

Recognizing God's Grace

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Meet the Writer

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Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

The Bible Teaches about God's Grace

Scripture

John 1:14–16; Romans 8

Main Idea

This session focuses on the definition of grace. It makes the point that, even in the church, the term *grace* has been used so much that it probably has less meaning than it could. By the end of this session, group members should be able to consider what Christians mean when we talk about grace as opposed to how the word *grace* is used throughout popular culture.

Teaching Points

This session invites learners to consider:

1. Grace as the core of the gospel.
2. Grace as the way God operates and a gift bestowed on believers to share and depend on.
3. The understanding of God's grace in the Bible is deeper and broader than any single word or expression.

Resources Needed

Bibles

Participant's book

Concordances

Newsprint and marker

Leader Prep

Grace can mean many different things in different contexts, but in Christian life grace is central to our understanding of who God is and how God relates with us.

When the word *grace* is used in Christian worship or theology, it takes on a meaning different from the several meanings it has in the secular world. A simple definition describes grace as God's

unmerited favor, but that definition needs explanation. Each of the common meanings of grace—welcome, acceptance, freedom from accountability, presence, something extra, kindness, courtesy, or beauty—expresses some aspect of what we understand as God’s grace. Although a concise definition is difficult, the struggle to understand the meaning of grace is worthwhile because it can lead us to greater awareness of God’s call and a broader understanding of our response.

Encourage the group to develop its own definition of grace before you go through this session together. It may be interesting to see whether the group’s ideas about grace are grounded in social convention or in theological reflection.

Throughout the study, excerpts from the *Study Catechism: Full Version with Biblical References* are included. Visit pcusa.org/media/uploads/theologyandworship/pdfs/biblical.pdf for a downloadable version of the catechism.

Leading the Session

Gather

- If this is your first time together, invest time in introductions, maybe inviting everyone to share his or her favorite joke, movie, or song. This can be a gentle way of breaking the ice.
- Use this time to share joys and concerns and incorporate the joys and concerns into an opening prayer.

Head

- The church often speaks a language all its own and assumes that everybody knows what it means. Working with partners, create and compare lists of words that have special church meanings that are distinct from their use in other contexts and of words that are rarely if ever used outside the religious context, such as *sexton* or *manse*. Looking at a worship bulletin may help stimulate ideas. Consider how many words survive only in church language.
- Does the word *grace* appear on the list? Why or why not?

- Use concordances to look up uses of the word *grace* in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. How is grace used in the Old Testament and in the New Testament? Where is the word *grace* found in the Gospels? Did Jesus talk or teach about grace? Of the New Testament writers, who used the word *grace* most?
- Read John 1:14–16. Ask: *What does it mean when it says the Word, Jesus, was “full of grace”? What is “grace upon grace”?*
- Read Romans 8. Ask: *If this were the only document in the Bible, what would we know about God’s grace? Which of Paul’s ideas in this chapter do not agree with the conventional wisdom of our time?*
- The Bible describes grace as a gift from God and as a quality or characteristic of life in relationship with God. Create a definition of grace as gift and quality. Record this definition on newsprint. Ask: *What does this definition share in common with ordinary understandings of grace? What is different?*

Heart

- God’s grace is a true reflection of God’s nature. Explore the significance and implications of this statement. Ask: *How do you explain God’s wrath and judgment? Does God’s grace exclude justice?*
- Dr. Weeks writes: “To the Thessalonians, Paul offers comfort and hope with a word of grace. The return of Christ, which believers anticipated daily, had not yet come. Instead, false teachers tempted followers of Jesus. To this situation, Paul said for them to ‘stand firm.’ ” Invite responses to this statement.
- Ask: *How are grace, comfort, and hope related in the Christian life?*
- Ask: *Have you ever experienced the comfort of God’s grace?* Invite those who are willing to share stories of God’s grace.

Hands

- A friend comments: “If grace is found in the Old Testament, it must be limited to a select group with patience enough to survive it. Look at how long Sarah and Abraham had to wait before the promise of a child was fulfilled and how long the Hebrew people had to wander in the desert before crossing into Canaan. Look how many centuries they waited for the promised Messiah!” Ask: *How do you respond to this comment?*
- Dr. Weeks writes: “Grace is the way God operates.” By implication, it is also the way God’s people are called to live.
- Ask: *Who exemplifies a grace-filled life?*
- Identify an issue in your church for which grace would be the difficult response. Brainstorm ways to respond graciously.

Depart

- Dr. Weeks writes: “With eyes attuned to see God’s grace, we can perceive it in the world.” Encourage the group members to commit to looking for signs of God’s grace in the world.
- Invite the group members to memorize and repeat the answer from the first question of the *Study Catechism: Full Version*:
 - Q. 1. What is God’s purpose for your life?
 - A. God wills that I should live by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, for the love of God, and in the communion of the Holy Spirit.
- Close with prayer.

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The Bible Teaches about God's Grace

Scripture

Psalm 41 The psalmist trusts God's care, even when all around him seek vengeance.

Acts 6 Early believers chose leaders who carried out ministries of God's grace in serving the needs of others.

Prayer

Gracious God, look with favor on us, our families, the members of this church, on all those who love you. Grant the bounty of your gifts for all your creation. May we use your gifts in ways that please you and that help your children. Guide us as we study about your grace and your gifts. Open our minds to new ideas of your truth. Illumine our souls through the work of your Spirit. Lead us to walk in your ways, serving others, even as in Jesus Christ you have served us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Introduction

Consider the graceful skater. She makes the difficult movements look beautiful and easy. Or think about a gracious friend. He listens patiently and accepts you regardless of the circumstances. Or remember a moment of grace when you received healing after a disappointment or forgiveness when you had wronged someone.

All these expressions draw on various, related meanings of the word *grace*. We use the word a lot in our prayers and conversations. When we take time to explore its depth, we find a central truth of both God and our lives. Certainly we admire those who exhibit grace in their lives. Do we not want to become more grace-full Christians? I suspect we also seek to be grace-full in communities—with our family, our friends, in the wider world.

We begin the study of grace by looking at this word from the Latin, *gratia*, and the Greek word, *charis*, which mean almost the same thing. The Old Testament uses several Hebrew expressions to

speak of God's care and favor. For the Greek translation from the third century B.C. (the Septuagint) the scholars settled chiefly on the word *charis* to convey the meanings of those words.

Charis became commonly used in Jesus' time. It was in the Mediterranean world a word of greeting—"Hello." Notice how the apostle Paul begins letters frequently with "Grace to you . . ." (Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:3; etc.).

The first Christians found this common word a splendid image to convey their conviction that God provides for us freely faith, hope, love, and much else. God's free gifts include not only virtues, but provisions for our lives and for the whole creation.

Grace, graciousness, favor, and even gifts are all related in Scripture. The noun *charis* carries both an aesthetic meaning, "beauty," and an economic meaning, "free." That word gives us "charismatic," "charity," and "charisma" (leadership ability).

As we study particular passages of Scripture, consider that themes of God's favor, grace, and gifts are common throughout the Bible. Indeed, many Reformed Christians find God's grace, especially as embodied in Jesus Christ, the central truth of faith.

God's Grace in the Old Testament

Hebrew expressions for grace can also mean "favor." While the older King James Version used the word *grace* more frequently in translation, the New Revised Standard Version prefers *favor*.

Early in Genesis, the writer says, "But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD." (Genesis 6:8, KJV. NRSV says, "Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD.") After that, the Bible says Noah was righteous. Was it because he received God's grace that Noah proved faithful in following God's direction? At any rate, Noah and his family were saved from the flood.

More pointedly, the reconciliation of Jacob and Esau employs the language of *grace* throughout. Jacob saw the angels of God and then gave livestock to find grace in the eyes of Esau (Genesis 32:5, KJV; *favor* in NRSV). Jacob had cheated Esau, according to the story. Esau received Jacob graciously. Did the angels counsel Jacob? Were they not a gift from God? Jacob became Israel, the namesake for God's people.

After the exile, when Ezra led a return of a remnant of God's people to Israel, he lamented the sins of the people and gave thanks for a brief moment of God's grace, or *favor* (Ezra 9:8). Again, the

prophet Jeremiah told of God's promise fulfilled: "The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness" (Jeremiah 31:2).

The Psalms speak of God's grace and seek it, as in Psalm 41, one of the Scripture passages for this session. In Psalm 119, which praises God's law, the singer asks for revival and instruction: "Put false ways far from me; and graciously teach me your law" (v. 29).

As prophets spoke of reconstituting God's people and God's temple in Jerusalem, Zechariah saw visions and heard God's promises. With one promise particularly, to make a mountain into a plain, there were shouts: "Grace, grace to it" when the top stone was brought out (Zechariah 4:7). In the second part of Zechariah, a word about good and evil shepherds anticipating words of Jesus, the prophet says he named two staffs: one "Favor" (Grace) and one "Unity" (11:7, 14). Sadly, he broke both staffs as symbols of the covenants broken from human sinfulness.

The understanding of God's grace in the Old Testament is also deeper and broader than any single word or expression. God chose Abram and Sarai (Abraham and Sarah), an act of grace. God chose Joseph, Moses, judges, kings, prophets, and even adversaries of Israel and Judah, all in grace-fully leading a people and seeking a blessing for the nations (Genesis 12:2).

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God's grace does have a flavor of favor, so to speak. To human eyes, God's purposes are mysterious. They may seem at times even capricious.

God's grace is generally seen as undeserved and freely given. In the decades between the writing of the books of the Old Testament and the time of the Gospels and letters that comprise our New Testament, the perception of God's grace given to human beings remained crucial in Jewish worship and work.

God's Grace in the New Testament

The Gospel of John begins with the unique nature of Jesus Christ, who from eternity was "full of grace and truth." From Jesus' "fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:14, 16-17).

The Acts of the Apostles describes the idyllic early days of Christian fellowship in terms of grace. “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul . . . With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all” (4:32–33).

The apostle Paul, as mentioned, used “grace” for his greeting among Greek-speaking Gentiles in the Hellenistic culture of his day. He also greeted Christians with “peace,” doubtlessly from the Jewish form of *hello*, *Shalom*. His letters typically begin, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; etc.).

In his missionary efforts (Acts 20), Paul told the Ephesians he wanted to “finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God’s grace.” Indeed, the letters of Paul really develop the understanding of grace as the core of the gospel. To the Romans, Paul summed up his message: “For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:22b–24).

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The book of Ephesians speaks of the “riches” of God’s grace, “that he lavished on us” (1:8a). Later in the letter, Paul told of God’s grace that enabled him to preach: “Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given to me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ” (3:7–8). These allusions to God’s bountiful grace, given to individuals—more than enough for us—become extremely important for Christians in understanding grace centuries later.

To the Thessalonians, Paul offers comfort and hope with a word of grace. The return of Christ, which believers anticipated daily, had not yet come. Instead, false teachers tempted followers of Jesus. To this situation, Paul said for them to “stand firm.” He prayed that God, “who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope,” would “comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word” (2 Thessalonians 2:13–17).

Later letters, such as 1 and 2 Peter, develop the doctrine of God’s grace even further. Christians would endure trials and temptations.

But prophets foretold the grace believers would receive to bear suffering: “Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed” (1 Peter 1:13).

Complete the Cycle of God’s Grace

New Testament understandings of the nature and work of God’s grace draw from Old Testament insights. Grace is seen as ever more expansive, ever more pervasive, at the very core of the gospel.

Grace is the way God operates, and also a gift bestowed on believers to share and depend on in life.

Grace is the way God operates, and also a gift bestowed on believers to share and depend on in life.

What is the responsibility of one who receives God’s grace? What is the job of the whole company of believers? The letters of 1 and 2 Peter speak of growing in grace and being stewards of grace (1 Peter 1:10; 4:10; 2 Peter 3:18).

One of the clearest passages on God’s grace and our proper response is in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. It is also quite complicated, and you will want to read both chapters together.

Paul and Titus were taking a collection of money from Christians elsewhere to believers in Jerusalem. Whether it was because those followers of Jesus were already being persecuted we cannot tell from the text. But Paul urges Corinthians to contribute generously: “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7). He begins the sermon with a word of grace: “We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia” (8:1).

Paul explains in the first place that God gives everything. Especially, God gave Jesus Christ, who “became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich” (8:9). Jesus gave himself. Others have received this gift of grace, and they pass it along to you. Your responsibility, Paul challenges the Corinthians, is to share in God’s gift of grace and complete the cycle by giving from your abundance to others. Give back to God—and cheerfully! Sometimes forms of the word *charis*, so frequent in this passage, are translated “gift” and even “thanks.”

Paul concludes the appeal by telling Corinthians their gifts will glorify God, and others are praying for them “because of the

surpassing grace of God that he has given you.” Paul prays, “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift” (9:13–15).

With this image in mind, we can see throughout Scripture this same cycle of the faithful completing God’s grace. Look at Deuteronomy 26, when Moses prepares God’s people for the life in a land flowing with milk and honey. Note the faithful are to take first fruits from their bountiful harvest and give back to God. Moses even tells them what to say, to remember they had been aliens and God’s provision is a free gift. Then they are to go home and celebrate. They are to include the aliens (vulnerable people) in their household feast. They complete the cycle of God’s grace by giving to others.

With eyes attuned to see God’s grace, we can perceive it in the world. We can respond by sharing it, giving graciously to others—therefore completing God’s cycle of grace. We shall be exploring the nature and work of God’s grace through these next lessons.

Spiritual Practice

Think of Bible stories that tell of God’s grace. Consider human responses, among the people in Scripture and from those in your congregation or family. Hint: Consider Joseph and his brothers, Boaz and Ruth, Mary and Joseph, those Jesus healed, Paul as a missionary, and people you know and respect.

Questions for Reflection

Who first taught you about God’s grace?

How have you perceived God’s grace at work?

How have you seen people be good stewards of God’s grace, passing it along, and giving back to God?