier. With all the power of Egypt at his disposal, Joseph easily could have had his brothers arrested and carted off to prison or even executed. He didn't. He showed them grace. When he finally told them he was Joseph, the brothers most likely

blanched and wanted to vomit. They were absolutely at Joseph's mercy. Their lives hung in the balance. We of course know the way it turns. Grace ruled over justified rage. The Scripture notes, **Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.** (Genesis 45:4-5 NIV)

More than forty years ago when the Russian communists still ruled over Poland, Pope John Paul II came and held a huge open air mass near where the Communist Party's Central Committee Building stood. Over six million Poles had been ripped out of their homes and transported to Soviet concentration camps by the Communist Party. Nearly one million Poles were killed or died due to mistreatment there. The Communists in Poland tried its best to destroy Christianity and closed down churches all over the country. In 1983 however, thousands of Catholic Poles marched to Pope John Paul's open-air mass and as they did so, they chanted, "We forgive you! We forgive you!", while going past the Communist Party headquarters. A couple years later, one of the most popular priests in Poland, who preached grace and forgiveness as the Russians were losing their hold on Poland, was found floating in a river with his eyes gouged out and his fingernails torn off. Immediately, the Polish people took to the streets with banners reading, "We forgive. We forgive". He had preached time after time in the town square, "Overcome evil with good." The people continued to show grace and it was that grace that brought an end to the communist regime in Poland.

Grace. It cannot be stopped. It will not be stopped. Love triumphs over hate. Kindness over anger. Life over death. Accept the grace of God and have eternal life. Pass along the grace He has poured in you and you will find God in whatever you do. Be merciful. Be kind. Forgive. Love. The rule of thumb for every Christian who wants to be happy and filled with the Spirit of God is when in doubt, show grace.