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**Grace and Eternal Security:
How the Gracious Nature of Salvation Ensures that it is Forever**

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Introduction

I had finished up one of my usual German sermons. I now waited for someone in the congregation to approach me, smile and tell me what an embarrassing language “*fehler*” (mistake) I made. This time Rita, a young lady who had come to faith not many months earlier drew me aside out of the ear shot of the rest of the congregation. I thought to myself, “I wonder what mistake I made this time?” hoping it wasn’t too embarrassing. With a very intense look on her face, she gasped, “What if he changes his mind?” “What do you mean?” I asked. What if *He* changes his mind about me?” she repeated. Then I realized she was talking about God. I smiled to myself, thinking this was simply an innocent question coming from a new-born babe. But I quickly realized that she was genuinely panic-stricken. She knew salvation was a gift of God’s grace received by faith, but she was terrified that God might change His mind concerning His gift. I began to explain, “Rita, there is no way God will do that. He won’t” It was only with much explanation and great difficulty that she began to relax and realize that she was safe.

This scenario or something akin to it is one that many, if not most, believers go through at some time in their Christian development. Some pass quickly through while others suffer and struggle with such a fear much of their life. I am convinced that part of the reason for such a fear striking the heart of so many is due to an inaccurate understanding of biblical grace. Dan, another friend of

mine has often expressed his greatest nightmare that God will take back his salvation. Dan has heard all my theological arguments and generally agrees but emotionally he battles with this haunting thought. He cannot believe that God could accept him as he is or keep him saved in light of his imperfections. This is understandable, since the concept of “grace” really is foreign to the ears of the modern world.

The Nature of Biblical Grace

When the term “grace” is used in the Bible, it is not always employed with exactly the same meaning. The Old Testament term, *hānan* has several derivatives. The various Hebrew stems can refer to: charm, physical beauty (Prov 31:30), an attractive personality (Prov 11:16; 22:1), showing mercy and kindness (Gen 34:11; 39:4; Ex 33:13; Ruth 2:10), speaking kind words (Eccl 10:12), or even offering supplication (Zech 12:10). Most basically the term means to show favor or good will. The verb form depicts a deep heartfelt response of someone towards another who has a need. The overwhelming use of the main Hebrew stem has God as the subject (Gen 43:29; Num 6:25; 2 Sam 12:22; 2 Kgs 13:23; Isa 30:18, 19; 33:2; Mal 1:9). In the LXX, *hānan* usually means to show pity or have compassion. The most fundamental idea behind the term is that the favors God bestows are freely given not on the basis of claim or merit by the receiver.

The prevailing New Testament word for grace is *Charis*. The meaning of this word can refer to attractiveness or external beauty (Jam 1:11), kind speech (Col 4:6) divine influence on the heart (Acts 4:33; 11:23; 2 Cor 9:8; 12:9), the nature of God’s salvation (Acts 20:24; Rom 3:24; 4:16; Eph 2:10), thankfulness (Rom 6:17), and the antithesis of access to God by works or law (Rom 6:14, 15; 11:6). Like the Old Testament word *hānan* it most generally refers to goodwill, liberality, unmerited favor, kindness or a benevolence which one grants to another or experiences from another. “Grace” first and foremost is derived from the divine perfections, i.e. the very nature of God. God is in his basic character gracious (Ps 103:2-4, 8-14; 1 Pet 4:10; 5:10), and Jesus is said to be “full of “grace” (1 John 1:14). This divine attribute cannot be altered since God’s character is immutable (Jam 1:17).

In contrast to mercy which refers to God withholding punishment in a situation where it is due, grace expresses the corollary concept of God bestowing goodness and gracious favor

upon those who do not deserve it. In respect to redemption, God's love motivated Him to send Christ to die for the sins of all and the church is charged with bringing that good news to all, but because the heart of every individual is corrupt, none seek God (Jer 17:9; Rom 3:10-11; 8:7; Eph 2:1). In spite of this, it is then the grace of God that moves him to draw sinners to himself (John 6:44, 65). Thus, biblical salvation is said to be of "grace" (Rom 3:24; Eph 1:7; 2:8-9). That means it is a free gift obtained completely apart from the contribution of human effort. It is not granted on the basis of what a person is or is not, no matter how noble or wicked and it is never merited nor forfeited through anything a person does, no matter how good or evil. Rather it is granted due to something that lies within the nature of God, His gracious character, His purpose and His free choice. Once given and received, it endures due to the same perfections in God that cannot change (Jam 1:17). Good works never secure God's grace nor are they the reason for its continuance. Rather they are the evidence of a life that has experienced the grace of God. Though salvation is bestowed as a matter of God's grace, faith is the means by which it is received (Rom 3:21-25). Yet, faith is not a work and never said to earn God's grace.

Grace as a Sphere of Existence Incorporating both Justification and Sanctification

Generally evangelicals do not dispute the notion that justification, God's declaration that an individual is righteous, is based alone upon God's grace, his free gift of unmerited favor procured by the death of Christ and received through faith (Rom 3:22, 24; 5:1). But does the believer's growth and continuation in the faith function according to this same principle of God's grace or do works accomplish sanctification? If it can be demonstrated from the Scriptures that the justified person's continuation and growth in the faith depends on the power, purpose and grace of God, then it can be argued that the sanctification of the believer depends upon the same grace that justified him.

Paul maintains that justification by faith introduces the believer into the sphere of God's "grace" in which the he *stands* or remains (Rom 5:1-2). He goes on to argue that having been justified the believer shall be saved from God's wrath (Rom 5:9). In fact in the next verse he argues from the lesser to the greater when he maintains

that if we were reconciled while we were still enemies with God, how much more will we remain saved now that we are no longer enemies (5:10). The capstone of his argument is that sin cannot overcome grace, for even in the case where sin abounds grace abounds “all the more” (Rom 5:20). In fact, grace reigns unto eternal life (Rom 5:21). Paul has essentially argued that the believer has entered into the sphere of grace with its certain outcome of eternal life. According to Peter, not only did God “cause” us to be born again,” but we are presently “protected by the power of God through faith” to obtain the inheritance which is “imperishable” (1 Pet 1:3-4).

In 1 Thess 5:23 the apostle prays that God himself would sanctify those believers so that their spirit, soul, and body would be preserved complete without blame at the Second Coming of Christ. Clearly, the believer will not be able to contribute to the final stage of his sanctification when he is transformed (1 Cor 15:5-14; Phil 3:21) and presented faultless before Christ (Jude 24). John says we will be “like him” (1 John 3:2), Paul refers to it as our glorification. Those who were “justified” will by God’s grace and power be “glorified”(Rom 8:30).

However, other verses make it clear that in the time between justification and glorification not only does God work to sanctify His children, but during this stage of spiritual development, the believer is exhorted to take an active part. Paul urges the Philippians to “work out” their own salvation (Phil 2:12). This suggests they are to take what they have received and put it to work. He goes on to qualify his point by saying “for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Phil 2:13). Paul does not suggest they can do it according to their own ability. If God was not working in them, their efforts would be in vain. Peter teaches exactly the same point. He exhorts his readers to diligently “supply” moral excellence and other godly characteristics to their lives. But the reason they are exhorted to do this is because God had already given them “His divine power” (2 Pet 1:3). The writer to the Hebrews who so vehemently warns against apostasy also alludes to the fact that for the believer to continue in growth, God must aid them (Heb 6:3). Jesus taught the same thing, “Apart me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). In his letter to the Galatians Paul’s pointed argument to those believers, is that if they began in the “Spirit” (if they came to faith through the

miraculous regeneration caused by the Holy Spirit when they believed), how is it that they imagine they could continue in the faith by the works of the law. In other words, the present growth process calls for the believer's cooperation, but is never accomplished by the believer's own dedication. Growth in the faith is only possible by the working of the same principle, God's power mediated through the Holy Spirit (Gal 3:3). Paul argues in Galatians 5:22-23 that the Holy Spirit produces fruit, the attributes of sanctification. Sanctification, like justification, is dependent upon God.

**How grace ensures that failures in sanctification
do not cause loss of justification**

But what happens when the believer does not cooperate with God in this process,

when we disobey in small or major ways, or even when we engage in outright rebellion? Don't several Scriptures teach that the believer must continue in fellowship with God and obedience to the faith to be saved (Col 1:22-23; Heb 2:1; Jude 21)? Doesn't the Apostle John speak of the need for believers to be overcomers (Rev 2:5, 7, 17, 26; 3:5,12, 21)? Don't several passages warn against the real danger of apostasy and the resulting judgment (John 15:6; 2 Tim 4:9, 14; Heb 6:4-6; 2 Pet 2:1)? Didn't Paul warn the Galatians that they were in danger of being "severed from Christ . . . fallen from grace" (Gal 5:4)? Did he not also tell the Romans that they could be broken off from the olive tree if they did not stand by their faith (Rom 11:17-24)? Does not Paul teach that if we deny Christ, he will deny us (2 Tim 2:12)?

These questions and others like them have caused some throughout church history and up to the present day to conclude that the believer can apostatize after being justified so as to renounce Christ and be removed (or remove themselves) from the sphere of God's grace. Those who hold to this view point out that the NT refers to some who did depart from the faith and warns believers against such a danger (2 Tim 4:9, 14; Heb 2:1; 6:4-6; 2 Pet 2:1, 22). Apostasy is therefore not a hypothetical theory but a reality. In addition it is argued that God would never force His grace upon a person who no longer desires it. This viewpoint grants that no one can snatch the

believer out of the Father's hand (John 10:28) as long as the believer desires to remain there, but nothing precludes the possibility of a believer removing him- or herself. Thus, the argument is advanced that just as it is possible for any person to reject God's gift of justification, it is also possible for the individual who has received that gift to subsequently renounce the faith. In addition, we have all met such individuals who once claimed to be followers of Christ and even evidenced the fruits of new life and later deserted the faith. How do we explain these difficult passages that seem to some to imply that some believers do apostatize? How do we make sense out of our experience that tells that some believers have indeed deserted the faith?

There is a way of reasoning through this maze without impugning the nature and power of God's gracious gift. It is true that a person can reject the gift of God's justification, but it must be added that in our most basic nature we all do initially reject it (Rom 3:10; 8:7). It must be added that God works in the heart to draw individuals to His saving grace, if He did not, no one would come to faith (John 6:44). In the same way it also is true that the New Testament teaches that the believer must remain in the faith to be saved and is exhorted to do so (Col 1:22-23; Heb 10:36), but that is not all that the Bible has to say about the subject. We are also assured that God is able to keep the believer safe (2 Pet 2:9; Jude 24). In fact He works to do so, and promises to do so (Phil 1:6). John indicates that genuine believers are those who overcome (1 John 5:4). It is the miraculous work of God in not just electing, calling, and justifying but also in sealing and sanctifying that is part of the gift of salvation (Eph 1:13; 4:30). But this is not apart from the cooperation of the believer. The true regenerate person will continue in the faith (Heb 10:39).

If we were to concede that true believers can apostatize, then a second related question should be posed. Does God deal differently with them as His erring children than those who depart from the faith as individuals who had never experienced eternal life? In such cases, when the believer sins, he or she can expect God's discipline not His abandonment (Heb 12:5-11). Is God able to discipline only some of His children so that they return to the faith but not have the wherewithal to effectively bring back others? Of course not, He is able to discipline each and every child in His own time and way so

that His purpose is accomplished. He may use any number of ways to accomplish this task. Experiencing His discipline indicates that we truly belong to him (Heb 12:5). God may go so far as to remove us from this life as he did some in the Corinthian church (1 Cor 11:30). He may even deliver us over to the world or to demonic powers to discipline us (1 Cor 5:5). He may discipline us immediately (Acts 5:1-10), but most often He allows us time and space to repent (1 Cor 11:31; 1 John 1:9).

Some believers do enter stages of serious doubt concerning their faith and others dangerously engulf themselves in sin, but even these are to be rescued or disciplined so that their spirit will remain saved (1 Cor 5:5; Jude 22-23). In contrast to apostates, whose nature never really changes (cf. 2 Pet 2:1, 21-22), the believer's new nature is never transformed back into an unregenerate state of being dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1). Eternal life never becomes temporal (John 10:28) and the words "never perish" never mean that "in some cases they will perish." In the case of unregenerate apostates, the apostle John explains that they "went out from us because they were not of us" (1 John 2:19).

Some references to apostates patently refer to non-believers among whom the message of the gospel or the kingdom did not produce regeneration (Matt 13:3-7, 18-22; John 3:5), or to religious blasphemers who rejected the Messiah (Matt 12:30-33), or to false teachers (Matt 7:15, 22-24; 1 Tim 4:1-4; 2 Tim 3:1-10; 2 Cor 11:4; 2 Pet 2:1, 21-22; Jude 4-16), or to tares in the field (Matt 13:20, 21, 24-30, 36-43), or to those who have dipped their toes in the water but never made the plunge (Heb 6:4-5), or to those who spurn the New Covenant and reject God's grace (Heb 10:29), or to those who fellowship with but never really were part of the body of Christ (1 John 2:19). In all these cases, the actions of apostasy belie the true unregenerate condition of those individuals in question (2 Pet 2:1, 22; 2 John 9). In this context, the words in 2 Tim 2:12 that warn, "If we deny Him, He will deny us," most likely refer to those who have rejected Christ and never come to know Him. Jesus refers to such cases in Matthew 7:15-23.

In other cases, some verses refer to believers who experience or are threatened by God's temporal (rather than eternal) judgment. This was the case of those Corinthians who died as a result of God's

judgment (1 Cor 11:30). Yet, there is no indication that they lost their eternal salvation (cf. 1 Cor 3:15). Perhaps Ananias and Saphira belong to this category (Acts 5:1-11). Finally there are those verses concerning which it is difficult to determine if the judgment is eternal in nature or merely of a temporal earthly nature (e.g. 1 John .5:16-17). Any combination of these explanations is possible.

Determining who is in the faith and who is out is not ultimately a duty given to the church. We can honor a confession of faith and observe the fruit of the life of those who confess Christ (Matt 7:15-16), but in the final analysis it is an impossible task to determine with complete accuracy who has experienced God's regeneration and who has not for we cannot see the heart (2 Sam 16:7) God has expressly asked us to leave the separation of the tares from the wheat up to Him (Matt 13:24-30, 36-43; 1 Cor 5:11-12). Even the Apostle Paul appeared to be uncertain as to the true spiritual condition of some of those in Corinth (cf. 2 Cor 12:5). Those who were in danger of being severed from Christ in Galatia were those who were seeking to be justified through the law (Gal 5:4). It was not the individual Romans who risked losing their personal salvation but the Gentiles as a group who had risked losing their new privilege of equal access to God, but only if they rejected faith in Christ which precludes experiencing the new birth (Rom 11:17-24). In Hebrews the writer uses the negative example of the apostates in order to encourage genuine believers to press on to maturity. In essence he says, apostasy is characteristic of those who reject the provision of the Messiah, but endurance should be the characteristic of those who have embraced the Messiah. Therefore, they must press on. Just as judgment awaits all apostates, reward awaits all who press on.

According to this writer, there is no contradiction of NT teaching. There is no possibility that one of Christ's sheep will ultimately be lost. It is the writer to the Hebrews who lays down some of the most severe warnings in the NT, who nevertheless maintains that God is "able to save for ever," that most of his readers were truly saved, and that they did not belong to those who "shrink back to destruction" (Heb 7:25; 10:39). Essentially this is what Jesus says in John 10:28-29; 17:12, "they shall *never* perish." The loss of one sheep would impugn the power and character of God. God not only saves by grace but He also keeps us by His grace and in His grace.

The Scriptures are clear that sanctification is both a work that God does and a responsibility in which the individual is to take an active part (Phil 2:12-13). The believer does not work to obtain salvation nor does he work to secure its continuance rather he takes that salvation and works it out in his daily life--that is he puts it to use. At this, he is to work very hard, but the purpose is not to obtain or keep it, but make it effective in his life. The same principle is true for perseverance. God must keep us (John 10:27-28; Rom. 8:38-39; Heb 7:25; 1 Pet 1:3-5; Jude 24), at the same time we are called to persevere in the faith (Matt 10:22; 1 Cor 16:13; Heb 3:14; Rev 3:11). Historically the Calvinist doctrine has emphasized the divine promise to keep the believer while Arminian advocates have stressed the human responsibility involved. In reality both comprise the total picture, but not in equal efficacy. God in His grace makes sure that the believer continues by working in the believer's will (Phil 2:12-13). In His prayer to the Father, Jesus notes that believers are a gift of the father to the son and that none of them were lost except for Judas which was according to God's divine knowledge and purpose (John 17:6, 9, 12). Jesus prayer includes the request for the Father to keep all believers and bring them into His glory (cf. 11, 20 24). Thus, when Peter later denied the Lord, he was restored by God's grace (John 21:15-22).

The Relationship between Grace, Divine Glory and Security

If theologians have differed on this subject over the centuries, is it something we need to continue to discuss? Is the issue of eternal salvation really so important that we need to continue to defend it? What is at stake? It appears to me that there are at least three significant matters at stake: (1) upholding what we interpret to be the scriptural teaching on the matter; (2) the confidence of the individual believer in God's character and promise; (3) and ultimately the glory of God.

(1) We don't defend this truth because we are uncomfortable with its antithesis; we defend it because we believe it is an accurate representation of what the Bible teaches. Of course those holding the antithetical view also call upon Scripture to defend their view, but we no less. The issue then is which interpretation of the passages can best be validated by a composite view of Scripture. That is what each interpreter or reader of the Scriptures must decide.

(2) Regarding the issue of the believer's confidence in God, let me return to my opening illustration. Jesus bets his reputation on the fact that he will never leave us or forsake us (John 10: 28; Heb13:5-6), even when we (as Peter did) forsake the Lord, the Lord remains faithful (2 Tim 2:13). Peter was forgiven and reinstated (John 21:15-22). There is no experience more horrifying, particularly at a time of serious trial in ones life or a time of serious sin, than feeling that the Lord has actually deserted the believer. There is a great gulf between feeling genuine guilt for sin and feeling that God has or can or may abandon me. If He saved us when we were yet sinners, will He not continue to save us when we sin (Rom 5:8-10)? Our Arminian brothers and sisters would be the first to point out that the Lord does not desert those who fear His desertion, in fact such a fear is a sign that that individual has not deserted the Lord. Rather those who lose their salvation are those who want to leave the Lord and desire for the Lord to leave them. But it is not possible for a true child of God to ultimately and successfully evade the Lord (Ps 139:7; Jonah). Regardless of who is categorized as a person once saved but now lost, the very idea that it can and does happen, creates two responses in many believers, obedience motivated mainly out of fear, and the plaguing fear that one has moved into the realm of the apostate. Needless to say that this does not make for a comforting relationship with the Lord. Regarding the counter-argument that eternal security may lead to license and immorality, it must be pointed out that Paul's opponents argued a similar point, that grace would lead to license (Rom 6:1). On the contrary, it alone provides the proper foundation and motivation for the Christian life. In a similar way, the teaching regarding the believer's security is designed to produce confidence and thankfulness that motivate the believer to love and serve the Lord.

(3) Finally, the ultimate issue is the glory of God. The believer's security is not defended merely so we can feel more secure in our relationship to the Lord regarding our eternal destiny, but its rival calls into question the teaching that salvation is entirely a work of God. It is a phenomenal work; not only in the way it was procured but also in the way it reveals the depths of God's mercy and love. Salvation resulting in obedience produces praise, but the knowledge or experience that even when I am unfaithful He will not abandon me, produces another level of praise all together. He may discipline me

with kindness, with trials, with whips, even with physical death, but He will never leave me nor forsake me. Ultimately I will never be severed from the love of God in Christ Jesus. (Rom 8:39; 2 Tim 2:13; Heb 13:5). To remove this aspect from graciousness in the salvation He has wrought, robs God of some of the glory it was intended to produce.