

# Back to Biblical Grace

Dub McClish

While Jerry and Patricia Norton were viewing the latest recorded episode of “24,” they were interrupted by a phone call. Caller ID indicated it was their neighbor, Bobby Crandall, two doors down and across the street. Jerry switched the phone to speaker mode so he and Pat could both visit with him.

“Hi, Bob. How was your day?”

“So-so. About like yesterday and the day before. Not much variety around here till I can get around on my own. How was yours?”

Pat chimed in: “We had to make a run to Kroger for some specials before they expired, and we stopped by Walgreen’s for a couple of prescriptions while we were out. What can we do for you?”

“Thanks for asking; you have been very good neighbors, and I hope I never take your kindnesses for granted. I have an appointment with my orthopedist in Dallas Friday; he wants to check on the progress of my therapy. I need a ride and wondered if you will be available, Jerry.”

Bobby and Sarah were relative newcomers to the neighborhood of long-time residents. Both in their early sixties, they chose for their place of retirement the mid-size city of Denton, Texas, not far from Dallas, where the Nortons had lived for twenty years. The Crandalls bought their retirement home in the Nortons’ neighborhood. Both couples were busy with their own lives, so they had developed little more than a “wave-at” acquaintance—until about seven months earlier. Bob and Sarah were returning from dinner at the local Olive Garden and a movie when a drunk driver ran a stop sign. His Ford pickup hit Sarah’s side of their Toyota Camry with deadly force. She survived only a few hours in the emergency room. Besides his great loss of her, Bob suffered severe leg injuries. Following three major surgeries and several weeks in the hospital, he was dismissed, facing numerous sessions of physical therapy. Their two daughters and their families lived several hours away, and Bob was unable to drive.

Jerry and Pat learned of Bob’s plight as they took dinner to him soon after he came home. While he had mastered his crutches rather well and had a wheelchair, he still had to depend upon others for shopping and for everything else that required driving. Jerry volunteered to be his “taxi service” for follow-up doctor appointments and weekly visits to his therapist.

Pat already had plans on Friday, so Jerry helped Bobby to and in the car that morning as they began their 30-mile drive to his doctor's office. On their way out of town, they passed a denominational building with a very large and attractive marquee sign that was difficult to ignore. It stated a simple message in bold letters:

**SALVATION IS BY...**

**GRACE ALONE!**

**FAITH ALONE!**

**SCRIPTURE ALONE!**

Bobby remarked, "That's not my church, but I agree with their sign. We are all sinners undeserving of salvation, so we are saved by grace alone. We can't be saved by our own works or goodness, but by faith alone in Jesus as God's Son. We should certainly depend only on the Bible for what we believe."

The Nortons had not discussed religion with Bob to this point, waiting for what they deemed the right opportunity. His comments gave Jerry that opportunity as they merged into I-35. Jerry began, "You have obviously given some thought to religion. I fully agree with you and the sign on the *SCRIPTURE ALONE* statement. In fact, it is the most important statement on that sign. It should be at the top."

"Are you implying that grace and faith are not important?" Bobby inquired.

"Not at all, but my point is that, were it not for Scripture, we would have no knowledge of even the existence of grace and faith, much less our need for them. We must go to the Bible to learn what God's inspired men wrote on these and all other subjects relating to our souls. We dare not base our concepts of salvation, grace, and faith upon the traditions, doctrines, opinions, and precepts of men. When men do so, Jesus said in Matthew 15:6 and 9 they 'make void the word of God' and worship Him 'in vain.'"

"I somehow get the impression that you don't agree with the *GRACE ALONE* and *FAITH ALONE* statements."

"Yes and no," Jerry responded. "Apart from God's wonderful grace, no one could be saved. You likely know the statement by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 2:8 and 9: 'For by grace have ye been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, that no man should glory.' Many other passages emphasize the saving grace of God. Note,

however, that while Paul said we are saved by grace, he did **not** say or imply that we are saved by grace **alone** – nor does any other statement of Scripture. So although the Bible teaches that only by God’s grace we can be saved, that is not the same as saying we are saved by grace only.”

By this time Bobby was obviously confused. “But wait a minute. My preacher and my Sunday school book make statements such as, ‘We are saved by grace plus nothing,’ ‘Salvation is a free gift of God, apart from any human activity,’ and ‘salvation is totally by grace.’ Are you suggesting that this very sincere and zealous man I listen to every Sunday, who studies hard and is fine preacher, is wrong?”

Jerry kindly answered, “Bob, please understand that it doesn’t matter what I may think or say about the teaching or preaching anyone does or hears on grace or any other subject. Nor does it matter how sincere or zealous a preacher may be. Remember, we agree with each other on the *SCRIPTURE ALONE* statement on that sign. Thus all that matters is what the Bible says about grace.”

“What about the *FAITH ALONE* part of the sign?” With a wry grin, Bob added, “I somehow suspect that you may disagree with it, also. ‘I’ll have to answer ‘yes’ and ‘no’ to this question, too, Bob. The Bible teaches that only those who believe in Christ as God’s Son can be saved. Jesus said, ‘Except ye believe that I am he, ye shall die in your sins’ (John 8:24), and of those who die without believing on Him, he stated, ‘whither I go, ye cannot come’ (v. 21). In John 3:16, a verse familiar to you, I’m sure, the Lord declared that ‘whosoever believeth on him should not perish but have eternal life.’ These and a host of other passages teach that we are saved by faith and that those who die in unbelief will be lost. But never does the New Testament teach that we are saved by faith **alone**. So, as with grace, yes, Jesus will save **only** those who believe in Him, but **not** by faith alone – if we take the Bible alone.”

By this time, they were parking at Bob’s orthopedist’s. Jerry and Bob read the usual waiting room magazines until Bob was called for his appointment. When Bob came out 45 minutes later, he sported a big grin.

“Good news, Bob? Jerry inquired.

“Yep. Everything is healing well, and my doc is pleased with my rehab progress. I don’t have to come back for another month – unless some unexpected problem arises.”

Jerry joined Bob in his elation, “Glad to hear it! Before you know it, you’ll be able to enter a marathon. This calls for a celebration. Let’s stop by that Uncle Julio’s Tex-Mex restaurant we passed on the way in. I could stand a big platter of enchiladas.”

An hour had passed by the time they consumed their orders in the colorfully decorated café and headed back home. As they got back on the Interstate, Bob said, “Jerry, could we discuss that church sign some more on the way home? I’ve been thinking about some of your comments. You said some things I had never thought or heard before, and frankly, you have aroused my curiosity.”

“I’ll be glad to continue our discussion. Is there some question or subject relating to our conversations that are of special interest to you?”

“As a matter of fact, there is,” Bob remarked. “I’m especially interested in the relationship between grace and salvation. I understand that God’s grace refers to His favor that no human being can ever merit. As I told you this morning, my preacher says that salvation is by grace alone, just like that sign reads, but you say the Bible teaches we are **not** saved by grace alone. That seems to imply that men must do something in order to receive God’s grace. But if men must **do** something to be saved – that is, to receive God’s grace – would they not thereby be earning salvation instead of being saved by grace? I’m confused, and maybe you can help me.”

“I’ll be glad to try, Bob. Let’s start by noting that the sign contradicts itself in claiming that salvation is both by ‘grace alone’ and by ‘faith alone.’ *Alone* excludes any and all other elements related to salvation. So *grace alone* leaves no need or place for another element, including faith. Likewise, *faith alone* leaves no room for grace. It would be like saying, ‘Bob alone is in the car’ and ‘Jerry alone is in the car,’ when referring to the same car. The statement suggests a logical impossibility.” Jerry continued, “About like the sign, I once heard a preacher say, ‘We are saved by grace, plus nothing. We are saved by faith, period.’ Each of his statements directly contradicted the other, just as the sign we saw does. If one could be saved by grace ‘plus nothing,’ faith would thereby be eliminated. If one is saved by ‘faith period,’ where does grace fit in?”

“I see your point about the contradiction on the sign; it doesn’t make much sense when you think about it, does it? I understand that men must believe in Jesus Christ to be saved and

that without God's bestowing undeserved grace upon us in forgiving us of our sins, we are lost. But I still don't see how grace, faith, sin, and salvation fit together."

"Okay, let's start with sin. Bob, how would you define sin?"

"I believe that sin is doing things that God and Jesus don't approve of."

"That's a good way to put it in light of what the Bible teaches. In 1 John 3:4, the apostle wrote that 'sin is the transgression of the law,' referring particularly to God's law, and Paul stated...."

Bob interrupted: "But wait a minute. We don't live under a law from God in the Christian age, do we? One time my preacher said in his sermon that because salvation through Christ is by grace alone, we are not under any spiritual law since He died on the cross. He further emphasized that if Jesus came to save us by grace, we can't earn our salvation by a legalistic system of law keeping. No one could perfectly keep the law God gave to Moses, and that's why we are in need of God's grace."

"The Bible indeed teaches what you said in your last statement, Bob, but let's explore the first part of it for a moment. If Jesus doesn't have any sort of spiritual law for those who have lived since He died, how does one become a sinner? Just as John defined sin as transgression of the law, as I started to say earlier, Paul stated the logical implication of that truth in Romans 4:15: 'For where there is no law, neither is there transgression.' This principle is indisputable regarding both human and Divine governments: It is impossible to violate law that does not exist."

"Wow! I see your point, and I had never made that connection between sin and law," Bob admitted. "In fact, not only had the logic of the sin-law connection never occurred to me, I obviously was not aware that the Bible plainly states this connection." "Now let's take it a step further," Jerry continued. "Why do we need God's grace?"

"Because we are sinners."

"Bingo, Bob. Can you now see that to suggest that God's grace excludes law actually precludes the need for grace? We need grace because we are sinners, just as you said, but sin does not exist apart from law. Thus, *no law – no sin, no sin – no guilt, no guilt – no need for God's grace* is both logically and theologically true."

“Yes, I see that, and it all makes sense. But if we must **do** something in response to Jesus’ law, how does that agree with the idea that salvation is a gift of God and that it’s not because of our works about which we could boast, as we discussed earlier?”

“That’s a good and perceptive question, Bob. In the passage you just referred to, we need to remember that Paul not only said we could not be saved by ‘works,’ but he specified the **kind** of works that will not save, namely works to which one could point and say to the Lord, ‘See here, I’ve done so many and such good works that I earned salvation—You owe it to me.’ None will ever be able to say that, for ‘all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,’ as Paul wrote in Romans 3:23. Although we cannot earn God’s saving grace by our own good works, this fact is in no way at odds with the Lord’s constant demand that men obey His will. He once asked his listeners, ‘Why call ye me Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?’ as we read in Luke 6:46.”

“So you’re saying that we must engage in works of obedience in response to what Jesus teaches, but that we cannot do enough good works to save ourselves.”

“Yes, that’s what the Bible teaches, and this is why we are in need of God’s grace, which is available only through Jesus. If we dare trust in our own faulty attempts at absolute goodness, we will be lost. But by believing in Jesus, and particularly in the power of His blood to cleanse us of the guilt of our sins, and obeying him, there is salvation. As I’m sure you know, the Bible teaches that Jesus shed His blood to make salvation possible for all mankind.”

“Does this then mean that all men will be saved?”

“If salvation is by grace alone, as the church sign states, then the answer to your question would be ‘Yes.’ But even those who promote the idea of salvation by ‘grace alone’ indicate—though they are self-contradictory in doing so, as we have seen—that faith is required on our part—again, just as the church sign indicates. As we discussed this morning, the sign is right in stating that faith is required on our part as a condition of salvation or of receiving God’s grace. However, it is wrong in stating men are saved by faith alone. Faith on our part is a condition of our receiving God’s grace.”

“I think I see what you mean by ‘conditions,’ but I thought God’s grace was free, which means He gives it ‘with no strings attached.’ I keep thinking about what my preacher says, that God’s grace and our salvation do not depend on our efforts. Are you saying that He bestows

grace and provides salvation only to those who comply with certain conditions? If so, does that not keep grace and salvation from being a gift?"

"But what does the Bible say, Bob? Let me put it this way: God's grace which brings salvation is 'free' in that we cannot earn or merit it. However, it is **not** free from the standpoint of God-given conditions men must meet to receive it. If there were no conditions to salvation and grace, then all would be saved. Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 2:4 that it is God's will that all men would be saved, but Jesus said in Matthew 7:14 that only a few will be saved. We can only conclude that the Lord has conditions for receiving His forgiving grace. Those who meet those conditions He will save; those who fail to meet them will not receive his grace and forgiveness, resulting in their being lost."

"I think I'm beginning to see how these things fit together, but I still can't seem to harmonize the idea of a free gift that is conditional."

"Let's see if I can illustrate the principle. Suppose a rich relative died and granted you \$10,000.00 in his will. However, the will stipulated that you must bring a leather briefcase to the courthouse to pick it up and that failure to do so would cause you to forfeit the grant. The award would be no less free because the will stipulated a condition and you complied with it. Nor would complying with the will's condition in any sense constitute earning the award. Likewise, one does not earn God's grace by merely complying with His conditions for receiving it; salvation is no less a free because it is conditional. Faith in Christ is the first and foundation of the other conditions that bring to us the wonderful grace of God. For example, Jesus said in Mark 16:16, 'He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned.'"

By this time Jerry had driven up in Bob's driveway. Bob rested his hand on the door handle but did not immediately open the door. Turning to Jerry, he reflected, "This has been a good day all the way around. I got a good report from my doctor, I enjoyed the outstanding dinner, I was in the company of a good friend and neighbor, but most of all, I learned in our discussion that I don't know nearly as much about the Bible as I thought I did. I see that I need to study and restudy some things I've been taught to see if they are in the Bible. I thank you, my friend, not only for devoting most of your day to my physical needs, but more than that, for opening my eyes to some spiritual needs."

“I’m glad I was available to take you, and I hope you’ll not hesitate to call on me for your doctor appointment next month. And if you think I can help you further with your study of this great theme of grace and salvation or other Bible themes, I gladly offer my services.”

Bob opened the car door, and Jerry came around to help him with his crutches. As Bob entered his front door, he assured Jerry, “You can count on me to call you soon for some further study and discussion of these matters. Good day, and thank you again, my friend.”

[**Note:** I wrote this MS on assignment for the 35<sup>th</sup> Annual Bellview Lectures, hosted by the Bellview Church of Christ, Pensacola, Florida, June 12-16, 2010. It was published in the lectureship book, *Back to the Bible*, Michael Hatcher, ed., and I delivered it orally as well.]

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