

# Standing in Grace

For the next 3 weeks, we are going to look at some of what it means to live by the grace of God. For each of us, this is deeply personal and right at the heart of our Christian experience, so I shall share some of my own experience in the hope that it may be of some help.

Paul writes in **Romans 5:1&2** *“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.”* For him, grace was not simply theology, or only something to do with his past. It was up to date and vital for him from day to day. We may have some understanding of the grace of God to us, but is it mainly theory? Hopefully we have some **experience** of grace as well, but is it chiefly the story of how we first came to Christ, maybe years ago?

As an illustration, do you remember how, as a child on your birthday, you may have received some parcels and some envelopes. Some of the envelopes contained just cards, but others had money in them. It was not until you actually opened the envelope and took out the money that you really **received** the present. It is often much the same in our Christian experience. I hope we can ‘open some envelopes’ together!

Most of us are conscious of two important goals:-

**1) Bringing others to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.** As we long to see others coming to him, what will draw them? Is it that we are ‘nice people’? There are many non-believers who are nice, too! Is it that we have the truth? Yes, of course, but lots of others make the same claim. Is it all the good things we do? Many non-Christians do good things, too. Surely the most compelling factor is they they can see something different about us, which can only be explained by saying “God is really among you!” (**1 Corinthians 14:25**)

**2) Learning to function together in fellowship.** As we have seen before, for the Body of Christ to grow, it needs each part to be working properly, as Paul writes in **Ephesians 4:16**: “Under his control all the different parts of the body fit together, and the whole body is held together by every joint with which it is provided. So when each separate part works as it should, the whole body grows and builds itself up through love.” (Good News Bible)

To move towards both these goals, the reality of God’s grace needs to be at work in our individual lives - on a practical, up to date level. How is that going to happen? Do we know **how** to take hold of the grace of God?

No-one ever taught me that when I became a believer. I was just 11 years old, with a church-going mother and a fiercely agnostic father. I had been taken to ‘church’ since birth but had never heard the gospel - in all those 11 years! After hearing and responding to the gospel at a summer camp, I found and joined a local Bible Class.

I was encouraged to read the Bible and pray, and given some frameworks and guidelines. Bible reading notes were vital, apparently. The ones that my mother had already encouraged me to use were not so gospel-centred as the ones recommended at my Bible Class. I ended up trying to read both sets, one in the morning and the other at night.

Praying was something else! I was told the A.C.T.S. formula - Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication. It sounded like a good idea, but I always seemed to get stuck on adoration, not really knowing how to go about it. Telling God how much I appreciated him did not come easily to a young boy for whom any spoken expression of love or devotion was embarrassing. Confession might have dominated my attention, as I was very aware of my failures, but telling God about things I had done wrong (which he apparently already knew about) was also an uncomfortable focus. ‘Thanksgiving’ - it seemed almost like a shopping list in reverse, all the things which I knew he must have given me and for which I should be grateful - and he knew about those, too! Did he really need me to say ‘thank you’ for them every day? Which brought me on to the real ‘shopping list’ - all the things which I wanted him to do for me.

Quite honestly, all this emphasis on prayer seemed somehow difficult to me, especially as it seemed to focus on telling God things he knew already!

Then there was the growing list of 'rules' for anyone who called themselves a real Christian. You were supposed to have a 'quiet time' each day, preferably in the morning, in which you would enjoy time with the Lord as you read your Bible and prayed, and which would set you up for the day. You were also supposed to 'witness' - in other words, to tell people that you were a Christian at every available opportunity. And of course you also had to lead a life that was consistent with your faith!

Failure to match up to the standards you imposed on yourself in this way only led to more sense of unworthiness and a determination to do better. Add to this all the other ways you failed to live a life that was pleasing to the Lord, and you were soon carrying a heavy load of condemnation. Seeking forgiveness for these failures was made to feel like starting all over again, so you either tried to convince yourself that you hadn't really failed that much or you kept on re-dedicating yourself to the Lord in the hope that you would 'get the victory'.

Victory seemed elusive and temporary at best - perhaps not surprising for a teenage boy! I went through my teens with Christianity as a sort of hobby, something that consisted largely of going to various meetings and special holidays, learning songs, reading books and getting to know the Bible. All these were quite alien to my home environment and, looking back on it, I think that my determination to press on as a Christian may have been partly motivated by teenage rebellion - of an unusual sort!

None of that Bible study was wasted, though. (**Matthew 13:52**) Nor were the numerous missionary biographies that I devoured. I gradually formed the ambition to become a missionary - without knowing much of what that meant in reality - and eventually left school to start medical training.

For the first year, I was in lodgings and shared two rooms with another (non-Christian) student. One was our shared bedroom, the other our shared study room. No privacy, no 'quiet time', no witness, very little fellowship! I commuted in to college each day of the working week and got involved with the local parish church at weekends. They got me taking a Sunday School class but, under the surface, any remaining spiritual life was starving and shrinking.

The next year, aged 18, I got new lodgings nearby, with my own study bedroom. A change? Wow! It was as if the Lord said to me "Right, now I've got you on your own, we can really get down to business!" I began to read and study the Bible again, and I clearly remember the impact of reading the seven letters to the churches in Revelation. No Bible reading notes, no commentaries, just the Holy Spirit opening up passages which seemed totally fresh. I have no idea whether I had ever read them before. It was certainly the first time I had heard the Lord speaking so clearly.

I began to see the difference between law and grace and realised that quite a lot of my 'Christian life' so far had been very legalistic. As well as reading the Bible for myself, I read more books again, amongst others re-reading *The Normal Christian Life* by Watchman Nee, which I had bought and first read 4 years earlier at the tender age of 14 or so. ("Aren't you a bit young to be reading that?" I had been asked by an older believer.) For the first time, I began to see that the path to victory lay in the **fact** that my old life really was dead, 'crucified with Christ', and also that the resurrection life of Christ lived in me, able to fulfil all the demands of the law.

Other books and more Bible reading fed my now growing spiritual hunger and the more I read, the hungrier I became. My earlier ideas of being a missionary now firmed up, but I began to seriously consider leaving medical studies to train for 'full-time ministry'. At the same time, I came into contact with *Operation Mobilisation (OM)*. Their recommended books and emphasis on discipleship continued to fan the flames!

Just a thought in passing: How do we present the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ to young people? Do we try to 'tone it down' so that we don't put them off, perhaps 'fudging' difficult moral issues to make the gospel seem more acceptable? Just take a look at the so-called 'radicalisation' of young Muslims in recent years. The demands of putting real belief into practice are compelling.

Certainly that was true for me back in 1966. The word was not in common usage then, but you could say that I was being 'radicalised' as the Lord took me back to the roots and fundamentals of what it meant to follow him.

Perhaps it is not surprising that the summer of 1967 saw me on evangelistic teams in Austria and Germany and in the late autumn I was on my way to India as part of a full-time 2-year 'training programme' with OM. We were repeatedly reminded that, although we were going to be doing evangelistic work, we were not going out as missionaries, but going to **learn**. My hunger for more reality in my walk with God was now being put into a down-to-earth, practical setting, tested by the difficulties of shared daily life on the team. We needed to be able to walk in the Spirit even when we didn't feel like it - perhaps **especially** then!

**Lamentations 3:7** says "It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young." The discipline of having to get on with day to day life while still holding firmly to your radical convictions. Not shrinking back from marrying up spiritual life with mundane reality and necessity. A very vital process!

But still it wasn't enough. Serving the Lord and learning from him and fellow Christians on a day-to-day basis left me wanting more. I wanted to **know** God, to be aware of his presence, to experience the power of the Holy Spirit in my life. When I was given the opportunity to speak, I felt that my words were weak and ineffective, that the lack of reality of my 'walk with God' made the things I tried to say sound empty and powerless - to me at the very least! No amount of following rules and patterns could fill this gap - I needed to find reality with God, and I was getting desperate.

Ten months of concentrated desperation later, I was at a small conference for young people from South India who were preparing to join teams working in the North. They wanted someone to speak on **Romans 6** and asked me to do it. I refused, as I felt I had absolutely nothing to share. They insisted, and so I reluctantly agreed to share what I could. When the Lord had started speaking to me 4 years earlier, I had seen a bit about what it means to be dead to sin and alive to Christ, so maybe I could at least repeat some of that, but it all felt theoretical and dead as far as I was concerned.

To cut a long story short, I did speak on **Romans 6**. I have no idea whether what I said that night was any use to anyone else, but the Lord was certainly speaking to me! He used **Romans 6:5** to show me the way: "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his."

When re-reading *The Normal Christian Life* four years earlier, I had begun to see the truth that my old life had died with Jesus on the cross and that the new life of the Holy Spirit in me was a direct result of his resurrection. More recently, I had begun to see the same sort of link between the ascension of Jesus to the right hand of the Father and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Now it was becoming clear that the whole 'package' was mine because I was '**united with him**'.

My months of desperation started to fade into oblivion. I was beginning to see the most valuable fact which I had somehow missed, that it was by the Father's doing that I was in Christ (**1 Corinthians 1:30**) and that he had made over to me in Jesus all that I could possibly need : Forgiveness, freedom from the power of sin and legalism, a life that pleases God - plus what I had been desperately seeking all these months - the real power of the Holy Spirit in my life.

I didn't need to plead for my Father to give me these things; they were **all mine already because I was already joined to Jesus**. I just needed to recognise what I had been given and simply take hold of what was already mine in him. So that's what I started to do!

Through my months of struggling, a few loving brothers had tried to help me by telling me that I already had everything I needed because our Father had already "blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ" (**Ephesians 1:3**), or telling me to learn to 'abide in Christ' (**John 15** and **John 2**). That had seemed unreal and impossible before but now it began to make perfect sense. Why? Because now my eyes were opening to the fact that my Father had placed me **IN** Jesus and so everything I needed really **was** mine in him, and 'abiding in Christ' simply meant living in all that wonderful provision, learning to take hold of it day by day.

The old saying is that 'preaching the gospel is one beggar telling another beggar where he found bread'. After all my hunger, I had certainly found bread now!

Once again, the Bible seemed to become a new book. Passages I had known for years began to open up with fresh meaning. Instead of pleading for forgiveness for my failures, I was able to acknowledge

them to my Father and know that forgiveness was mine in Jesus (**1 John 1:9**). Not presuming on the grace of God, but beginning to **know** it more in reality.

Out of nowhere, I started to pray "Father" as well as "Lord" - the fatherhood of God became real to me as I now knew that I was joined to his Son. I didn't need to strive for acceptance with him, I had begun to see that I was already accepted in Jesus (**Ephesians 1:6**).

And yes, I did begin to experience the power of the Holy Spirit in my life in a fresh way. Quietly, not as dramatically as I had somehow expected, but very real none the less. The 'old' truths of being dead to sin, dead to law and alive to God in Christ (**Romans 6:11, 7:6**), which I had begun to see back in my student lodgings, now seemed to snap sharply into focus, right in the centre of what Father was making real to me.

An illustration that summed it up for me then (and now) is this:- Take a piece of paper and put it in a book. Now post that book somewhere else. What happens to the paper? It goes with the book. Whatever happens to the book happens to the piece of paper. In much the same way, God has placed us in the Lord Jesus Christ and we are identified with him in his death, burial, resurrection and ascension - and much more!

Perfection? Of course not! If anything, I was more conscious than ever that I had definitely NOT 'arrived', but now I had been given a key that seemed to open every door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Needless to say, the years that have passed since then have not been perfect, either! But the 'key' of knowing that I am in Christ, with my life joined to his, continues to be the basic foundation of my life. I would not swap back to the sort of 'Christian life' I had before - for **anything!** And of course I long to see other people enjoy the same sort of freedom - 'one beggar telling another.'

Learning to live by the grace of God is not about building an ever-increasing 'portfolio' of Christian activity, trying to please him by doing more and more for him, and feeling more and more condemned when we fail. God shows us his mercy by not giving us what we do deserve and shows us his grace by giving us what we do not deserve. Discovering grace in this way is definitely NOT limited to our 'gateway' experience when we first come to faith in Jesus! Please do not be afraid to want more in your own experience - that is exactly what our Father wants for us, each one, whatever our age or experience so far.

As the old song says: "His love has no limit, His grace has no measure, His power has no boundary known unto men, for out of His infinite riches in Jesus He giveth and giveth and giveth again."

Over the next couple of weeks, I aim to start looking at what it means to live by the grace of God in a practical and spiritual way, being radical, dealing with the basis of our new life in Jesus.

"I am a new creation,  
No more in condemnation,  
Here in the grace of God I stand . . ."

Dave Taylor

August 2015

*"God will not give me humility or patience or holiness or love as separate gifts of his grace. He is not a retailer dispensing grace to us in packets, measuring out some patience to the impatient, some love to the unloving, some meekness to the proud, in quantities that we take and work on as a kind of capital. He has given only one gift to meet all our need: his Son Christ Jesus." **The Normal Christian Life (Watchman Nee), chapter 10.***

Further copies can be downloaded from [www.justonecandle.uk](http://www.justonecandle.uk)