

# Grace — What is it?

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*John 1: 1-17.*

## **Seekers for Light.**

*Fourteen Addresses to Edinburgh Students.*

by W. T. P. Wolston, M.D.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Grace — What is it?**

You will observe in the 17th verse that the Spirit of God says, "For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." On a previous evening we were occupied a little with Christ as the Truth. Tonight I want to say a few words on Grace. Both came by Jesus Christ, and therefore I know not the truth, nor have tasted grace, nor have you, unless we have to do with Him. The question raised must be, "Have you had to do with Him?" You know not the truth, nor apprehend what grace is, unless you have.

"The law was given by Moses." And what did the law do? It convicted, and condemned man. That is all the law can do — convict a man, and condemn him. "Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ," and grace is a wonderful thing. Would it not be a wonderful thing if grace picked you up, converted you, and turned you to know the living God, and made you a present and everlasting witness of God's goodness? That would be grace. It would not be a question of desert, because grace is always the activity of the love of God, when sin is present. The moment you hear of grace, you must recognise the fact of sin. I know people do not like to talk about sin, they do not like to think about sin, and they do not like to admit sin. They try to deny it; but mark this — deny sin, and you shut out grace. The man who is not content to own himself to be what Scripture affirms about him, knows not what grace is.

You ask me, What is grace? I do not know that I can exactly explain it. I know it; I have tasted it; I have enjoyed it; and I wish you to enjoy it too. Grace is God's coming to a man that has sinned, and taking him out of the condition in which his sin has placed him, a condition out of which he cannot by any possibility extricate himself by his own efforts. Now I was saying once before to you that you could not say that God was the truth. God is true; but Christ is the Truth, because He is the perfect revelation and exhibition of what God is. I do not read in Scripture that "God is grace." I read that "God is love." That is what He always was, before man was on this scene at all, or before man fell. God is love. That is what He is in His eternal existence. And God is light These are the two absolute terms by which God is described. Love is

His absolute character of goodness. Light is more relative to evil. He cannot tolerate evil. After man sinned, what do I find? That God stepped into the scene where man had sinned. Grace is the love of God putting on a new colour, and a new character, entering the scene where man has sinned, and entering for the purpose of blessing the man, who, by his sin, had put up a barrier between himself and God.

Now there is no good blinking the matter. You and I are both sinners. You may deny sin, but you cannot deny its consequences. The Word of God says, "By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (Rom. 5: 12). Elsewhere we read, "The wages" — the consequences — "of sin is death" (Rom. 6: 23). You cannot deny death. It is all round about you; and I will tell you more, it is the thing you least like. There is nothing a man dislikes so much as the thought of death. It is a strange thing. You never saw a dog afraid of death. I have seen hundreds of men afraid of it. No beast, no animal, is afraid, of death. The only creature that is afraid of death is man; and why? Because man has a conscience, and has a deep inherent consciousness — that there is something after death. Said a wretched man lately, "If it was not for what comes after death I would have committed suicide surely." Scripture tells us what it is, "But after this the judgment" (Heb. 9: 27). Yes! God must deal with sin. He must judge sin, and we have all sinned. The Holy Ghost has said, in the plainest possible language, "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3: 23). That takes you and me in.

But you may ask, What is sin? Scripture does not leave us without a definition of what sin is. "Sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3: 4, R.V.) — that is, the creature doing his own will. Now, I think I cannot go beyond the truth in saying that every one of us likes our own way. There is not a man in this audience but likes his own way. The Spirit of God in describing our condition, says in the Old Testament, "All we, like sheep, have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way" (Isa. 53: 6). One man takes his way — it is the wine-cup, and shameless orgies; another, the race-course, and dissolute company; another, the card-table, and the gambling-hell; and another, the billiard-room, and its concomitant waste of time and money. Sin may take any shape you like. It may take the shape of what men would term "innocent pleasures," but which they would not care should come out in the light of day. The point is this, you and I like our own way. I acknowledge it. I liked my own way, ay, and I took it too. What happened? I am thankful to God for it, He stopped me. How did He stop me? He stopped me by the revelation to my heart of what His grace was — the grace that came by Jesus Christ.

"The law was given by Moses." It came, and made claims upon us. It made claims for the right reason that the law is a revelation of what the creature ought to be. As I gaze on the ten commandments I see what I ought to be. My conscience tells me that I am not it. Consequently I am condemned by the law. It naturally condemns me whenever I learn its spirit and its power. But what does the gospel do? It brings the revelation of what God is, not what man ought to be. The chapter we are looking at tells beautifully how God has come into this scene in the Person of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. It says, "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." And who is that Word? The opening verse tells us, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." I want you to look at this, "In the beginning was the Word." Then the next thing is, that "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." By "the Word" what am I to understand? The Eternal Word of

God! It is Jesus — the Son of God entering into this scene and becoming a man. Men have said, "God was made flesh." Scripture does not say so. It says the "Word was made flesh;" and the reason is very simple. If I think of God as given to me in the Bible, I have presented to me the Triune God — Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. If I say "God was made flesh," then I should not express the truth, because the Father was never incarnate, and the Spirit of God was never incarnate; but the Son of God, the Word, "became flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" (ver. 14). The Eternal Son has come into this scene, humbling Himself, and becoming a man, in order that, in the form of a man, He might reveal to us the heart and nature of God; and moreover, that God, in the condition in which He was found as a man, might find all He looked for in man. That is the charm of these beautiful words, "full of grace and truth." The law Moses might bring, but "grace and truth" came only by the Son of God.

Now I admit that the truth will convict a man. The first effect of truth on a man is to trouble him. I do not think the first effect of the gospel will be to make a man happy. Oh! you say, I thought the gospel would make him happy. Nay! The first effect of the truth is to make a man serious before God, in the conscious sense, I am a sinner; I am an undone sinner. I will tell you more — If you ask any one who is in this hall tonight, who is a converted man, how he got on at first, what his experience was, he will tell you, that while the gospel is now filling his soul with joy and gladness, yet when the truth first met him, it did not make him happy, but made him serious and thoughtful. Why? Because the truth that he was a guilty undone sinner entered his soul like a red-hot iron.

Truth, then, will convict a man. When I am convicted by truth, what is the next thing? Grace wins me. Grace attracts me, and I turn to Him, in whose presence I find myself to be a poor, ruined, good-for-nothing sinner. I turn to Him, and learn that I am unfit for God. I learn also in that blessed Man, who is the image of God, and the eternal Son of God, in His life and death, what grace is — grace personified. I learn how the love of God can go out after a good-for-nothing, ungrateful, sinful, and self-willed man, until it has overtaken him, and poured blessing into his soul. Many a man in this audience tonight can tell you the same thing. I was pursuing a course of self-will until arrested. My friend, you must be arrested sooner or later. The day of your arrest is at hand. Sooner or later! Infinitely better is it to be arrested in this moment, when grace is active, when God in grace is blessing man, — when God in grace is coming out to meet us, than be arrested by-and-by in your sins, when righteousness can only condemn you. Now God, in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, comes to meet us in grace, with a view to our present and eternal blessing.

Grace, then, is the activity of the love of God to us, after we have sinned, and before the day when He deals with our sins as the righteous, moral governor of the universe, because God must judge sin. He would not be God if He did not judge sin; He would be no better than us if He did not judge sin. I know perfectly well that men try to get rid of the judgment of God; but the truth is this, God judges sin, and must do so, because He is God, and is infinitely holy. But what has He already done? After you and I have sinned, and before the day of judgment, when He must deal with men about their sins, He has stepped into this scene, in the Person of His own beloved Son. Grace has come in, and what do I find? That the very One, who is going to be judge by-and-by, anticipates the day of judgment, enters into the scene, dies in the room of guilty man, bears his judgment, and delivers him, not only from the consequences, of his sin, but brings

him into the enjoyment of the love of God, makes him a child of God, and makes him the happy possessor of the forgiveness of sins, and of eternal life.

That is what Christ does. That is love. What was He in Himself? He was the expression of perfect grace. Track Him where you will, during His lifetime on earth, and you will find nothing but grace. Ah, but you say, He exposed the hypocrites. Yes, He did. Do you think Christ would do anything else? It was absolute grace that exposed hollowness. Do you think it would be gracious of me, if I knew you were thoroughly false, not to tell you? No. It was so with Christ. It was His grace that exposed those who came near Him. It was righteousness also; but Christ was the Truth, and the Light, and nobody who came into contact with Him could fail of being exposed. That is why men do not like Him, and will not come to Him, because, if they come to Him, their true condition is necessarily made manifest to themselves, and that they dislike.

After the truth convicts us, grace meets us perfectly. Have you ever tasted that the Lord is gracious? The Lord is abundantly gracious. Take any illustration you please from the history of His pathway through the world. Look how His grace went forth to that poor guilty woman caught in an act of the most heinous sin (John 8: 2-11). The law could only condemn her, and her crime should be visited with death. You know what took place? The scribes and Pharisees brought the woman, taken in adultery, to Jesus, and said, "Moses in the law commanded us that such should be stoned; but what sayest thou?" They sought to put Him on the horns of a dilemma. That was their wickedness. They thought to have occasion to accuse Him. If He said, "Let her go," He would be acting in defiance of the law of Moses; while if He said, "Stone her," they would have turned on Him, and asked Him what had now become of His doctrine of grace, for He was dealing in judgment. Jesus was the light, and He said, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast the stone at her." You know what took place, They all went out. The light drove them all out, and the woman was left all alone with Jesus. "Woman," He asks, "where are those thine accusers? Hath no man condemned thee? She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee; go, and sin no more."

That was grace. Christ was acting on the ground of that which He Himself was going to accomplish; He anticipated the atoning effect of His death. Grace can only be active now, save on the ground of the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. The wages of sin is death, and just because of what He is, God must judge sin. There was nothing binding on Christ, save His purpose to glorify God; but, in grace, He took the place He did, and He who knew no sin, became sin for us, and the Just died for the unjust, that He might bring us to God. The spotless One took the sinner's guilt, and died in the room and stead of the poor sinner. What then? God raised Him from the dead, and in another part of Scripture that speaks of grace — where the Spirit of God, by the pen of Paul, is unveiling the way in which God now justifies, and saves men — I read this: "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound. That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign, through righteousness, unto eternal life, by Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 5: 20, 21).

Now observe this, grace came in the Person of Christ; and as the consequence of His death what do I find now? I find grace is reigning. Who is on the throne today? Christ. By-and-by He will be the judge. The day of judgment has not come yet Who is on the throne today? If I may use the figure — Grace. The apostle is careful in this same chapter to point out that sin and death have reigned. Death and sin reigned, and I might add another — Satan. There was a fearful

triumvirate of evil reigning — Satan, sin, and death — up to the coming of Jesus. What since then? They have been deposed. Grace has entered the scene, and now reigns "through righteousness, unto eternal life, by Jesus Christ our Lord." Is sin abounding? Who will deny it? Has it not abounded in your history and mine? How blessed then to know that "where sin abounded, grace did much more abound."

I heard lately how grace abounded in a remarkable case. It was the custom of a certain family to meet all together about Christmas time. It happened one year that the meeting took place in the house of the eldest son Henry, who at the time was an infidel. When the whole family had gathered there, the old grey-haired father, who was a pious man, as he sat at his son's board, returned thanks for the meal they were about to partake of. The son angrily said to his father: "You have no right to say that in my house; you have no right to give God thanks. I bought that food, every bit of it; and I will not have you thanking God for what I bought and paid for. There is no God. I don't believe there is any God at all. Look here! If there is a God I'll give Him a chance. I will give Him five minutes to cut me down." He took out his watch, and put it on the table. The whole family sat aghast. They knew what God could do, but would He? was the question. Is there an atheist here tonight? My friend, yours is a poor creed. One minute went by, two, three, four, and five, and the defier of God was not cut down. "There," said he, "where is your God? He has had His chance, and lost it." "Ah, my son," said the old man, "when you put the watch on the table, I began to pray to the Lord for you. When you were a child I gave you to God, my son, and I have never taken you back. I believe God will save you yet, my lad."

The meeting broke up, and very soon after the old father died. Is your father dead, and gone to heaven? Then you had better follow him. Henry took his own way. He knew better than his father. Most young men think so; and he went into courses of evil and sin. He became a frequenter of public-houses. You often find infidelity and atheism are joined with dissipation and debauchery. After fifteen years he was seen walking in the street with tattered garb. He had his last shilling in his pocket. "What shall I do with it?" he thought. "I will have two glasses of whisky, and carry home a bottle of beer with me." He turned to go to the nearest gin palace, but when he was quite near it the recollection of the family scene struck him, and an arrow of conviction from heaven entered his soul. He exclaimed, "O, Spirit of God, have mercy upon me, and answer my dear old father's prayer!" He did not go into the public-house. He went back to his house and wife, and got down on his knees before God, and cried for mercy. God answered his dear old father's prayers, and blessed him. He was saved. That was grace! That is like God.

Oh, you say, I expected you would tell us he was cut down. That is what you or I would have done. That is the way of man. But God did not cut him down. He spared him, and then saved him. Grace so wins its proudest victories over its foes. Ah, the grace of God would like to save you this evening. It has saved me. It has saved many who are in this meeting tonight. It can save you. Did you ever hear that remarkable expression, "The grace of God that bringeth salvation to all men hath appeared"? (Titus 2: 11) Righteousness will bring judgment by-and-by. Grace brings salvation just now. "Where sin abounded grace did much more abound; that as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign, through righteousness, unto eternal life, by Jesus Christ our Lord." Mark, it is grace — sovereign grace. I hear a man say, "Surely to get salvation I must labour for it. Are there not some works to be done?" I have often heard a man say, "I will turn over a new leaf." It is easy, if you have been careless, and heedless of the things

of the Lord in the past, to say you will turn over a new leaf for the future. But observe, though you turn over a new leaf it is still the old book. What about those old pages blotted with the sins of bygone years? Blotting no more will not erase the existing blots. You do not want reformation, you need reconstruction. You need exactly what the apostle gives you here, "Grace reigns, through righteousness, unto eternal life, by Jesus Christ our Lord." It is a new life communicated, given — not some patching up of the old life. You have to learn that "eternal life is the gift of God, through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 6: 23).

But, again, I hear some one say, "Must not I do something towards salvation?" Well, I will read to you a scripture from the fourth of Romans: "Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness" (Rom. 4: 3-5). That is a very remarkable scripture, is it not? I will read it to you again. "To him that *worketh not*, but *believeth* on him that justifieth the ungodly, his *faith* is counted for righteousness." If I pay a man a professional visit, I do not think it an act of grace that he should pay a fee. It is a question of righteousness. If a man does a week's work for me, it is no act of grace on my part if I pay what is the proper amount for the week's work. I am in the labourer's debt until it be paid. How was Abraham justified? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness." It was faith on Abraham's part, and grace on God's. But carefully note, "Now to him *that worketh* is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness." I hear some one say, "I thought God would justify the godly." No, He justifies the ungodly, in absolute grace, on the ground of righteousness, i.e., the atoning work of His Son. It is only God that can do this. It is His own work, and He rejoices in it. I know perfectly well the thought usually comes into a man's mind that he must do something — he must work. Profound mistake.

I was very much struck lately with a passage in the eleventh of Romans: "Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more of grace. But if it be of works, then it is no more grace: otherwise work is no more work" (Rom. 11: 5, 6). How then am I saved? By pure sovereign grace. So wrote the apostle Paul to the Ephesians: "By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2: 8, 9). It is the blessed, precious, sovereign grace that has come to all of us in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ. What we need, as sinners, is salvation. That salvation the grace of God has brought to us. If grace then has brought salvation, what have I now to do? I have to avail myself of that which God brings to me in the Person, and through the work, of the Lord Jesus Christ, — in plain language, I have to accept, by faith, the eternal salvation which grace brings to me.

The death of the Saviour is the only foundation and basis of acceptance of every one before God, because, in the cross, we have God's judgment of sin, executed on His sinless Son. There I see Him, who knew no sin, made sin for us. There I find that, "all we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way: and *the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.*" The cross is God's righteous way of delivering our souls out of the difficulty and danger into which sin had plunged us. The cross, whereon Jesus died, is the expression of the love of God, as

well as the demonstration of the fact that "God is light." If, without bringing in the cross, He had condemned man where were His love? And if He had passed and glossed over sin, without judging it, where were His holiness? The cross of Christ meets both difficulties. It is a great thing to see that the truth of Christianity rests upon two solid pillars, love and light, *i.e.*, what God is in His own nature. He must judge sin; but, to save the sinner, He has given His own Son as the expression of His love, to bear his sins, and to die in the room of those upon whom the sentence of death and judgment rested. The whole superstructure of revelation rests upon these eternal buttresses of truth. Light displays man's sin, and love removes it. Man had sinned, and was going on to the righteous judgment of God; but God steps in, and gives His Son, who becomes a man, that He may be enabled to die as the substitute, and in the room of guilty man.

We have God demonstrating His love, in giving His Son, and manifesting His righteousness and holiness, in that His Son, when bearing sins, and made sin, was judged on the cross. Christ owned and felt the weight of that terrible load of sin, as, on the tree, He says, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" As the righteous consequence of that atoning work wrought by Jesus, God declares that whoever believes on Him receives eternal life. That man has the gift of God. That man receives forgiveness of sins. That man gets salvation. That man gets pardon, and the blessing of the Lord. if you want an illustration, just look at the dying thief That man got salvation. "Lord," he says, "remember me when thou comest in thy kingdom." You know what Jesus said, "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise." He was saved by the sovereign grace of God. Light entered his soul, and he trusted Jesus, and deep joy must have filled it as he heard where he was to go that day, and in what company.

But whom was Jesus dying for? For sinners, therefore He died for me. Do not you believe that He died for you? If you have been ashamed to confess Him hitherto, my friend, away with that cowardice. Ashamed of Jesus! Ashamed to confess Him! God forbid! Oh, may you have grace to believe in Him, and confess Him too. If you believe in His vicarious death for you, you will get what I have got — eternal life, through His precious name. You and I die because we are sinners. He became a man, that He might die, and meet the claims of God. As man, triumphant over sin, death, the grave, and Satan's power, He is sitting there in glory, as a living Saviour, and He says, "Look unto me, and be ye saved."

Grace wins wonderful victories — victories over sinners like you and me. Those victories consist of winning careless hearts, turning them to Christ, who in His grace blesses, and saves us. Well do I remember how God won one of your fellow-students once. I do not think his match is in this hall tonight. I knew him during all his course at Edinburgh University. He was the finest cricketer of his day, and the best football player in the University, and had a cupboard full of prizes. He was foremost in his classes, and everywhere else, and became resident physician in the Royal Infirmary. He was the son of a widow, a fine handsome fellow, and a general favourite. I had often spoken to him about his soul. He did not much like it, but when he was sick he would always send for me. It was a curious thing that, though he did not want me to talk to him about his soul, he sent for me when sick. I recollect perfectly well one Saturday night getting a little pencilled note from him, "Will you come up to see me in the Infirmary? I am very ill." He had been playing football, and in a tremendous *mélée* had fallen and injured his knee. Plucky fellow that he was he attempted to carry on the game, but fell down in a dead faint. He was brought up to the old Infirmary, where he was still a resident physician, and had been three

weeks ill before I knew of his accident. When I got to him that Saturday night, I found him in bed suffering from one of the worst attacks of rheumatic fever I ever saw. Two nurses were with him, one during the night, and the other by day, busily employed mopping the perspiration that formed on his brow.

He had lost all power to turn himself, except the moving of his head, and knew very well that eternity was in the distance. I was very sorry to find him in such a condition, and asked him what I could do for him. "I want you to write to my mother," then living in the West Indies. He gave me certain instructions, and then I said, "And may I tell her that you have found the Lord?" "I wish I could say that, I would give all the world, if I had it, to find Him; but I fear it's too late now." I assured him that was a mistake, and then he said, "But it would be a shabby thing to come to Jesus now, after neglecting Him so long." "Never mind," I said, "He will bless you, and save you now, if you will believe Him." I put the gospel before him, and left, with further instructions, to tell, his mother that he was now "anxious to be saved."

One Sunday, four weeks later, I got a message again asking me to come. I went up, and saw plainly enough that death had marked him as its victim. The dew of death was on his brow. I sat down by the dear fellow's bedside. He was truly anxious to be saved, and I went over the story of the prodigal son with him, the history of the dying thief, and then quoted, "THIS IS A FAITHFUL SAYING, AND WORTHY OF ALL ACCEPTATION, THAT CHRIST JESUS CAME INTO THE WORLD TO SAVE SINNERS, OF WHOM I AM CHIEF" (1 Tim. 1: 16). Presently, when I had stopped, I saw his lips moving, and I knew he was praying. It is a wonderful moment when a man prays — when God can say, "Behold, he prayeth." At length he said: "My life has been a mis-spent life, but I believe Him now, I can trust Him now. I see it all."

I spent that night with him. To his nurse he said: "I was not too great a sinner for Jesus to save. I am dying, and I am not afraid to die. I am dying happy." To me he once said, "Do you think He will let me slip at the last?" "Oh, no!" I said, "it is not like Him. Do you think He would care for you, and die for you, love you, and then drop you at the last? Hear his own words, 'My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I GIVE UNTO THEM ETERNAL LIFE; AND THEY SHALL NEVER PERISH, NEITHER SHALL ANY PLUCK THEM OUT OF MY HAND'" (John 10: 27-29). "Comfort my mother, tell her I am going to be with Christ," fell from his lips, and his last words were, "IF I DIE, ALL IS WELL."

That was sovereign grace, was it not? Thank God! it was grace That same grace will save you tonight, if you have never tasted it before.

"The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" Will you trust Him now? I think some of you will. If so, we might well sing that hymn

"Jesus, I will trust Thee, trust Thee with my soul;

Guilty, lost, and helpless, Thou can'st make me whole.

There is none in heaven or on earth like Thee;

Thou hast died for sinners — therefore, Lord, for me.

Jesus, I may trust Thee, name of matchless worth,

Spoken by the angel at Thy wondrous birth;

Written, and for ever, on Thy cross of shame,

Sinners, read and worship, trusting in that name.

Jesus, I must trust Thee, pondering Thy ways,

Full of love and mercy all Thy earthly days;

Sinners gathered round Thee, lepers sought Thy face —

None too vile or loathsome for a Saviour's grace.

Jesus, I can trust Thee, trust Thy written word,

Though Thy voice of pity I have never heard:

When Thy Spirit teacheth, to my taste how sweet —

Only may I hearken, sitting at Thy feet.

Jesus, I do trust Thee, trust without a doubt:

'Whosoever cometh, Thou wilt not cast out.'

Faithful is Thy promise, precious is Thy blood -

These my soul's salvation, Thou my Saviour God!"