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“UNMERITED” FAVOR?

Sometimes the word Grace is defined as “unmerited favor.” Does this imply that there is such a thing as “merited favor”? Is this an accurate biblical definition of grace? What, truly, is grace and what are its implications for us?

Scholars simply define the Greek word *charis* as grace or favor. Sometimes it is translated using one word; sometimes it is translated using the other. It neither implies nor requires some modifier such as “unmerited.” Grace or favor simply is what it is, without need for amplification.

Favor, even in our own experience, is generally independent of merit or the lack thereof. Many people put their children’s art work on the refrigerator. That is an act of grace. It is doubtful that any of those people put up the art only when the child is deserving of recognition and take the work down in punishment for breaking household rules. The art goes on the refrigerator regardless of merit (either of the individual or the artistic merit of the work). Sometimes parents even praise the child for something done properly just *because* they have acted in a way that lacked merit. Grace is extended in one area in order to redirect wrongdoing in another.

Sports fans are quite familiar with the independence of favor and merit. An athlete may be quite good at what he does, and some people will not like him simply on the basis of the team he plays for. Some will not favor him simply because he is so good at what he does. If this same athlete changes teams to the one the fan roots for, the grace afforded him changes. It is not based on personal merit, but on something as minor as the team that pays him.

God’s grace is unexplainable. There are those who teach that God makes a choice of who will be saved and who will not, perhaps even before the person is born. That would certainly be unmerited favor, but it does not jive with God’s being God. Unlike his creation, God does not have grace toward some and not toward others. God does not choose who will be the recipient of his grace and who will not. “For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men.” (Tit 2:11) He does not say that one person is unworthy of his grace while another is worthy. His grace is universal. In that he is different from most

people. Using the earlier example, some might be willing to post pictures on the refrigerator from more than just their own children (perhaps that of other relatives or friends); few would solicit artwork of questionable quality from everyone in the world (unless you call your refrigerator YouTube™).

Is there such a thing as “merited” favor? Paul argues that there is not. “And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work.” (Rom 11:6) A short while before that, he says, “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Rom 6:23) If it is merited, it is not favor.

Does universal grace imply universal salvation? If God has favor for everyone, does that mean everyone will be saved from their sins? Hardly. Grace and mercy are inextricably entwined, but they are not the same thing. Everyone is a beneficiary of God’s grace; only a few benefit from his mercy. Paul does not tell the Ephesians “by grace are ye saved, regardless.” Rather he states, “By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.” (Eph 2:8) The grace is extended to everyone. Jesus died so that all sins could be forgiven. That does not mean all sin will be forgiven. The condition of, and means unto, salvation from sin is faith, not grace. Grace makes salvation a possibility; trust makes it a reality.

Grace is, by definition, independent of merit. There is no reason to include that qualifier in the description because it implies something that is not true. Grace is available to all, even though none of us have merit in ourselves. But that is what makes God who he is.

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SIMEON AND ANNA

I was young then. About the age of the young couple who brought their son to the Temple to be circumcised. They were clearly not from Jerusalem. Their dress and speech made them out to be Galileans. Probably they had come south because of the registration for the Roman tax. Someone I talked to heard that they had been staying in Beit Lechem for the past week or so. That was where the child had been born, and now they had traveled the twelve miles into Jerusalem to keep the Law.

I don't know that the Romans were going to get much of a tax out of this couple. He was clearly a laborer, possibly a stonemason or a carpenter, judging from his muscular build and the callouses on his hands. He was no stranger to a hammer and possibly a saw. I noticed how he looked at the Temple with an appraising eye, as if he knew of the workmanship that had gone into the building for the past twenty years.

Actually, the Temple itself was torn down and replaced in a year and a half. That alone would have amazed this man, as it did all who had feared that once Herod tore down the old Temple he would not build a new one. But work was still going on; the outbuildings are still being constructed these forty years later. Over 1,000 priests were occupied in the construction of the buildings.

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Priests, not carpenters and masons, because only priests could enter the Temple proper. Still, this man must have admired the work they had done.

He was a poor man, though. I don't know what caught my attention about this couple; maybe just that they had come with a baby. Nevertheless, I noticed them buying turtledoves for the sacrifice. That is how I knew the Romans would probably get less out of them than they had spent traveling for the registration. The sacrifices for a newborn are very specific, and turtledoves are only a last resort for the poor. Since then I have even known some people who would borrow money to buy a lamb, just so people would not know how poor they really were.

As a result of whatever intrigued me about this couple in the beginning, I followed them from the animal

sellers into the inner court. It was there I observed two unusual incidents. If I had been intrigued before, now I became obsessed. So much so, in fact, that I have spent the rest of my life keeping track of the young child. A few words in the Temple court actually changed the course of my life.

Simeon was famous in the Temple. Even as young as I was, I knew the stories about Simeon. Some might have thought he was crazy. Most, however, said he had received a message from God. I don't know what he was like in his younger days, but as an old man he was famous as a devout man, a true Tzaddik (a righteous man). He said he was only alive because he was awaiting the Messiah. He could be seen throughout Jerusalem, helping the poor, but he was most often seen in the Temple courts. Nor was today an exception. In fact, his talmidim or disciples were whispering that he had come today at the prompting of the Ruach Hakodesh, the Holy Spirit of God. Something significant would happen today.

I watched as old Simeon and the young couple seemed on a collision course. He clearly was seeking them out, in spite of all the crowd of young mothers. He walked directly up to them and spoke.

Taking the child in his arms (over the objections of the mother), he prayed, "Adonai, let me die now in peace, as you have said. I have now seen your salvation with my own eyes; a salvation you have prepared in the sight of all people. It is a light to disclose you to the nations, your shekinah for your people Israel."

This was no casual prayer in the corner. Simeon never did anything casually. I believe he was speaking to God, but also to the people gathered around. It certainly had an effect on me, then and for all these years since. If he was saying he could die in peace, he believed this child was Messiah. When a Tzaddik like Simeon declares Messiah has come, people listen. Clearly this mother and father were affected.

Then he turned to the child's mother, whom I later came to know as Miriam. He proclaimed, "Lo, this is appointed to bring many in Israel down and to raise many up. It is a sign that many will try to contradict. Your own soul will be pierced as with a sword in order to reveal the thoughts of many hearts."

As is true with many such prophecies, nobody understood what Simeon was saying at the time. It has taken me forty years to fully comprehend that Miriam would see her son die so that many could be forgiven of their sins. Many would believe and live, and many would stumble and fall because of Simeon's declaration that this was Messiah.

That alone would have been enough to catch my attention, but the day was not over. The second event followed on the heels of the first.

Anna had heard the commotion. If Simeon was famous in the Temple, Anna could be said to be part of the Temple. She had lived in the Temple as long as anyone could remember. Well, maybe she had gone elsewhere while Herod was rebuilding it, but some claim he had just built it up around her. Eighty-four years she had been a fixture in the Temple, and she was now approaching her century. As a young woman she had been married for about seven years. After her husband died she devoted herself to prayer and service in the Temple. There was not an hour of the day she could not be found there. So of course she heard what Simeon had prayed. I would say she came running, but at her age few people can run. (Truth be told, I have never met anyone else that was her age.)

Anna bat Phanuel was well known as a prophetess. I guess when you spend that much time in the presence of God you have no choice but to speak his word.

There are many that look for the redemption of Israel. Many of them act in secret, because it is not popular, in front of the Romans, to let what may be considered treasonous thoughts be expressed openly. The Romans were not allowed in the Temple courts. Even if they had been, they probably would not have touched Anna. That would have sparked the riots they wanted to avoid.

She was not a rebel. Her idea of the redemption of Israel seemed to be one of turning the people back to God. She may have spent all her time in the Temple, but she still knew the religious temper of the people. Maybe because she spent so much time among the priests she knew of the need for something or someone to turn Israel back to God. Once she heard what Simeon had said, she wasted no time. She stopped everyone she saw in the courts and told them Messiah was come. Some people ignored her, as they will an old woman. I could see she had caught the same fever I had. She would not live to see what I have since, but she was content with what she had seen.

Miriam and her husband left the Temple after making the appropriate sacrifices. The priests saw only a young mother bringing her son to be circumcised. They had heard all the commotion, but it did not seem to have meant anything to them.

I have spent my life keeping track of the child. When I learned that he came from Galilee, I moved there. When he became an itinerant rabbi, I followed him. It has cost me everything I had, but I don't regret it. I was there when he healed the lame and blind. I followed him into the wilderness, and was satisfied with a meal that came from a few loaves and fish; I even helped gather the

leftovers into baskets. I traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem and back again. He raised the dead. I saw it! He even raised the dead! (I know I am repeating myself, but once you see something like that you have to repeat it.)

I was with the Teacher on his last trip to Jerusalem. Oh, that was a good time, and a bad one. There were a large number of us who gave up everything to follow the Teacher and hang on every word. So it was with heavy hearts we saw him convicted, and executed by the Romans. That was the saddest time of my life.

But as life is lived in cycles, that sadness was followed by joy when we saw him after his resurrection. I repeated myself when I spoke of raising the dead; I have to do so again here. He himself arose from the dead! He lived after he died. I was in a crowd of about five hundred people that saw him. It was truly him. I know, because I had spent my life devoted to him. He arose!

Now after all these years I understand what Simeon was saying, and what Anna was so happy about.

Maybe because she spent so much time among the priests she knew of the need for something or someone to turn Israel back to God.

The Romans are still here. Life in Israel has not changed. But life has changed.

We understand the prophets now. We understand Simeon and Anna now. We have seen the consolation and redemption of Israel. And recently we have even heard that some of the Romans themselves are becoming followers of the Teacher. Simeon said it. "A light to the nations." Many among the Jewish people are believers. "The Shekinah of your people, Israel." Just as the glory of God filled the first Temple, so the glory of the Teacher fills the world.

I was young then; I am old now. Maybe not as old as Anna, but I might make it. Or I might not. The Romans are beginning to hear of The Way, and many of them are afraid. When people in power begin to fear, nothing good can come of it. But what does that matter?.

I was in the Temple courts forty years ago. I heard Simeon. Anna stopped me as I was following a young couple and their baby with my eyes. She told me what he would become. Now I have seen it for myself. Simeon could not stay silent. Anna had to stop everyone and tell them. And so do I.

(Based on Luke 2:21-40)

CITIES OF THE MEDES

“In the ninth year of Hoshea the king of Assyria took Samaria, and carried Israel away into Assyria, and placed them in Halah and in Habor by the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.” (2 Kings 17:6) This was about 722 BCE.

In about 576 BCE some of the Jews returned from Babylon to their homeland to rebuild the Temple, at the command of Cyrus the Great, a Mede. In approximately 481 BCE, if Ahasuerus is the Xerxes who styled himself King of the Medes and Persians (and also King of the World), the Jewish people “from India unto Ethiopia” were saved from genocidal destruction.

Although the book of Esther does not mention God by name, his hand is clear in everything in the book. But perhaps God’s reach can be seen much farther than just the events in that book.

In Babylon the Jewish people received a mixed reaction. According to the book of Daniel, some of the more intelligent Jews gained positions of power. That, in itself, brought ethnic tensions between the Jews and the Babylonians. The accounts of the destruction of Judea by Nebuchadnezzar also show a dichotomy. The Babylonian king showed great cruelty toward one king of Judah (Zedekiah, 2 Kings 25:7), but his successor played the gracious host for another former king (Jehoiachin, 2 Kings 25:27-30). In the three deportations from Judah, the quality of the captives went steadily downhill, until those deported in the final destruction were barely above the abject peasantry. The Babylonians left only the poor of the land in Judah. (2 Kings 25:7)

When the Medes and Persians took power about seventy years later, however, one of the first acts of Cyrus the Great was to allow the Jewish captives to return to

rebuild Jerusalem. Why was he so kindly disposed? Some historians claim it was simply Medean policy to allow all peoples captured by the countries they conquered to return home. Others say it was specifically the Jewish people that were singled out. If so, why? Could it be because the Jewish people had lived peaceably in the cities of the Medes for almost a century and a half? Did God see that the northern tribes were settled in the cities of the Medes, just so Cyrus would have had a pleasant experience with them, making him more disposed to assist the Jews of Babylon?

That the Jewish people continued in the cities of the Medes long after Cyrus is clear in the book of Esther. That book takes place perhaps almost a century after Cyrus acceded to the Persian throne, yet there were Jews living in the palace city of Susa (about 250 miles east of Babylon). The writer of the book indicates that there were Jewish settlements throughout the Persian Empire, perhaps as far east as India. There was enough hatred of the Jews that Ahasuerus was easily persuaded to order the total destruction of the Jewish people. (Perhaps a little prejudice, and \$180 million in today’s US currency.) Yet there was sufficient fear of, or respect for, the Jews that he was also easily convinced to countermand his order. (Or he was influenced by a pretty face, as many people in power have been. Ahasuerus was notoriously wishy-washy.) One is again led to wonder if the transplantation of the Jews into the cities of the Medes almost two centuries before did not have some influence on the establishment of the holiday of Purim.

(Purim falls on February 24 in 2013 Gregorian/Adar 14, 5773 Hebrew.)

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