

2: Biblical Themes in the Old Testament

I. Reconciliation with God

25. Understanding Grace

We've been talking lately about God's answer for sinful rebellion. To sum it up: Out of love, God provides a way to deal with the problem of sin. This way has to do with sacrifice and atonement, first and provisionally, the atoning blood of sacrificed animals, but ultimately and perfectly, the atoning sacrifice of Christ on Calvary. This atonement becomes personally applied through repentance: a turning from, and renouncing of sin, and a turning to, and acceptance of God's gift of life through Christ. The result is that all such people move from a status of alienation from God to a place of reconciliation with him.

But here we must pause to consider the nature of the Grace of God that leads us to be reconciled to him. Let me start with some questions. What is the difference between those who respond to God's offer and those who do not? That is, "What's the difference between those who repent and say "yes" to God's offer of life and those who do not repent, who either ignore him or say "no" to him?" Is there something inherently better about the former group even before they have repented? Is there a seed of goodness in them—a seed that is lacking in others—that helps them to turn to God? To ask it another way, "Do people who turn from lives of sin to life with Christ get any credit at all for their good sense?"

Scripture teaches that those who repent do so not because of any inherent goodness in themselves, but simply because God graciously enables them to do so. That's because by nature all people are dead in sin unless and until they are made alive by God. Let me mention a few passages that tell of the hopeless condition of humanity apart from God's grace:

- Genesis 8:21 tells of God's determination to never again destroy the earth with a flood "even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood."
- Jeremiah 17:9 calls the human heart "deceitful above all things and beyond cure."
- In Psalm 51:5 David speaks for himself, but also for all of humanity, when he confesses: "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me."
- Isaiah 64:6 says, "All our righteous acts are like filthy rags."
- Ezek. 11:19 recognizes that God's people have incorrigibly unfaithful and stony hearts that can become faithful and open to God only by the power of God.
- In Rom. 3:10ff the apostle Paul starts his summary of the Old Testament teaching on this in saying: "There is no one righteous, not even one."

It was not this way originally, but the sin of Adam and Eve brought God's judgment of death, not only to them, but to all their descendants. That is to say, no one is born into the state of innocence that Adam and Eve originally knew in the Garden of Eden. Everyone is born in a sinful, fallen condition. We are by nature in bondage to sin and have within ourselves no ability to get out of it, or even incline ourselves to love and serve the Lord

This is the historic position of the Christian church, and one that the church father Augustine was particularly clear about. He focused much of his energy upon this topic because of an alternate view posed by one of his contemporaries: Pelagius. Pelagius said that people are born into a state of innocence and have within themselves the ability to live a life of obedience to God. Pelagius still spoke of the importance of the grace of God, which he said was manifested in God's gifts of free will, the Law of Moses, and the teachings of Jesus. These were important, Pelagius thought, to facilitate righteousness, but in the end such righteousness was not impossible to attain without God's grace.

Pelagianism was rightly condemned as a heresy at a council of churches in Carthage in 418 and this condemnation was repeatedly upheld by subsequent Councils. Even so, it persisted and, with modifications, still persists today in what is generally called semi-Pelagianism—the idea that although divine grace is necessary for salvation and righteousness, there is still within the human soul an “island of righteousness,” untouched by sin, that can and must be exercised to cooperate with God in the process of salvation.

Here’s the analogy one semi-Pelagian evangelist used (as cited by RC Sproul—in *Modern Reformation*, Vol 10, Number 3 (May/June 2001), pp. 22-29): “Sin has such a strong hold on us, a stranglehold, that it’s like a person who can’t swim, who falls overboard in a raging sea, and he’s going under for the third time and only the tops of his fingers are still above the water; and unless someone intervenes to rescue him, he has no hope of survival, his death is certain. And unless God throws him a life preserver, he can’t possibly be rescued. And not only must God throw him a life preserver in the general vicinity of where he is, but that life preserver has to hit him right where his fingers are still extended out of the water, and hit him so that he can grasp hold of it. It has to be perfectly pitched. But still that man will drown unless he takes his fingers and curls them around the life preserver whereupon God will rescue him. But unless that tiny little human action is done, he will surely perish.”

Sproul goes on to critique this semi-Pelagian view in saying: “Now, if we’re going to use analogies, let’s be accurate. The man isn’t going under for the third time; he is stone cold dead at the bottom of the ocean. That’s where you once were when you were dead in sin and trespasses and walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air. And while you were *dead* hath God quickened you together with Christ. God dove to the bottom of the sea and took that drowned corpse and breathed into it the breath of his life and raised you from the dead.”

So again, Scripture teaches that by nature all people are dead in sin unless and until they are made alive by God. All people—both those who eventually are brought to life and those who remain under condemnation. The difference is not an “island of righteousness” in some, but God’s work in them. The New Testament is very clear that God gets all the credit, not only for providing a way out of sin, but also for giving sinners, irrespective of their connections or meritorious works, the will and the strength to travel that road.

But this truth is also proclaimed earlier, in the pages of the Old Testament, despite the propensity of some of Abraham’s physical descendants to suppose that their enjoyment of God’s favor had to do with their moral superiority. Take for example what happened after Adam and Eve rebelled against God. They did not find their way back to fellowship with the God they had rejected. Instead, and despite their total lack of merit, God uncovered their hiding place and called them back into fellowship with himself, in this way both providing for them and assuring them of future blessings. This is only the first of many instances in which God took the initiative to show his love and rescue people from their self-destructive ways.

We also see this pattern in the work God later undertook with Abraham and his descendants. Most, if not all, of Abraham’s contemporaries were idol worshipers. Abraham and his family were too as Joshua made clear centuries later: “*This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Long ago your ancestors, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates and worshiped other gods’*” (Josh. 24:2).

If God had been looking for an especially righteous person at this time, he might have gone to the mysterious Melchizedek, to whom we are introduced in Genesis 14. This king of Salem (later called Jerusalem) was already in Canaan where he was living up to his name, which meant King of Peace. Hebrews 7:1 says that Melchizedek was a priest of God Most High and calls him greater than Abraham.

But God **chose** the unrighteous Abraham from among all the idol worshippers and set him apart to be the special recipient of his mercy. Abraham responded in belief and obeyed the Lord's call to travel with his wife, nephew, servants, and possessions to the land of Canaan. From this time on, while others continued to worship the evidences of the divine in the heavenly bodies and in themselves, Abraham committed himself to the worship of God and staked his future upon God's existence and faithfulness. To be sure, Abraham went through times of doubt, particularly in the matter of the heir God had promised to give him and Sarah. But, he remained faithful to God.

Even so, he did not have the ability to earn righteousness by his faithfulness. Instead, as Gen. 15:6 puts it, "*Abram believed the LORD, and he credited to him as righteousness.*" Before this, Abraham had rightly obeyed God's call to go to a different land, but that obedience had not made him righteous—able to stand before God without guilt and as a full covenant partner of the Lord. But now, with Abraham's belief following this repetition of God's original promise, Abraham was credited with—granted—righteousness, not as something he earned by believing, but as a gift of God to one who believed.

The New Testament goes into detail about this, but the seeds of its teachings are found in the truth that righteousness before God simply cannot be earned. There was nothing in Abraham, not in his contemporaries, that commended him to God and prompted God to bless him. Nor does God grant his blessings today to those who have in them any seed of righteousness. Righteousness is entirely a gift of God to those who don't deserve it.

Every other religion of the world emphasizes the need to do creditworthy things in order to be accepted by the gods. Biblical religion alone says that nothing we do is creditworthy enough to make us righteous; righteousness comes only from the one true God, who then enables us to seek and do what is good.

This unmerited grace of God— unmerited grace, you understand, is a redundancy. If something is merited, it is really payment for services rendered. If a blessing is unmerited, it has to be by grace. Anyhow, the unmerited grace of God shown to Abraham was also given to Abraham's descendants languishing under slavery in Egypt. God delivered them from Pharaoh's grasp and brought them to Sinai where he then gave them his law to live by. As God reminded them there, the gift of their freedom came prior to their call to righteous living.

Years later Moses warned Israel never to suppose that their blessings were wages from God for the things done for him. "After the LORD your God has driven [your enemies] out before you, do not say to yourself, 'The LORD has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness'" (Deut. 9:4). In other words, obedience was not a precondition for Israel's deliverance or its possession of the Promised Land; these blessings were entirely due to the unmerited grace of God. Of course, the appropriate response to God's grace is obedience, as Moses also reminded the people. And obedience is not to be underrated. But it is a different thing to see the keeping of God's law as an appropriate response to God's blessings than as the thing that obligates God to reward you.

There's an important story in 2 Kings 5 that reinforces the teaching of Moses and other biblical authors about the relationship between God's grace and human effort. The subject of the story in Kings—Naaman—was an outsider to Israel, an important Syrian official who lived during the time of Elisha. But Naaman had a problem; he had contracted one of the most dreaded diseases of the ancient world—leprosy. However, Naaman also had an slave girl who told him about the healing power and mercy of the God of Israel and his prophet Elisha.

Naaman was desperate enough to make the trip to see Elisha in the hope that he could be healed. But he was significantly disappointed and angered when, upon arrival at Elisha's house, he did not even get to see the prophet. All he got was an instruction to go and bathe in the Jordan River.

General Naaman went off in a rage. His resistance was not unusual. For one thing, he had probably had expected more deference—a meeting with the prophet at least. But he may also have expected a prescription for certain rigorous procedures to follow, involving sacrifices or ointments or dietary supplements—something besides bathing in an insignificant river. Nevertheless, he eventually was persuaded by the wise counsel of his servants to do what the prophet had instructed. Seven times Naaman had to go into the river—to show that the healing was a work of God—and afterwards, Naaman got the healing he desired.

Naaman was overjoyed by his healing. He naturally appreciated the prophet Elisha. But more than that, he appreciated the God of Elisha who had shown that he had no equal among the gods of the world. In fact, Naaman said as much and wanted to show his appreciation in the customary way—with a generous payment for services rendered.

What Naaman did not understand, however, was that God is not impressed by worldly wealth. Nor did he know that God meant to teach Naaman that what he had received had not been for sale, but was the free gift of a gracious God. Naaman was thus given a taste of what God intended for many more outside-of-the-covenant, lost-in-sin people. He would be a sign of God's grace to all such as he, and also a message to Israel—that they should neither take God's grace for granted nor forget the love God has for strangers and aliens.

Elisha's servant Gehazi knew the lessons that God wanted Naaman to learn. However, in his greed, Gehazi put them out of his mind and secretly caught up with the Syrian to secure for himself some of the wealth that his master had refused to take. For his part, Naaman was happy to comply. He had wanted to pay for the healing he had received. Now he got another chance. But with that chance, he came to another conclusion about Elisha. He concluded that Elisha was not that different from other prophets after all. He was more powerful, to be sure, but like all other prophets, he wanted to be paid, albeit secretly in order to preserve his image as someone who cared nothing for money.

Tragically, Gehazi's greed gave Naaman the wrong idea about God. Naaman now thought, or was tempted to think, that God and his prophets were just like all other gods and their prophets. We don't know if Gehazi's misrepresentation of God's grace was disastrous for Naaman. But we do know that it was disastrous for Gehazi. The leprosy, which had not been a judgment for Naaman, became a judgment for Gehazi and his descendants. Those personal consequences were bad enough. But even worse was the compromised witness to the purposes and character of God, and the wrong idea that healing and salvation was something a person could earn or at least pay for or contribute to.

All too often the world's religions still offer some sort of legalistic solution to the problems of life that people attribute to the disfavor of their gods—solutions that usually involve gifts of money or sacrificial actions: The God of Scripture, however, wants us to understand that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ. Gifts and sacrificial actions may be responses to God's grace, but they aren't ways to earn it. If anyone is to become cleansed, it will be by the power and initiative of God, after which anyone so cleansed is called to a life of service to God.

The story of the prophet Isaiah's call (Isa. 6) is another good Old Testament illustration of this. Isaiah had a vision of the majestic Lord seated on the throne, surrounded and worshiped by angels. But far from being happy at what he saw, Isaiah was filled with dread, for he was overwhelmed by his own unworthiness in the presence of the Lord. Listen to Isaiah's words in Isa 6:5, *"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."*

Isaiah was correct about himself and his people—all people, for that matter. But his dread was allayed when an angel took a burning coal from the holy altar of the Lord and touched Isaiah's mouth with it saying (v.7), *"See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."* Isaiah had known his utter inability to do anything about his uncleanness, but he realized now too, that the grace and cleansing fire of God—freely given without regard to his worthiness—was able to wipe away all his sin and guilt and not only make him able to be in the presence of God, but able and willing to do the work that God wanted done.

The cleansing and reconciliation Isaiah experienced, as we have come to understand from the New Testament witness, comes to all who put their faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin and the Lord of their life. But it remains so important that all such never forget that it is by grace they have been saved, and not by works. Even the faith by which we take hold of Jesus Christ as God's answer for sin—even that faith—is a gracious gift of God, without which, we would forever remain dead in sin. God gets all of the credit and all of the glory.