

Channels of Grace (Discussion Guide on page 11)

2 Corinthians 1:1-2

Have you ever watched a movie with someone who ruined it for you because they kept telling you what's going to happen next? It's not fun. However, when it comes to reading the bible, understanding the plot line and where it's all headed, doesn't take away from it; rather it enables us to read the Bible in a transformative way. Jesus said to the religious leaders: *"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me,"* (John 5:39).

What is the grand theme of the bible? The bible from start to finish is one grand story that points us to the restorative and redemptive grace that is found in Christ. It's not a self-help manual for how to live your best life now. The Apostle Peter wrote: *"Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the **grace** that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, ¹¹ inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories"* (1 Peter 1:10-11).

The prophets prophesied about that **grace** that was to be ours in Christ—a **grace** that not only saves us but enables us to live the Christian life.

Concerning godly living, the Apostle Peter, after his opening blessing of grace and peace, wrote, *"His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence,"* (2 Peter 1:3).

When God through the word exhorts us to live godly lives, He does not expect us to do so in our own power. He's not instructing us about what we need to achieve for Him. He is pointing us to the divine gifts that Jesus provided, which are manifested in our lives as we grow in the knowledge of Jesus and in dependence upon His grace.

As one bible teacher noted: "The Bible is NOT an instruction manual for your life. That wouldn't work anyway, seeing as people didn't do so

well with the Old Testament law. **The Bible is solely and strictly a testimony of the grace that has come TO YOU, through what Jesus did at the cross.** If you're reading the Bible correctly, you should always be reading about what Jesus accomplished for you in His flesh (1 John 4:1). Even if you're reading about godly living, it is meant to testify about what Jesus did for you. It turns out godliness isn't a requirement, but a **gift inside of us** through the [restorative] work of Jesus." reforminus.com

With this in mind, note that in the last chapter of 2 Corinthians the Apostle Paul writes: *"Your restoration is what we pray for"* (v.9) and in verse 11 he writes: *"Aim for restoration,"* (11a) and then he closes with a benediction that is similar to how he opened his letter: *"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all"* 2 Corinthians 13:14).

Now in Paul's day, Corinth had become the third most important city of the Roman Empire. Because it was a narrow strip of land with sea on either side, Corinth grew to become a great commercial trade power. The population of Corinth was made up of a diverse people from all over the Roman Empire seeking a better life. Because there was no dominating class in Corinth, wealth became the sole factor for respect and influence.

As one Bible scholar noted: "Corinth was a free-wheeling "boom town," filled with materialism, pride and self-confidence that comes with having made it in a new place and with a new social identity. The "pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-boot-straps" mentality that would become so characteristic of the American frontier, filled the air." Scott Hafemann

So, although the Corinthians believers experienced the grace of God in salvation, when the Apostle Paul left Corinth, the Corinthian believers drifted spiritually and began looking to the wisdom of the Corinthian world to better themselves. Rather than looking to the grace of God and their identity in Christ, the Corinthians resorted to the self-reliant and self-serving lifestyle that characterized their surrounding culture.

Because Paul's self-giving and counter-cultural way of life did not fit with the way of Corinth, some in the church even began to question his Apostolic authority. But Paul, who found his identity and sufficiency in Christ, did not write them off. Instead, he wrote to them with the aim of restoration through the grace of God so that they could more fully experience the resurrection life.

Main idea: God pours out His restorative grace so that we become more than reservoirs but instruments through whom He can display His grace to others.

This morning we are going to see how God's grace works in us to transform us into channels of His grace to others.

1. Receive His grace

Point number one: God works in us as we **receive His grace**. Keep in mind that while Paul, who planted the church, was away attending to other missionary endeavors, the Corinthians began to conform to their surrounding culture. Like the culture of Corinth, they were looking to wealth as the primary factor for respect and influence. As a result, not only were they losing sight of their identity in Christ, but also of the grace that He supplies for all of life.

Paul lived a different way of life. While the Corinthians were giving into the mindset that wealth and status would gain them influence and respect, Paul understood that God's strength was made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthian 12:9-10). When in his weakness and helplessness he leaned hard on Jesus, he experienced that God's power was sufficient for all of life.

But because Paul boasted in his weakness, because his bodily presence was weak, (2 Cor. 10:10) because he didn't try to gain influence through clever talk and rhetorical flare, because he didn't gain wealth from preaching the gospel, those who were dominated by Corinthian values rose up in opposition to his leadership (2 Corinthians 11:3-6). And he was concerned that these opponents were

undermining the message of the gospel and leading others astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ (2 Corinthians 11:3).

But Paul did not allow what other people thought about him to shape who he was or to divert him from his calling. His identity and sufficiency were in Christ. Therefore, he opens his letter by identifying who he was and who the Corinthians were in Christ. He writes: *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia.*" (2 Corinthians 1:1).

Notice that Paul, whose prayer and aim in writing to the Corinthians was their restoration, did not point to his Jewish pedigree or the prestigious religious training he received (Philippians 3). Rather, he identifies himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. In other words, Paul was not an apostle of Jesus by his own authority, but by the authority of God.

In general, the word apostle means sent one. Paul didn't send himself. He was sent by the Holy Spirit on a mission for God to establish churches for Christ and strengthen them through the word of God so that they might spread the fame of Jesus in the world.

Now it's important to note that Paul and the apostles of Jesus, who all saw the risen Lord, had special divine authority, like the authority to write the New Testament. But in a sense, all believers are sent ones. All believers have been uniquely called by God to build up the church and to be a witness for Christ in the world.

And like Paul, we've been called not because of our pedigree, social standing or religious training, but by the grace of God. In 2 Corinthians 15:8, when explaining how the risen Lord appeared to the apostles, Paul shares: *"Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am,"* (2 Corinthians 15:8).

O brothers and sisters, we are not only **saved** by the grace of God, we are **sanctified** by the grace of God and we are **sent** by the grace of God. If you received by faith the grace of God in Christ, which justified you before a holy God, at that moment, you also received through the Spirit all that you need to walk with God and to work for God. In the bible, the word grace means more than not getting something we don't deserve. Grace speaks of divine blessings and the supernatural enablement at work within us.

Notice that in Philippians 2:13, after calling the believers to work out their own salvation, Paul clarifies, *"for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure"* (Philippians 2:13). God working in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure is grace.

It's important to note also that in the opening of his letter to the Corinthians, Paul not only identifies himself as an "apostle" of Christ Jesus by the will of God, but he identifies Timothy, as "our brother," the church of Corinth as the "church of God," and all the believers in Achaia, which is the region in Corinth, as "saints" (v.1) All these identifications, apostle, brother, church of God and saints, or holy ones, are all true by the grace of God in Christ Jesus. Paul is not just saying nice things to the Corinthians because that's what you're supposed to do at the beginning of a letter.

Like us Chicagoans, the Corinthians were in a spiritual battle not to conform to the mindset of Corinth. And to resist conformity, they needed to bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10). To do so they needed to own their identity in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). They were not of this world. Rather, by grace they were and we are saved, sanctified and sent to be the church of God—a called out people who proclaim the excellencies of Christ. (2 Corinthians 4; 1 Peter 2:9-10).

This bring us to are second point, rely on His grace.

2. Rely on His grace

After Paul's opening words, which identified who Paul and the Corinthians were in Christ, Paul gives his blessing of: "*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*" (2 Corinthians 1:1-2).

If Paul already established the identity of the Corinthians in Christ, as the church of God, as the family of God, and as saints, and if they were all that and more by the grace of God, what's the point of his blessing? Because although Paul was affirming their identity in Christ, in the rest of the letter Paul calls them to live out in their practice who they are in their position. And remember, grace not only makes possible their position in Christ, grace working in them is what will enable them to live out their identity.

Therefore, Paul gives the blessing, "*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*" Paul is not expecting them to live according to their new identity in their own strength. He knows that they must rely on a fresh supply of the grace of God day by day.

Later, in 2 Corinthians 2:16b, when explaining the life and death implications of the call of God to be living witnesses for Christ, gripped by the weight of this responsibility, Paul exclaimed, "*Who is sufficient for these things?*" (2 Corinthians 2:16b).

In the next chapter, Paul answers this weighty question when he writes: "*Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, ⁶ who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life*" (2 Corinthians 3:5-6).

Paul wasn't mightily used of God because he thought that he had it all together. He accomplished great things for God because he knew how helpless he was apart from the grace of God. God doesn't use anyone mightily until they recognize how needy they are and cast themselves upon the sufficiency of Jesus.

God's power is not lacking in our lives and churches because we think ourselves too weak, but because we think too much of ourselves—

because we are too self-sufficient—because many churches today think that they figured out how to draw a crowd without the need for the Holy Spirit. And the acid test of our devotion and dependence upon God is prayer. Daniel Henderson often says, prayerlessness is our declaration of independence from God.

In an article on the dynamics of God’s grace, Nancy Lee Demoss writes: “I know that there are people in this room who are facing major decisions, and there's financial pressure. There's pressure in the workplace. There are career issues. It can be huge things. It can be little things, but we need God's grace. It's those circumstance of life that squeeze us, that press in on us, that make us cry out to the Lord and say, “Lord, I can't do this without You.”

I've often said over the years, “Anything that makes me need God is a blessing.” Anything that makes me more desperate for Him, anything that makes me cry out to Him and say, “Lord, help!” is a blessing.” I don't know if there's any prayer that's more precious to the heart of our Heavenly Father.”

How many of you know, the worst place to be in life is to not recognize your need for God’s grace. Because of our tendency toward self-sufficiency, sometimes our greatest need is a need so that we might lean on Jesus and find that His grace is enough.

Now being fully aware of his need and the need of the Corinthians, before giving them any instructions about living a counter cultural Christian life, Paul shares the prayer of his heart for them, “*Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ*” (v.1). How many of you know, the peace of God, which is a fruit of the Spirit, is the outflow of the inflow of grace in our hearts.

Peace is not the absence of trouble; it’s the presence of Jesus. When the Spirit of grace is at work within us, He makes the power and presence of God known to us which produces peace from God—a peace the surpasses all understanding (Philippians 4:6-7).

It's important to note that Paul's blessing of **grace to you** for the Corinthians was not only the prayer of his heart, but he also understood that grace is mediated through the word of God. Remember, that the word of God, which Paul was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write, is more than an instruction manual.

In 2 Corinthians 3:6, Paul wrote, "*the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*" The Spirit breathes life into us through the medium of God's Word. In Psalm 119 verse 50, the Psalmist declared, "*This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life.*"

The word of God does more than instruct us about what we need to accomplish. The Spirit reveals the glory of Christ to us through the Word. And beholding His glory allows us to see our need in light of His glory and the grace that only God can supply to live for His glory (2 Corinthians 3:17-18).

In light of this, notice that Paul also gives a similar benediction of grace and peace at the end of his letter to the Corinthians, with a subtle but significant difference. He writes: "*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all*" (2 Corinthians 13:14).

Now, whereas in his opening blessing the prayer of his heart for the Corinthians is *grace to you*, at the close of the letter his prayer is for the grace of the Lord to be *with you*, along with the manifest love of God and the fellowship of the Spirit. It's important to note that this subtle but significant difference between the opening and closing benedictions is also found in Paul's other letters.

I want to suggest to you that the difference lies in Paul's understanding that the word of God is a means of how God's strengthening and sanctifying grace comes "to us" through the Spirit. In other words, knowing that when the reading of the letter came to a close that the word of the Spirit would have been delivered to the church, Paul was confident that the grace of God, which he prayed would come **to them**, would now be **with them** to enable them to live out their identity in Christ.

This brings us to our final point, release His grace

3. Release His grace

Brothers and sisters, God's grace comes **to us** through various means, like the word of God and prayer. And it comes **to us** so that it would be **with us**. And His grace is **with us** not only to bring restoration in our lives, but so that, like a Paul, we would release grace and become channels of grace in the lives of others.

In 1 Corinthians 15:10, Paul wrote, "*and his grace toward me was not in vain.*" In other words, it wasn't futile, it wasn't wasted, it wasn't for nothing. He goes on, "*On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them,*" speaking of the other apostles, "*though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.*" That is to say, the grace of God that came to him not only worked on his behalf, but empowered him to be a channel of God's grace.

Everything that Paul accomplished, all the hard work, all the persecution that he overcame, all the suffering that he endured with joy, and all the times he ministered the word to others, was all by the grace of God at work within him. (1 Corinthians 15:10).

Brothers and sisters, like the apostle Paul, we must also be utterly dependent on the grace of God to, among other things, make the Word real in our hearts and for God to speak through us to minister to the needs of others.

Now, let me ask you, how does God want you to be a channel of His grace in the lives of others? What specific areas do you need God's supernatural enabling to serve Him and others?

Let me suggest to you that we all need God's help to impart grace to others by the words that we speak. If we seek Him, God will give us grace so that we can speak words that minister grace to others. In Ephesians 4:29, the apostle Paul wrote: "*Let no corrupting talk come*

out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.”

I appreciate Nancy Lee Demoss' observation here: “How many times do we want to open our mouth and just give people a piece of our minds? We need God's grace to be quiet, to not speak a word at times. Then we also need God's grace to speak appropriate words, to speak only such words as are *good for building up, that it may give grace to those who hear* (Ephesians 4:29).

I've heard somebody say, “We need to breathe grace in and grace out.” That's a good way to think about all of life—always receiving God's grace. Breathe God's grace in—for your sin, for your suffering, for your sanctification, for your salvation. For whatever you need, breathe God's grace in and then breathe God's grace out. John Bunyan said, “Nothing can be done aright without grace.” We need God's grace—to take it in for our lives, and then as we minister to those around us, we do so by means of God's grace.

Ask the Lord if there's someone in your life to whom He wants to deliver His grace through you, maybe even today. Is there someone that, as you look around, has a need for perhaps a word of encouragement, and God wants to breathe out His grace into that person's life through your words, to give to them out of what God has given to you? Maybe it's a meal you could prepare for someone who's in a situation where they're having a hard time doing that, or an errand that could be run, or just to stop and pray for someone who is stressed or needy, to stop and to say, “Let's pray,” and you breathe God's grace out as you have received it.”

Remember, that the apostle Paul was mightily used of God not because he had it all together. Rather, he accomplished great things for God because he knew that apart from God's grace he was helpless and hopeless not only to be saved from the penalty and power of sin, but to fulfill the call of God upon his life. He not only understood that as a former persecutor of the church he was an example of the power of the cross to save all who call upon Jesus, but that he needed the grace of God for sanctification and service.

Contrary to popular opinion, God doesn't help those who help themselves; He helps those who know they are helpless without Him. God is ready to help you in your helplessness. In what specific areas do you need God's restoring grace? Cry out to the Lord and say, "Lord, I can't do this without You."

Conclusion

If you've received the grace of salvation, you must daily rely on His grace both to will and work for His good pleasure. And we receive God's grace not to be reservoirs but to be channels of His grace.

May we seek His grace not only to help us in our helplessness, but to make us instruments of His restoring grace to help others in their helplessness, in their neediness, and in their weakness to the glory of Christ Jesus.

Discussion Guide

Main idea: God pours out His restorative grace so that we become more than reservoirs but instruments through whom He can display His grace to others.

Review

Where did the surrounding culture of Corinthian find their security and identity? How did this challenge the church of God in Corinth?

Assess

Where did Paul find his identity and where did he desire that the Corinthians believers find their identity? What gave Paul and the Corinthian believers their identity? (2 Corinthians 1:1; 1 Corinthians 15:8-10).

In the Greek, the words translated grace and gifts have the same root word. Besides the definition, "not getting what you deserve," what does the word grace mean in the following contexts? (1 Peter 4:10; 2 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthian 12:9-10; 1 Corinthians 15:10).

What enabled Paul to work harder than all the other apostles (1 Corinthians 15:10)?

What were the 3 main points of the message and how do they build on each other?

For what aspects of the Christian life (i.e. salvation, sanctification, service) do we need grace for?

What are the “means” of grace? In other words, how does grace come to us? (2 Corinthians 1:2; 13:14; James 4:6; Ephesians 4:29; Psalm 119:50; Hebrews 4:16)?

What is the acid test (measure) of our devotion and dependence upon God?

Apply

Contrary to popular opinion, God doesn't help those who help themselves; He helps those who know they are helpless without Him. God is ready to help you in your helplessness. In what specific areas do you need God's restoring grace? Cry out to the Lord and say, "Lord, I can't do this without You."

How does God want you to be a channel of His grace in the lives of others? What specific areas do you need God's supernatural enabling to serve Him and others? (Ephesians 4:29)

Pray together: Scripture fed, Spirit led, worship-based prayer.