

I was born in the County of Argyll, in the Parish of Western Ardnamurchan on the last day of September, 1933. I had the great privilege of being born into a Christian home and was the youngest of six children, two girls and four boys. The most westerly point of mainland Britain, Ardnamurchan is a peninsula running into the Atlantic ocean with the island of Skye lying to the North and the island of Mull to the South. It was, in many ways, an idyllic place in which to be brought up and fostered in me a great love for the countryside, and in particular, for the sea and the mountains.

When I was a little boy, my father was a building-contractor but also ran a croft, or small farm on which the family did the work. From the earliest time I can remember, the croft animals, cows and calves, sheep and lambs, horses, and of course, collie dogs were part of our rich and varied everyday life. We did not realise it at the time, but it was a kind of life fast fading into the obscurity of history.

My father was a very hard-working, upright, honest, able man with a fine mind and a very skilful pair of hands. A deeply exercised Christian, his heart was open to all kinds of people and he was a helper of every needy person and cause. I don't think I have ever met anyone whom I have respected in quite the same way as I respected him. He was converted in middle life, in the year 1921, when a visiting preacher held meetings in our village. He went through a long, trying period under great conviction of sin and was hugely troubled for a time over the doctrine of election. His deliverance from all this came by way of a powerful experience of God's grace in Christ when reading a sermon on that very subject by C. H. Spurgeon.

I have counted it as a fortunate thing that, being the son of a bardic family and endowed with a fine command of good, fluent Gaelic, he has left some of his early spiritual experiences on record in the form of a few fine Gaelic spiritual songs and hymns. After

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his conversion he began to preach, and along with other young Christian converts of that period to hold Cottage meetings in the villages surrounding his home. My mother, Jessie MacLachlan, was also of Ardnamurchan people on both sides of her family, but had been born and brought up in Glasgow. She came to Ardnamurchan to care for an elderly uncle and soon afterwards was converted through hearing my father preach.

Memories of my childhood are happy ones and many of them centre around the gospel and the love which the gospel always brings into a home. I still recall very vividly our worship times as a family, my father's prayers, and his carrying me on his shoulders as we went through the woods and over the hill tracks to the lovely, white-sanded bay where the people of four little hamlets met for worship and preaching at three o'clock on Sunday afternoons. Our home often entertained the preachers or other Christians and so I think I always knew that the Lord's people were happy and greatly enjoyed each others' fellowship.

I remember, on one occasion, sitting in that small church at Sanna Bay listening to our minister preaching on the Judgment and describing how people on that Day would call on the mountains to fall on them and cover them from the face of God. At one point in his sermon, he tiptoed, very gently, over to the windows of this little church and, pointing upwards to where we could all see the huge, rugged, granite rocks and boulders perched on the steep slopes of the hills as they towered above us, he said, in a voice filled in awe, 'People will be calling on those very rocks and hills to hide them from God, if they are not ready to meet him on that great day.' I was probably only three or four years old at the time, but I can still remember feeling the power of that moment and the still, solemn hush that came over us all.

I can remember something else which had an even more vivid and lasting effect on my life and which took place when I was eight years old. In our times of family worship we used to sing some verses of a Psalm; and, one Sunday evening when we were singing the opening verses of Psalm 40 I had a very powerful sense of the nearness and the love of God. As we sang, I felt something very special in these words which speak about God taking us out of the miry clay, setting our feet upon a rock, and putting a new song in our mouths. My heart was touched and

melted, and I really felt that God loved me and had come to me; so I told my parents and my friends at school that I had been converted. For quite a long time after I tried to live like a Christian, at home and at school.

Outgrowing religion

When I was nearly twelve I had to leave home to attend secondary school at Tobermory on the island of Mull. Here, two things worked against my continuing to think and act as a Christian. First of all, there were no other believers of my own age. Secondly, one of my new teachers positively undermined my faith in the Bible. By the time I was thirteen, I felt I had outgrown religion. I put behind me the impressions I had had from early childhood. Religion was all right for the likes of my parents, whom I regarded as old and old-fashioned, but it was not something which I needed.

Before I was fourteen, I had to leave school. Two years earlier my father had moved to quite a large farm which he ran with my two older brothers and, at certain times, help from an uncle with the sheep. My oldest brother was leaving home that Autumn to study at Veterinary College in Glasgow and, at the same time, I ran into difficulties finding accommodation near my school. Just as these were being overcome, in the month of January 1948, my uncle died very suddenly and so with pressure of work in looking after his croft with its horse, cows and sheep, as well as the sheep on our own farm, I was, to my own entire satisfaction, allowed to abandon any further thought of returning to school almost a year before attaining the minimum leaving age and, in the event, never went back at all.

I had just got settled into this new situation and the beginning of a working teenage life when my mother, who had had surgery a year or so earlier, began to be very unwell and finally became ill with a painful, terminal cancer. Strangely enough, despite her own faith and cheerfulness, her illness and especially the long, dragged out, closing year of her life confirmed me in the anti-religious, anti-Christian attitudes I had begun to adopt during my last year at school.

Another influence in my life at this time was the books I used to borrow from a man with communist views (a red Clydesider) who came to live not far away. As I read these books, especially

through the long wintry nights, I felt confirmed in my rejection of Christianity.

Will I meet you in heaven?

I also recall something which happened one night in the early springtime of that final year of mother's life. My brother and I had been out at a ceilidh and dance, singing and playing accordions in a village about thirty-five miles away. We got home in the wee, small hours of the morning – just as a new day was beginning to break. I opened the back door of our house and immediately heard a strange, but beautiful sound. It was my mother's voice. She had had some training in voice production when young and had, at one time, sung with some groups in Glasgow. But here she was now, just months before her death and at a time when her days were often filled with great pain, awake in the middle of the night with the stress of her illness, and my father sitting with her, softly singing a glorious testimony of faith in the verses of one of her favourite Psalms:

I shall not die, but live, and shall
The works of God discover:
The Lord hath me chastised sore,
But not to death giv'n over.

O set ye open unto me
The gates of righteousness;
Then will I enter into them,
And I the Lord will bless.

(Psalm 118:17-19)

She was singing the second verse just as my hand was on the handle of the back door. I was so overcome I could not go in. I went away up into the hills to cry. Here I was full of youthfulness and with everything opening out before me, and there she was, so weak and in such pain, yet singing with triumph about what was opening out before her. There was something about that, and about her whole life, that touched even my hard heart.

Three months later, one hot day in July, I was in my mother's room and she asked me to read a few verses for her from the Bible.

'Where would you like me to read?'

'In John chapter 14.'

I took up the Bible and began to read: Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.

'That's enough.'

'But, Mam, would you not like me to read a bit more? I could read the whole chapter.' (I was actually feeling quite proud that I could do this for my mother.)

But she said, 'No, Douglas, that's enough. That's everything.' Then she turned to me and said, 'Douglas, there is something I want to say to you. I may never talk to you again. In a short time I am going to be with Jesus. But I want to ask you, *Will you meet me there?*'

Four days later, she died. So seven days after that last conversation, I was standing beside my mother's grave. It was as if I could hear her voice ringing in my ears, 'Will I meet you in Heaven?' I knew that, if there was a Heaven, I was not walking on the road that led to it. I felt I had to harden my heart against my mother's appeal, and I did.

Were you in church last Sunday?

However, there were many things which began to get to me and leave me very uneasy with my life and outlook. For example, in my work as a shepherd I was closely in touch with nature. Especially in lambing time I had to get up when it was dark and climb the hills as day was dawning. From the height of the mountains behind our house, the beauty of nature was staggering. I remember sitting down on the top of a mountain, early one morning, and looking out to the west I could see the nearer islands and beyond them, the Outer Hebrides. Beyond that, there was nothing between me and America. The beauty and immensity of everything made my hair stand on end. I could not get the question out of my head – *Where did all this come from?*

To cut a long story short, six or seven years of atheism came to an end as I found it actually easier to accept the existence of God than to go on believing that all this beauty and order came from nothing.

But now a new struggle started. What if the God who made the world was the same God as my parents believed in? What if the Bible was true? What if there was a Heaven and a Hell? I remember that, as I was out drinking one evening, I was suddenly overcome by the seriousness of a question from which I could not escape. *What if all I had been taught about the Bible was true?*

One night, when I was in a local pub, a man asked me, 'Douglas, were you in church last Sunday?'

I said, 'No – not me! These fellows just put me to sleep.'

A week later I was playing my accordion at a dance. I got up to dance with a girl and, as we moved round the floor together, she suddenly asked me, 'Douglas, were you in church last Sunday?' I was beginning to feel persecuted! But she went on: 'There's a wonderful young preacher. You must go and hear him.' I'll not repeat what I said to her.

The mask removed

My older brother used to drive my father to the midweek service in the church six or seven miles away. But one Wednesday around that time my brother was away at a cattle sale and I got the job of driving my father to the church. I intended, while he was in the church, going to the pub for a drink and then going to visit a girl. However, as we came near to the church I had an idea. I asked my father, 'Who will be preaching tonight? Is it that young preacher?' 'Yes.'

I thought, 'This is my chance to find out what they are all talking about.' I went in with my father, but as soon as I sat down in the church amongst these old people I began to wonder if I was going mad. What if my mates found out that I spent my Wednesday evening in a church!

Then the door behind the pulpit opened and I got quite a shock. I thought that all preachers were old men, ready to crumble and fall into the grave. They were religious because there was nothing better for them to do. But this young man was just a little older than I was myself. He looked as if he had a broken nose – in fact his whole appearance reminded me of my hero Freddie Mills, the British cruiserweight boxer who was then champion of the world.

At first I was disappointed when he began to speak. His voice was low, as if he was afraid of all the old ladies in black. His text

was: 'Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased in goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that you are wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind and naked: I counsel you to buy from me gold tried in the fire...' (Revelation 3:17-18). To this day I am amazed that he chose to speak on a text like that when he must have expected to address a group of old Christians. Anyway he described what he found in the text – the spectacle of a soul worshipping itself. What took my breath away was – he gave an exact description of me, and of my life. I was living for myself, for pleasure and for what I could accomplish. I drank, I enjoyed the company of the lassies, but there were also hard ambitions which had taken over my life. I lived for money, and there was another thing. I used to do the round of the Highland Games, and often featured in the prize lists for the 'Heavy Events'. I was especially keen on hammer throwing. I had been doing it since I was fifteen and thought that in about four years I could reach the top.

But, as I listened to the preacher in that quiet country church, all these things lost their dazzle. The very things which had become the focal point for my driving ambition began suddenly to look pathetic and empty. What was the point in giving over my life to these things? The mask was being removed from my life.

I began to wonder – 'Did my old man tell this preacher about me? But no; I did not even know myself I would be listening to this until I stopped at the door.'

I was not converted that night, though I promised the preacher that I would come to the church again. It was three weeks before I saw him. I was driving along beside the sea in the old lorry we used at the farm when I spotted him walking beside the road, carrying a Calor gas cylinder. He had about a mile to go yet. I said to myself, 'Will I stop, or will I go roaring past him? If I give him a lift, he'll ask me why I haven't been back in church.' In the end I stopped and said quite roughly to him, 'Want a lift, Jock?' he wanted a lift all right. He threw the cylinder in the back and climbed up beside me. Just as I thought, the first thing he said to me was, 'You never came back to church.'

'No – I've been busy.'

'You are a liar.'

'That's a terrible thing for a preacher to say.'

'But you are a liar; it wasn't because you were busy – am I right?'

'I suppose you are.'

He shouted, above the sound of the old engine, 'You know what I think? I think you are running scared. I think you are scared that you will get converted.'

'No, I am not scared. Actually, I would like to be converted, but I don't think I can be.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, since that night, I have asked God two or three times to convert me and nothing has happened.'

By this time we had reached where he was staying. He said, 'Why don't you come in?'

It can't be as simple as that!

I went in with him, and he talked to me as no-one had ever talked before. Then he said to me, 'If you are really serious about this, what about going down on your knees and we will ask God to change you.'

I wasn't very keen. I was embarrassed, but then I said to myself, 'I want this if I can get it,' so I went down on my knees. At first he wanted me to pray, but there was no way I was going to do that with him there. I said, 'You are the one who is paid to do the praying. You pray!'

He began to talk to God as if he really knew him and as he continued he quoted John 3:16: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.' I had known these words all my life, but as he quoted them it was as if someone drew aside curtains so that light came into a dark room. I understood these words in a new way. I saw that Christ had finished all that was necessary for my salvation. I didn't have to do anything to save my soul. I got a hold of the preacher's arm and said, 'Say that again.'

He stared at me. 'Say what again?'

'That bit about God loving the world: say that again.'

He repeated the text.

I said, 'Does that mean that, if I really believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that he died on the Cross at Calvary to save us

from our sins, and trust him because of that, I will be saved?'

He said, 'Yes – that's just what it means.'

I said, 'It can't be as simple as that!'

But, although I was arguing like that, I felt I was understanding the way of salvation for the first time in my life. What I had known in one way for so long now seemed so new! And as I believed it for the first time, a great peace began to flood into my heart, and a stillness came over me.

Then I thought, 'That's all right, but you know how a Christian is supposed to live.' I began thinking of all the things I would have to stop. He saw my face changing and asked, 'What's wrong now?'

I said, 'I don't think I could live like a Christian. I would have to give up too much.'

'Listen, Douglas,' he said. 'You think through everything you feel you would have to give up. Think about it very carefully.' Then he said, 'In this hand, (holding out his right hand) I'll give you everything you are afraid of losing; and in this hand (holding out his left hand) I'll give you Christ.'

He didn't make it easy for me. I'm sure I must have sat there for ten minutes (he said afterwards it felt like an eternity) thinking deeply about all that was involved. Then at last I absolutely knew which one I had to take. I said, 'If I can really have Christ as my Saviour, I'll take him.' As soon as I had said that, my heart was filled with joy and love.

Then I suddenly remembered my father. I had dropped him off in the village at two o'clock. He was going to collect his pension and visit a friend, and I was to have picked him up at four o'clock. By this time it was twenty past seven. I said to the preacher, 'Man, I've forgotten my old man. He has been waiting on me for three and a half hours.'

I jumped into the old lorry and went roaring off back to the little bungalow where my father had said he would be. The lady came to the door and let me in. I hurried ahead of her into the living room. My father was sitting opposite the door. As soon as I came in he got up, crossed the room, took me in his arms and said, 'Douglas, thank God.'

'Why?'

'You've been converted.'

'How do you know?'

'I could see in your face, as soon as you came in the door, that my prayer had been answered.'

Call to the ministry

By the time I had been a Christian for two years I was quite sure that the Lord was calling me to preach the gospel. I tried to satisfy this demanding heart-urge by applying for, and getting acceptance as a Lay Preacher with my local Presbytery. Having spoken at one or two of the little, weekly Prayer Meetings conducted by my father, I preached my first sermon in Lochgilphead Free Church, in March 1957. My father died in June of that year and it was in the days following that momentous – but in some ways marvellous – event, I knew that I would have to seek entrance to the ministry of the gospel.

At the end of August 1958, I left home to take up full time study at Skerry's College, Edinburgh, with a view to entering the ministry of the Free Church of Scotland. I had, of course, at least four years of secondary school studies to make up and knew that I was facing an uphill task. Over the next two years, my time was spent in studying for University Preliminary Entrance exams.

My only source of income, once I stopped work, was an annual grant of £70 from the church, so to make ends meet I drove a lorry in the afternoons for a Haulier who used to camp on our farm over the Summer holidays. He and his wife were tremendously kind to me at that time and were a great help during a period when I felt very homesick and missed my dogs, my sheep and my hills.

Throughout that period, though, the Lord was really good to me. I enjoyed listening to fine preaching, made many new Christian friends and, within two years, gained passes which enabled me to enter Aberdeen University. I enjoyed my time there enormously, marrying at the end of my first Session, and graduating MA in 1963. I then returned to Edinburgh to pursue my theological studies at the Free Church College.

Places of service

I was ordained to the gospel ministry, and inducted to my first pastorate in St. Columba Free Church, Aberdeen, on 3rd Septem-

ber, 1966. The congregation was not large but both Mary and I knew it well from our student days and over the last few years of my predecessor's very faithful ministry it had not only grown in numbers but it had increased in spiritual vigour as well and there was a fine tone and quality to its life. We knew that during the University Sessions there would be quite a number of students amongst us.

During my time in the Dee Street Church, as it was most popularly known, my ministry was quite varied with a lot of hospital visiting, evangelism amongst lapsed churchgoers, open-air meetings, street tracting and work amongst College and University students. We saw the Lord at work amongst the people there and over the years quite a number of young people were converted. This was one of the happiest periods of my life and I enjoyed the work tremendously. I was quite heartbroken when I felt the time had come to leave for another church.

In 1974 I was given and, after much heart-searching, accepted a call to St. Vincent Street Free Church in Glasgow. The work there was different from Aberdeen but I also enjoyed it a great deal. There I saw quite a number of older people being converted – indeed, the first person and the last which I knew to be definitely converted to Christ there were both over seventy years of age, something which I always regarded as quite unusual. Anyway, I ministered very happily there until 1982 when I was appointed to the chair of Church History and Church Principles in the Free Church College, Edinburgh.

I had eight years at the College and much enjoyed working with the men studying for the ministry of our own and various other churches. I was able to speak and preach in many places outwith Scotland and came to know the Lord's work on a wider scale than formerly.

I had just indicated acceptance of a call to a congregation in Edinburgh, where I am now ministering, when I took ill with coronary disease in the late Spring of 1990. That eventuated in open heart surgery and a triple bypass in July of that year. It was my first ever experience of hospital or of serious illness and it is a great joy for me to say that through all this rather traumatic experience I was very deeply aware of the Saviour's presence and felt my heart fortified by his peace.

I was very humbled by the large number of calls and letters we received – from all around the world, almost – assuring us of continued prayer both from churches and individuals. And those prayers were wonderfully answered. It was a marvellous experience to feel myself absolutely cushioned with the love and power of Christ on the evening before my operation and not merely to know, but actually to feel that I was on the receiving end of a huge battery of Christian love and Christian prayer.

Over the months since then, I have made steady progress back to health and have been able to pick up the beginnings of a new ministry amongst a people from whom, and in whom, I receive many tokens of the Lord's love and graciousness. On the medical side of things I have also received great kindness as well as dedicated and attentive care. I have marvelled at the skill, patience and sheer professionalism of all the people involved in this ministry of healing and, under God, owe them a great deal.

Gratitude to God

I feel that I owe a special debt of gratitude to the Lord for the help and support I have had from my wife, Mary, in our thirty years together as well as during this last year and its times of illness and utter weakness. As I have indicated, she is also a graduate of Aberdeen University, was a teacher prior to our marriage, and is the daughter of a well-known Free Church minister and writer, the late Rev Murdoch Campbell, Resolis. Mary has been a great help right through my ministry and has made our home a place where people feel welcome.

We have five children; Eilidh (Gaelic for Helen); Murdo; Mhairi (Mary); Neil and Douglas. All of them are grown up now and are deeply committed Christians. The first is a Social Worker in Inverness; the second works with the Department of Agriculture; the third is a Clinical Psychologist; the fourth is studying for the ministry of our church; and the youngest is a student in Cardiff.

Looking back over my life the greatest thing which ever happened to me was, without a shadow of a doubt, my conversion in 1955. I have never regretted that the Lord sought and found me, a lost, unworthy sinner, and changed my heart and life with his grace and power. The Lord has been very gracious and good to me down through the years and has never failed me.

My only regrets lie along the line of my own many failures to be all that I should have been for him. But despite the sins and disobedience and the imperfect service I have been able to give to the Lord I would not want to change any of it. My life has been full and happy, and every day has been rich with his love and mercy.

I would like to guard against the thought that I am in any way special, or that my experience, although so uniquely personal, is any different in principle from that of other Christians. It is not so. I am a very ordinary person who was found and saved by a very extraordinary Saviour, and I owe him a debt that can never be repaid either in this world or in the world to come. The wonder that filled my heart the night I first found Jesus in June 1955 is still there – the complete wonder that, as Paul put it long ago, *he loved me, and gave himself for me.*

What Grace Is

It is often said, and with perfect truth, that the central theme of the Bible is salvation. Had there been no salvation planned and put into operation by God for the redemption of sinful men, then it is highly unlikely that there would have been a biblical revelation to man at all. The existence of biblical revelation itself implies a prior purpose of salvation and indicates to us that the Bible has been given, quite literally, as a Manual of Salvation. So it is not strange that salvation should be the central theme, the great burden, of the Bible's message to man.

But the salvation of the Bible is of a unique and special kind. There is nothing among men, not even in their religions, which compares with it. To know this salvation is to learn that, strictly speaking, it belongs to an order all its own. There is nothing which gives us a perfect comparison; nothing of which it can be said with total truth, '*That* is what it is like!'

We are not surprised to learn therefore that the Bible uses a very special family of words to describe and define various aspects of salvation; the uniqueness of salvation requires it to be so. What may surprise us is that there is *one* particular word frequently used in the Bible to convey to the reader the nature and character of salvation. Without this word – the word 'grace' – the true nature of biblical salvation would never be understood properly. So crucial is this one word to the understanding of salvation that it provides a 'seed bed' out of which grows the Bible's theology of salvation. All the major doctrines of the faith root back into it. It is, in many ways, the keyword of Christianity. Without some understanding of it the gospel of salvation remains an enigma. If it is used as the interpretive key, the gospel unfolds itself with perennial freshness and penetrating power. The word *grace* carries with it solemn implications for our destiny and therefore demands our close attention.

The gospel of the grace of God is the central message of the

Bible, and the key factor in the Christian's experience of salvation. There can be absolutely no question but that the love of God for sinners is the mainstay of every Christian life as it is nourished and directed by the teaching of the Bible.

This is reflected by the place that the saving love of God holds amongst Christians everywhere. Wherever they have fellowship together their speech is, simply and naturally, strongly seasoned with the assurance of this great and precious fact. It is with texts which state this truth and elaborate its theme that every true child of God strengthens his soul.

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son' (John 3:16).

'Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us that we should be called the sons of God' (1 John 3:1).

'Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends' (John 15:13).

It is with the glorious realities of which such texts assure us, that God the Father loves us and that Christ the Saviour died for us, that we comfort one another in times of darkness and trial and establish our souls in times of doubt and dismay.

The whole burden of this amazing love, its essential nature, its ultimate achievement, finds its focus for us in this word *grace*, one of the best-known and best-loved words in the New Testament. As J. I. Packer writes, 'It is a commonplace in all the Churches to call Christianity a religion of grace.'¹ In fact, wherever we meet with the semblance of biblical religion, whether in books, individuals, groups or churches, we encounter a frequent usage of the word. We must not be deceived. This does not mean that all is well in the world of religion. Packer continues, 'It is repeatedly pointed out in books and sermons that the Greek New Testament word for grace (*charis*), like that for love (*agape*), is a wholly Christian usage, expressing a notion of spontaneous self-determined kindness which was previously quite unknown to Graeco-Roman ethics and theology. It is staple diet in the Sunday School that grace is God's Riches at Christ's Expense. And yet, despite these facts, there do not seem to be many in our churches who actually believe in grace.'

That comment of Packer's, along with his earlier observation

about the widespread homage paid to the word *grace* by varied and sometimes contradictory beliefs, alerts us to the urgent need for definition and clarification.

Importance of our understanding

It is clear that where such a basic and essential word as *grace* is misunderstood, the great realities of which it speaks will also be misunderstood. There will be a gap between our understanding and the true reality. In some areas of life or even in some areas of doctrine this kind of gap may not matter a great deal, but in this particular instance it is absolutely crucial. A mistaken view of *grace* will inevitably lead to a distorted view of salvation and we will be in real danger of 'turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all' (Gal. 1: 6,7).

Here we are concerned with a word that bears directly on the very nature of the gospel and upon the kind of salvation held out to us there. Our correct understanding of the word *grace* is critical or it will not bring us the message which God, in his love, intends it to convey. Knowledge of truth is essential to belief in it, and what we know obviously has a powerful effect on what we believe. However, knowing a truth does not necessarily mean that we will believe it. One of the rather sad features of our present-day religious scene is that the basic meaning of the word *grace* is not only misunderstood but tends not to be believed.

The failure on the part of so many people to believe in *grace* is probably because our explanations and definitions of what *grace* really is are not always clear or adequate. But it also reflects the fact that there is an element in *grace* and in the living experience of *grace* which ultimately defies total analysis and complete understanding. To experience *grace* is to experience an utterly undeserved kindness from an unexpected source and this attitude is so alien to our sinful, selfish natures and our modern lifestyle that it is difficult for us to understand it, or accept it.

The Bible does contain a doctrine and theology of *grace* and there are three important strands of teaching on the subject, each of which must be given due emphasis if we are to understand the Bible's teaching about salvation.

1. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1973) p. 142.

Grace is power

This is the first element in the teaching on grace. Grace is power. We can go a step further here and say that grace is the power of God which is made available to helpless individuals. In fact, we may go as far as to say that it is the power of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit exerted in complete unity of purpose and harmony of action for our salvation.

The element of power is an absolute essential in our understanding of the grace that brings salvation. If grace did not include a power great enough to achieve the salvation of sinners then we could never be totally certain of any sinners being saved. We could not say as the Bible does, that 'it is by grace you have been saved' (Eph. 2:5) if the word did not convey the notion of power and the ability to achieve all that is involved in salvation.

It becomes ever more certain that grace must contain this element of power when we reflect on the nature of sin and the actual condition of those who are held in its grip. The Bible makes no attempt to hide or obscure the havoc, the damage that sin has brought into our lives: 'As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins' (Eph. 2:1); 'By the trespass of one man death reigned' (Rom. 5:17). The Bible describes in graphic terms this state of complete spiritual death common to us all. Only grace can bring life where there was death, can make us alive again, can change this condition. That is exactly the kind of power which is attributed to grace in the Scriptures: 'God ... made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions; it is by grace you have been saved' (Eph. 2:5).

This gives a realistic picture of what grace has to do in the salvation of real people, real sinners, like ourselves. It lays hold of those who are spiritually dead, and imparts new life. It comes to one who was an enemy of God and gives instead a new heart that is full of love for him. In irresistible power, it transforms a sinner into a saint, an enemy into a child of God.

The power involved here is power of a unique and special order. The Bible compares it, in its results and effects, to the power of God exercised in creating all things. It is a life-giving, quickening, creative power: 'For God, who said, "Let the light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2

Cor. 4:6). To grasp this is to have the key to understanding many other biblical truths of a similar kind. In describing the deep-seated, radical nature of the change that Christian conversion involves, Paul actually declares, 'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come' (2 Cor. 5:17).

There can be no question but that the graphic language used to describe the condition of sinners and the nature of conversion is there to emphasise for us our spiritual helplessness when it comes right down to the mechanics of how we are turned from death to life. Death is a very intense, a very strong word. Applied as it is to the spiritual state of the natural man (i.e. man apart from grace) it excludes any thought of self-help at all. It highlights both our helplessness and the urgent and crucial necessity for us to experience the life-giving power of God. It is only because grace is power, that it can save those who are 'dead in sins' (Eph. 2:1).

If this helplessness was not spiritual, then perhaps salvation might come through something other than power. For example, it might come by wise counsel or by powerful exhortation. Both of these are important and if based on biblical revelation, they should, we might think (as many people do) be quite adequate for the task. But the hard facts disallow the effectiveness of such a strategy altogether – it would be quite useless. Death puts men beyond the reach of good advice. It is sheer folly to ask a dead person to *do* anything. That would be asking for the impossible. It would be asking for a definitive, positive course of action in the face of complete inability to respond. A dead man does not need instruction or exhortation: he needs life! In the matter of salvation it is exactly the same. The sinner does not only need good advice or reasonable exhortation in order to become a Christian. Something far more effective is needed; something that no preacher or counsellor or adviser can ever give; something without which he will remain forever dead in his sins. He needs the quickening, life-giving power of God. He needs grace.

This is one of the reasons why the New Testament disciples gloried in the gospel message they had been sent to preach and teach. They knew it was good news, but they knew that it was more. They knew the gospel as a tremendously effective and transforming power which, when it began to work in the hearts of men and women, brought about a radical, lasting change in their

lives. 'Our gospel,' writes the apostle Paul, 'came to you not simply with words, but also with power' (1 Thess. 1:5); and to the Romans he wrote: 'I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation' (Rom. 1:16). This is how Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones states the matter in one of his powerful sermons on Ephesians:

We are spiritually dead by nature, and no one can do anything until he has been quickened, raised, given life and created anew. According to the New Testament, no category is adequate to describe what we are in Christ save this conception of the re-birth, regeneration; and no man can give birth to himself. The power of God is the beginning and end of salvation; all is of him and his power.²

Grace is love

The second idea conveyed by the word grace is that of love. Yes, grace is power. It is not, however, a random power, operating without purpose or direction. Rather, it is power harnessed and directed by love, a love which acts for the good of all on whom it sets its kindness and affection. The American theologian, Dr. B.B. Warfield wrote: 'Power, in itself considered, may blast as well as bless. The power that grace is always blesses, because grace is love.'³

Recently we have had an awe-inspiring demonstration of the havoc that power, uncontrolled, can cause. Huge areas of the United States and of Canada were devastated by a tornado. Our daily newspapers and television screens have vividly portrayed the wreckage for us. In a matter of moments the work of years has been laid waste. Sheds, houses, gardens, roadways, bridges, whole towns were uprooted and broken and smashed. People lost their property. Some people lost their lives. What is a tornado? From one point of view it is immense power gone completely out of control – power gone mad, unleashing an energy that destroys everything in its pathway. That is a power to be feared. But brought under the control and direction of purpose and usefulness how beneficial the energy of power can be. It can be used, even in the

case of the wind, to warm our homes and add comfort and help to many aspects of our lives.

Now this is the way it is with grace and this second element in our definition of what grace means is vitally important to a correct understanding of the gospel. Grace is an exertion of God's power, but it is always his power being exerted in kindness and tenderness. It is the love of God acting according to its nature. It is God himself acting graciously, acting in the way of positive blessing. Here we have nothing less than the power of omnipotence acting under the direction and dictation of infinite love – a power which can touch us in our weakest places and in our darkest moments with all the tenderness of a great love.

There is a very beautiful example of this in the ministry of Jesus. We read in the Gospels of a mighty, powerful work of Jesus which is known as 'The Raising of Jairus' Daughter'. The narrative as we have it from Mark 5:22-43 gives one interesting detail which none of the other Evangelists mention. Mark records the very words that Jesus used to call the little girl back to life: 'Talitha, cumi.' These words were, of course, from the everyday language of the people concerned and they had a very lovely meaning and usage. Literally they meant 'Rise, little lamb' and they were the morning call of a mother to her child or, as we would say nowadays, 'Time to be up, love.' As the Lord Jesus exercised his power in bringing this little girl back to life, as he reunited the bond between soul and body which death severs, he used the ties of early familiarity and motherly affection to temper that power and to suit it to the needs and circumstances of a bewildering experience. That, I would suggest, is very like our Lord Jesus and very like the grace that is involved in our salvation. It is power exercised in tender love.

Paul in his letter to the church at Ephesus conveys the same idea to his readers. When speaking of the grace which saves sinners, he attributes it all to its real source and speaks very beautifully of the riches of God's mercy and 'his great love wherewith he loved us' (Eph. 2:4). This element of love in grace is basic and essential to our understanding and appreciation of the nature of grace. When we are saved by grace our salvation traces right back to the love of God as its single, ultimate source.

2. Martin Lloyd-Jones, *God's Ultimate Purpose* (Banner of Truth, 1978), p. 396.

3. B. B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings*, Volume 1, p. 287.

Grace is a gift

The third idea contained in the word *grace* is the thought that it comes freely and costs nothing at all. The New Testament makes it quite clear that the love of God is not earned by us. It brings us a sharply pointed contrast between grace and works, as the basis on which sinners can be saved and does so in order to teach us that God's saving of sinners is always on the basis of grace. If salvation could be earned in any way it would no longer be of grace (Rom. 11:6).

Now a gift is usually an act of kindness which is prompted by love. This is exactly like the lovingkindness that flows through the grace of God. Grace is more than kindness, it is kindness to those who are ill-deserving.

At one time, the educational system ensured that young people who made the grade could go on to study at College or University at no cost to the family. They were 'grant eligible' and so qualified for free education. It came, not at a price, but as a gift. In the same manner the sinner, unable to pay the debt he owes to the broken law of God becomes, by his very sinnership, 'grant eligible'. If he is to be saved at all his salvation must be funded and gifted out of 'the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness towards us through Christ Jesus' (Eph. 2:7).

Finally, on this matter of the freeness with which grace comes or is bestowed, we must not overlook the fact that it is the freedom of God himself which lies at the heart of the issue. Is God free to act in the way which most pleases him and which he wills to take? God does not need any one of us in order to have the perfect felicity and blessedness that is his continually – nor does that felicity depend on anything external to himself. It is also the case that since we have sinned and have become enemies of God (Rom. 5:10) he is in no way compelled to show us any favour. We cannot even on the basis of our 'rights' ask him for mercy; the highest claim we can make on him is a claim for justice, and justice being what it is, that would mean condemnation and rejection by God. God is not in any way obliged to pardon sinners; the very fact that he is God means that he is just as free to act in condemnation as he is in salvation. The very fact that we are sinners means that no blame could attach to him should he decide to act only for condemnation.

James Packer sums up this idea of the freeness of grace when he writes, 'Grace is free in the sense of being self-originated, and of proceeding from One who was free not to be gracious.'⁴

How amazing and how wonderful is God's grace in its freeness. Had that freeness not involved the pure, inherent, moral right not to be gracious towards sinners, then grace would not be the totally free and spontaneous love which the Bible proclaims it to be and of which Calvary is the ultimate proof (Rom. 5:8).

These then are the basic elements which blend into our understanding of what grace is. When we accept the biblical teaching that we are 'saved by grace' then we accept that we are saved by power – the omnipotent power of God. We accept that we are saved by love; amazing, undeserved, infinite love. And we accept that we are saved by a God who was absolutely free to have dealt with us, not in mercy, but in justice. That he has not done so, we owe totally to the fact that he freely chose to deal with us in grace.

4. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 146.