

## Grace Rhys Thomas

In the John Wayne movie, “The Alamo,” Davy Crockett spoke these words to the commander of the garrison, William Travis:

Republic. I like the sound of the word. It means people can live free, talk free, go or come, buy or sell, be drunk or sober, however they choose. Some words give you a feeling. Republic is one of those words that makes me tight in the throat; the same tightness a man gets when his baby takes his first step or his first baby shaves and makes his first sound like a man. Some words can give you a feeling that makes your heart warm. Republic is one of those words.

About 180 men chose to fight against impossible odds, not for family or property or country, but for an idea, knowing that they would all die. Imperfect as they were, each one decided that this concept was bigger than they were.

Grace is one of those words. It’s not about me, what I stand to gain or lose. It’s about an idea that is a lot bigger than I am, an idea in which I can invest all that I am, and know that, whatever may come, my time on earth will be worth living.

The various writers of the New Testament held grace to be so fundamental that every letter except Hebrews, James, 1 John, and 3 John start out with some form of, “Grace and peace.” Many commentators have declared this to be a standard greeting of the time, which is false. Only Christians would have any concept of grace or peace. To assume that this was a throw-away line disposes with the purpose upon which their writings depended. In fact, all of those letters close with the same thought, “Grace be with you.” Grace was used like bookends, holding the rest of the Word in place.

But, like every great concept, grace has been badly explained and horribly applied so that a great number of churches just avoid the whole topic, which leaves a gaping hole in the plan of God, removing the reason why God created this universe in the first place.

Others have used grace as an excuse, a reason to sit down and do nothing. They are told that wanting to do something in response to grace is insulting to God, a sure ticket to the legalism of the Pharisees.

And still others have taken that legalism road, not out of self-promotion or a desire to earn God’s favor, but because, lacking other choices, we tend to fall back on the wisdom of this world, which has instilled in us a work ethic.

My objective this morning is summed up in Hebrews 12:28 “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, *let us have grace, by which we serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.*” Let us have grace – let us be like God and be gracious.

**Grace is about the nature of God, not that He gave something you did not deserve.**

If we make grace about what we have received, our religion becomes self-centered. If I'm in this for what I can get, I'm all about me. If I know a really nice and really rich person, if I hang out with that person because I expect to gain some of his wealth or benefit from his influence, I am just shallow and greedy. If I hang out with a really nice and really rich person because he is really nice, and I happen to get a nice present, that's a fortunate accident.

Grace is a character trait of God that happens to spill out over us in a really neat way – but the point is the character trait of God, not what I received. We rejoice that our God is gracious and that joy colors all we think and all we do. Paul wrote that repentance is a result of understanding the kindness of God, not His wrath. Peter wrote that we are drawn to God by His virtue and character, not His authority. If I do not understand this fundamental description of who God is, that God is gracious, then my concept of God is very likely to be that of the Great Power, the Punisher, the Judge – like Islam. What were the gods of the Gentiles like in the first century? Morally challenged? Capricious? Harsh? What are the gods of the Hindus like? Morally challenged? Capricious? Harsh? If we don't pick up on this primary character trait of God, grace, we may call it Christianity, but we really will be no different than the Muslims or the Hindus.

The grace of God is the central principle of creation. God created an incubator for faith with the goal of building a family that will last. Grace is central to the concept of family.

Hebrews 2:11 For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren.

God wants a family. But, as illustrated by the fact that many angels chose not to stick with the family despite living with God, just being in heaven is not enough to keep spirits going in the right direction. Not that God failed with the angels, so He made people, rather, the angels illustrate the point to us; God's long-term plan is to build a family that will survive, angels included (Ephesians 1:10, Hebrews 12:22 – 24). Obvious also is that a performance standard for this family is both inappropriate and hopeless. We don't assess our own families on a performance basis; why would God? If God were trying to build a sports team or a research lab or a government, perhaps He would review resumes and conduct interviews in order to select the best, although we know that even the best are not all they could be. No, God wants a family, not a corporation. That's why we are here, to develop faith within ourselves and to teach faith to angels (Ephesians 3:10). If God were to use a performance standard, a right-and-wrong standard, He would get really lonely really fast.

Grace, a giving nature, a nurturing attitude, is who God is. Just like in well-oiled families, grace holds us together. Good families, God-like families, hold together because we accept one another, especially when things aren't going so well. We don't excuse bad behavior, but we live with it and do our best to see that a particular bad choice doesn't bite us more than once. Like Paul wrote in 2 Thessalonians 1:11 – 12, “Therefore, we also pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of this calling [being called into the family of God] and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness [get on board with the purpose of family] and the work of faith with power [God gives us power to accomplish His objective] that [here's the reason] the name [the essential quality] of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified [paraded] IN you [we parade

Jesus' character traits] AND you in Him [your character traits will be paraded in Jesus] according to the GRACE of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Fulfilling God's eternal purpose happens as we, through the power of the Spirit that dwells in us, take on the character of Jesus so that we will make one big, fully functional family.

Getting something we did not deserve is not in this picture. Certainly, we benefit from God's gracious character. But “deserve” is a legalistic word. Certainly grace diverts us from the way we were going with its inevitable bad end. But we are not patched up to resume the race toward perfect behavior, we are taken out of the rat-race and dropped into love, hope, and joy. We need to look at this as a natural result of who God is, not in those self-centered terms of what I receive.

God made us to be a highly diverse family complete with its own interesting characters like weird Aunt Minnie or strange Uncle Claude who certainly was called up from the minors for his baseball skills since he has been in left field as long as I've known him. That's how grace works; grace understands diversity.

The nature of God is to reach out, to make available whatever is needed, and to encourage each of us to finish. Like in Ephesians 1:3 – 6, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ [God has provided what we will need to make this big family thing work], just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world [this whole family thing was the reason that God created the universe], that we should be holy and blameless before Him in love [how are we going to do that, Paul?], having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself [ahah! Adoption. Family doesn't operate on performance but on love and loyalty and rescuing each other], according to the good pleasure of His will [this is what God wants, this family], to the praise of the glory of His grace [and only grace can make a family function over the long haul], by which He made us accepted in the Beloved [accepted because we are family].”

### **Grace brings hope; Law brings hopelessness.**

Have you noticed that we can nit-pick choices to death? We can take a good idea and criticize every step of its execution so that, even if we succeed, we get no satisfaction, just guilt for not doing it better? A significant percentage of church-goers feel that way. Worse yet, many church goers are taught that they are worthless and corrupt with the supposed intent of glorifying God for rescuing us. I see two major problems with this. First, we accuse God of being a lousy engineer. He built a creation that went horribly wrong, or He built it horribly wrong on purpose. Both choices describe God as a bumbling idiot. Second, even the faithful never obtain the joy the New Testament describes.

Listen to 1 Peter 1:13, “Therefore gird up the loins of your mind [sounds like you are preparing for a really difficult task], be sober and [here it comes!] rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” I think Peter was being intentionally humorous, “Prepare for this arduous task! Be serious and focused!” Then he breaks the tension with, “Rest your hope fully upon grace.” Remember the character of God. His nature is to be gracious. Remember Jonah's complaint after God relented in His plan to destroy Nineveh?

Jonah was very upset that he had traveled all the way to Nineveh to preach their condemnation only to have God change His mind. Jonah said, “Ah, Lord, was this not what I said when I was still in my own country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm.”

Grace brings hope; law brings hopelessness. One of the great lines in the Bible is Galatians 2:20, but people forget about verse 21 that gives the means by which to accomplish it, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” But how do I get there? How do I live by the faith of Jesus? Verse 21, “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through law, then Christ died needlessly.”

Isn't that how many church-goers miss the joy? As Paul put it to the Galatians in 3:2, “This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?” Or in 5:4, “You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.”

Imperfect execution is not the issue, but that the choice was a response to grace by faith. How did Jesus live thirty-odd years and never sin? That's how Hebrews 4:15 describes Jesus, “Tempted in all points as we are, yet without sin.”

Imagine Jesus making a decision about whom to heal in a crowd of thousands of people. If perfect execution were the issue, Jesus would need to know the details of every person in the crowd, perhaps every person in the region, even every person in the world so that He could select exactly the right person to heal at that moment in time. Talk about information overload! If Jesus were fully human, going through a life on earth with no advantages, being tempted in all points just as we are, He did not have the brain power to process that much information. Of course, many explain this away by saying that Jesus was God on earth and knew all things just as He did before coming to earth. But if that were true, then Jesus, when He was on earth, was nothing like us. Jesus would have no need of faith because He knew all things. But several books in the New Testament state unequivocally that Jesus operated by faith and that we should live by that type of faith. The point is that imperfect execution is not the issue, but that the choice was a response to grace by faith.

As Romans 14:23 says, “All that is not of faith is sin.” If we make a choice as a response to grace through faith, that choice is acceptable, despite our ability to nit-pick that choice to death after the fact. With more information or more maturity or more faith, could we have made a better choice? Probably. But the choice is just fine with God because it was made as a response to grace through faith.

### **Grace is not about justice, but about justification.**

Justification is not a way to avoid justice, although that is how people commonly think. Self-justification – which is a fancy term for excuses. We make bad choices and, instead of relying on grace, we stick with the legalistic mentality and find ridiculous reasons why our actions were

really OK. We blame others, the situation, the devil – any port in a storm. If we can lay even a little blame on others, if we can show that someone else made bad choices, too, we have the irrational expectation that my part in this fiasco was minor, even escaping God’s notice, justifiable. That is not justification, it is self-deception – which is about the only way a lot of people can get through the day without sinking into deep dark depression and excessive misery.

Justification is being declared acceptable by someone with the authority to say so. And the only person who can make that call is God. Yes, there is also justice, but that is a different concept. Here’s how they go together, in Romans 3:23 – 26, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation [the place where we meet God] by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just [which is why Jesus had to be a sacrifice] and the justifier [grace assigns acceptability by intent, not execution] of the one who has the *faith* of Jesus.”

Jesus paid that debt; that’s justice, but that is not justification. Jesus’ sacrifice gets us back to even. But that just makes us available for grace. We are declared OK, justified, for a different reason. As Colossians 1:13 says, “He has delivered us from the power of darkness [that’s the paying our debt to justice part] and has transferred us into the kingdom of the Son of His love.” The currency of the kingdom of God is faith. The governing principle is grace. We are declared OK, justified, because we were released from our slavery to sin and taken out of the system of right and wrong, placed into the system of grace and faith. We have the choice. We can return to the world of right and wrong – but I predict it will turn out about like the last time: bankrupt. Or we can opt to trust the character of God, grace, and be accepted into the family thereafter making our choices based on the faith demonstrated by Jesus. Every choice does not have to be the absolute best choice that anyone could possibly make – it just needs to be a choice based on trusting what we know about God at that moment. As our faith grows, the quality of our responses grows, which is, after all, the point.

### **Grace is not about what you do, but why you do it.**

- **The character trait of God, grace, teaches us**
  - Titus 2:11 – 14 “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, *teaching us* that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself *His own special people, zealous for good works.*” Our reaction to knowing the grace of God is to live godly and do good stuff. The motive, knowing the grace of God, is the essential first step.
  - 1 Peter 2:1 – 3 “Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, up to salvation, *if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious.*” Growing up to being like Jesus on earth can be distasteful unless you first taste grace.
- **Understanding the grace of God stabilizes us**

- Hebrews 13:9 “Do not be carried away by various and strange doctrines. For it is good *that the heart be established by grace*, not with foods which have not profited those who have been occupied with them.” Our hearts, our motivation, our emotional investment are stabilized by understanding grace.
- Romans 5:1 – 2 “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also *we have access by faith into this grace* in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” Peace stabilizes. Further, through our faith we have access to this same character trait of grace. We display God’s brand of grace to the outside world. In this we stand and in this we rejoice. People are attracted to those who have something upon which to stand and who are truly enjoying what they are doing.
- Hebrews 4:16 “Let us therefore *come boldly* to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and *find grace to help* in time of need.”
- **The grace of God becomes part of us, as with the other character traits of God**
  - Colossians 1:3 – 6 “We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints; because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, of which you heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel, which has come to you, as it has also in all the world, and is *bringing forth fruit and growing*, as it is also among you *since the day you heard and knew the grace of God in truth*.” What fruit is that?
  - Colossians 3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, *singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord*.
  - Colossians 4:6 *Let your speech always be with grace*, seasoned with salt, that you may know how to answer each one.
  - Hebrews 12:28 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, *let us have grace, by which we serve God acceptably* with reverence and godly fear.

Step 1 in having a relationship with God is to realize that His character is dominated by grace. Our God is not wrathful or punishing or harsh. He is a truly gracious person. To become a child of God, we must be attracted by His kindness, His virtue, His character, His grace. If we come to God because of what we stand to gain, we are shallow and self-serving, capable of trashing heaven inside the first week.

Step 2 is to opt out of the world as we know it and trust the promises of the God of grace. We make a public declaration of our intention, of our commitment to letting the Spirit do its job of transforming us into the character of Jesus. We call that ceremony baptism.

Grace describes not what we get, but who God is. He is gracious about our flaws, but not a pushover. He picks us up and encourages us when we fail. He gives us what we need to succeed. When we trust Him, He adopts us into His family. Thereafter, we relate because we’re family.