

What Is so Amazing about Grace?



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It is a profound privilege and sacred obligation to be invited to speak to you today. As a bonus, your aloha spirit has a delightful way of thawing the winter chill that has settled on the mountain west. I have entitled my remarks, "What Is so Amazing about Grace? I want to talk to you about the grace of Jesus Christ for three reasons. First, we covenant every Sunday to always remember• the Savior, but too often we explain to others or think to ourselves that we don't really need to talk about Him and include what He did for us in our talks and lessons because all Christians believe in Him. We therefore mistakenly assume that His importance is apparent in everything that we believe in the Church and so we don't particularly need to include His essential power in our lessons.

Second, in all the years I have taught religion in high-school seminary and university classes, I can't remember a student expressing initial curiosity about what we as Latter-day Saints believe about the grace of Christ. And third, understanding what Latter-day Saints believe about salvation by grace is at the heart of every one of my discussions with my Christian friends of other faiths. My hope today is that we can all have a greater awareness and reverence for this matchless gift from the Savior, especially as it is taught in the keystone of our religion, The Book of Mormon.

Consider a few examples to illustrate that we are often uncomfortable with and sometimes ignorant about the doctrine of grace. I recently heard a missionary bear a powerful witness of Jesus Christ after being ten days at the Provo Missionary Training Center, in which she observed: I have never thought about the grace of Christ before I came on a mission. Since I've been at the MTC, I think of it and pray for it every day. Why is the doctrine of grace so foreign to us?

Not long ago, I heard a new convert to the Church request clarification on Nephi's declaration, It is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do• (2 Nephi 25:23). After hearing so many differing explanations for the passage from various members of the Church, he was even more puzzled about the role of grace in our lives. Why are there so many different interpretations among us about grace?

Words in the first verse of a well-known sacrament hymn speak for many of us: "I stand all amazed at the love Jesus offers me, confused at the grace that so fully He proffers me. What is so confusing about grace? Why is it easy for Latter-day Saints to recite from memory and explain the doctrine in the epistle of James, Faith without

works is dead (James 2:20), but difficult to proclaim Paul's writings in his epistle to the Ephesians, For by grace are ye saved through faith;... Not of works, lest any man should boast (Ephesians 2:8-9)?

First, let's make certain we are together on the meaning of grace. • In Hebrew, the term grace means favor or goodwill. In the Greek, it is a gift "freely given; a divine influence upon the heart. Theologically, grace refers to God's predisposition to empower us in our vulnerability and weakness. According to the LDS Bible Dictionary, it is an endowment of power, a divine means of help or strength, • made possible only through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Grace is the assistance to do good works that [we] otherwise would not be able to maintain if left to [our] own means.

The Dangerous Dichotomy

The root of our confusion over the grace of Jesus Christ generally stems not from our definition of the doctrine, but from our inability to know how to incorporate it into personal practice. How do we confuse our receipt of this unparalleled gift? There is a human tendency to see grace and works as mutually-exclusive, polar-opposite positions, which tendency entices us to gravitate to one or the other. At one extreme of the dichotomy, we can justify any disobedience to God by claiming that Christ's Sacrifice has already paid the price for our sins and so we might as well eat, drink, and be merry. • Discounting any personal responsibility to become more like the Savior while believing Christ has already saved us is commonly referred to as cheap grace." At the opposite extreme, we focus exclusively on our list of good works as evidence of our righteousness, as though Christ's role is merely to wait at the finish line to congratulate us for a meritorious life when we die. We mistakenly believe that we have to independently produce a noteworthy life before the power of Christ will kick in to help us. In either case, we neither comprehend the grandeur of Christ's Atonement nor taste the singular sweetness of His grace. We are therefore left without the enabling grounding or perspective to sincerely respond to God in the humble manner that He requires of us.

A similar pair of opposing beliefs emerged in Nephite society, as reported in the Book of Mormon. Two false teachers among the Nephites represent the polar responses to Christ's grace. One was Nehor who became immensely popular and wealthy by preaching that all mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear nor tremble, but that they might lift up their heads and rejoice; for the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and, in the end, all men should have eternal life • (Alma 1:4). Nehor's version of universal or cheap grace • was so appealing that many did believe on his words, even so many that they began to support him and give him money (Alma 1:5). According to Nehor, nothing we do, be it good or evil, makes any difference to our salvation because a loving Redeemer has already saved us.

Arguing from the opposite extreme was the anti-Christ Korihor who [led] away the hearts of many, causing them to lift up their heads in their wickedness, • with teachings that men and women fared in this life according to the management of the creature,... prospered according to [their] genius, and ... conquered according to [their] strength (Alma 30:17-18). Drawing on our desire for control and self-righteousness, Korihor argued that we carve out success through our own intellect, brawn, and organizational skills. Under this philosophy, those who are independently strong will naturally progress without any help from the Savior (see Alma 30:16-17).

Identifying the destructive dichotomy in ancient times can alert us to this equally enticing trap in our day. C. S. Lewis observed that the devil always sends errors into the world in pairs--pairs of opposites. And he always encourages us to spend a lot of time thinking which is the worse.... He relies on your extra dislike of the one error to draw you gradually into the opposite one. But do not let us be fooled. We have to keep our eyes on the goal and go straight through between both errors.

Falling into Korihor's Trap

Latter-day Saints are more often accused of showing such distaste for Nehor's philosophy that we over-emphasize all we can do, • thereby neglecting to recognize the grace of Jesus Christ and falling into Korihor's

trap. Perhaps it's our reaction to what we think sounds like Protestant doctrine• that drives us to avoid even the mention or thought of grace. By confusing the Apostle Paul's teaching by grace are ye saved through faith;... Not of works, lest any man should boast• (Ephesians 2:8-9) to mean a mere belief in Christ will grant exaltation, we emphasize our works all the more, tipping the balance so far the other way that we neglect the Savior and His grace altogether. The natural next step finds us assuming that it is our efforts and merits that save us.

One of my returned-missionary students confessed in a term paper his gravitation one extreme because of his dislike for the other, To me, it was a common understanding that some religions place too much emphasis on grace and not enough on works. I have talked to individuals who truly believe that their efforts are of no substance when it comes to being saved. However, I had never contemplated the other extreme [of over-emphasis on our works].

Another student who had bought into the saved by our works philosophy, expressed his concerns this way: After all we can do is a phrase that scares me to death. Every time I read this statement, or think about it, I worry that there is no way I am doing or am going to do all that I can do. Whenever I do anything, be it work, school, or some other activity, I think, I could have done it a little bit better. When I am repenting I think that I should do more to make up for an offense or that I should be more active in my ward, etc. After all, Christ did all He could do and that was to lead a perfect life. So how can I think I will ever measure up?

My guess is that he is not alone. If we espouse the belief that we have to earn our way back to God, we will eventually give up and lose hope of ever returning to live with God or else we will suffocate in the pride of our works.

From the beginning, LDS leaders have warned that serious dangers spring from a zealous focus on works. Consider two examples:

In 1913, the First Presidency of the Church counseled members, People who pride themselves on their strict observance of the rules and ordinances and ceremonies of the Church are led away by false spirits, who exercise an influence so imitative of that which proceeds from a Divine source that even these persons, who think they are the very elect, find it difficult to discern the essential difference.

Joseph Smith observed our tendency to take credit for successful performances and endeavors instead of giving credit where it is due. He warned, When the Twelve or any other witnesses stand before the congregations of the earth, and they preach in the power and demonstration of the Spirit of God, and the people are astonished and confounded at the doctrine, and say, That man has preached a powerful discourse, a great sermon, then let that man or those men take care that they do not ascribe the glory unto themselves, but be careful that they are humble, and ascribe the praise and glory to God and the Lamb; for it is by the power of the Holy Priesthood and the Holy Ghost that they have power thus to speak. What are thou, O man, but dust? And from whom receivest thou thy power and blessings, but from God?

The Book of Mormon is a second witness that we are saved and enabled by the grace of Christ while at the same time warning us of pride "our mortal tendency to rely on self-righteousness rather than on the Savior's righteousness. Take for instance Jacob's sobering description of what would happen to every one of us if the Savior had not completed His Infinite Atonement, reminding us of our hopeless state without His grace and mercy: This flesh must have laid down to rot and to crumble to its mother earth, to rise no more. O the wisdom of God, his mercy and grace! For behold, if the flesh should rise no more, our spirits must become subject to that angel who fell from before the presence of the Eternal God ... and our spirits must have become like unto him, and we become devils, angels to a devil, to be shut out from the presence of our God, and to remain with the father of lies• (2 Nephi 9:7-9). Clearly, the Atonement is not a mere convenience to avoid greater punishment.

In a prayer recorded on the brass plates that Lehi's family carried to the New World from Jerusalem, the prophet Zenock suggested that our problem with pride occurs because we choose not to recognize our hopeless situation without Jesus Christ: Thou art angry, O Lord, with this people, because they will not understand thy mercies which thou hast bestowed upon them because of thy Son• (Alma 33:16). Because of pride we choose to believe that we succeed either by our own greatness or by doing nothing. Pride is the enemy to grace in every era and culture.

Consider a sampling of Book of Mormon one-liners which underscore that we cannot boast to God as a result of our good works, because it is only through the merits, mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah that we succeed in this life and receive eternal life forever.

1. After seeing a dream in which he was lost in a wilderness until he found the Tree whose fruit made him exceedingly happy and gave him a desire to help others, father Lehi taught that all mankind were in a lost and in a fallen state, and ever would be save they should rely on this Redeemer• (1 Nephi 10:6).
2. Lehi taught his son Jacob: Ye are saved through the righteousness of the Redeemer• (2 Nephi 2:3).
3. Jacob, Nephi's younger brother, taught, the Lord showeth us our weakness that we may know that it is by his grace, and his great condescensions unto the children of men, that we have power to do these things (Jacob 4:7).
4. Aaron, one of the four sons of Mosiah, taught, since man had fallen he could not merit anything of himself; but the sufferings and death of Christ atone for their sins• (Alma 22:14).
5. The prophet Zenos prayed to the Father, And thou didst hear me because of mine afflictions and my sincerity; and it is because of thy Son that thou hast been thus merciful unto me (Alma 33:11). Note that Zenos did not say that God hears us due to our good works and brilliant contributions. God hears our sincere prayers by virtue of His Son's merits.
6. In his concluding testimony, Mormon observed, all things which are good cometh of Christ; otherwise men were fallen, and there could no good thing come unto them• (Moroni 7:24).

What is All We Can Do?

Recognizing our overwhelming need for the Savior, does anything remain for us to do? Prophets in every era are direct and unequivocal in their reminders that we have a role. Remember the essence of grace reflects not only a gift given, but a gift humbly received. Choosing to accept His grace is at the heart of all we can do. In all His magnanimous offering, the Lord will not force us to accept Him or His enabling power. For there is a God, and he hath created all things, ... both things to act and things to be acted upon"• (2 Nephi 2:14). We are not mindless robots killing time until someone programs us to conform to Christ's law. We are more than empty vessels waiting to be filled. We are free to choose to come to Christ. Our role is therefore neither a passive one nor independent of Christ's enabling power. The grace of Jesus Christ actually enables us to do and become all that the Lord envisions for us.

Reflecting on these teachings throughout the Book of Mormon, Elder M. Russell Ballard described our role in our salvation this way: Our works consist of placing our full confidence and trust in Jesus Christ and then exercising our desire and willingness to live by His teachings. We do this by repenting of all our sins and obeying the laws and ordinances of Christ's gospel. As we do this faithfully over our lifetime, we are sanctified by the Holy Ghost and our nature is changed." The king of the newly converted Lamanites identified repentance as our work in grace and works. He taught, for it was all we could do to repent sufficiently before God that he would take away our stain• (Alma 24:11, emphasis added).

More specifically, the resurrected Lord taught that our role is to have faith in Him, repent of all our sins, be baptized in His name, be sanctified by the reception of the Holy Ghost,• and endure to the end (3 Nephi 27:13-20; see also 2 Nephi 31). In essence, this constitutes coming to Christ. These same requirements are reiterated

and reinforced elsewhere in scripture as being interconnected to the grace of Christ.

When we talk about our need to obey God's command to receive the ordinances of the gospel without explaining that the true power is in Christ and that the ordinances are given to symbolize or typify Him, it is soon easy to mistakenly conclude that our works or the ordinances themselves save us. Let me illustrate with what one of students remembered from his baptism several years before. As one of many eight-year-olds in his stake to be baptized on the same day and in the same baptismal fount, he was adamant in his instructions to his mother that he could be the first one of the group to receive this important ordinance. His mother had sudden images of her son being a great religious leader because of the boy's urgent desires to become a member of the Church until she deciphered his thinking. This anxious eight-year-old feared being baptized second or third or tenth in the group of children because, he reasoned, he could come out of the water with more sins on him than he had when he entered the water. He had a mental image of innumerable, disgusting sins already floating on the water when he entered for his own baptism. In other words, he thought that the baptismal waters literally wash away our sins. In his mind, the symbol had replaced the actual sourced of power.

Nephi taught that it wasn't the ordinance of baptism that cleanses us from sin, but by fire and by the Holy Ghost our sins are purged away (2 Nephi 31:17). He further explained that although we enter on the symbolic path leading to God through our willing baptism and repentance, ye have not come thus far save it were by the word of Christ with unshaken faith in him, relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save• (2 Nephi 31:19). By exercising sincere faith in Jesus Christ because of His merits we make progress along the path.

In context, Nephi spoke of being saved by grace, despite all we can do after recounting the story of the children of Israel when poisonous serpents threatened their lives. Their healing occurred when they simply looked up at the symbol of Christ, the serpent on the staff (2 Nephi 25:20). They were saved by the grace of the Lord because they looked to Him in faith. Because what was required of them was so simple or easy, however, many perished (see 1 Nephi 17:41). Therefore, Nephi petitioned, "believe in Christ, and deny him not; ... wherefore ye must bow down before him, and worship him with all your might, mind, and strength, and your whole soul; and if ye do this ye shall in nowise be cast out"• (2 Nephi 25:29).

Elder Bruce C. Hafen of the Seventy, clarified Nephi's words by teaching that we are saved by grace, 'both during and after all we can do.• Elder M. Russell Ballard explained it this way: It is only through the infinite Atonement of Jesus Christ that people can overcome the consequences of bad choices. Thus Nephi teaches us that it is ultimately by the grace of Christ that we are saved even after all that we can do. No matter how hard we work, no matter how much we obey, no matter how many good things we do in this life, it would not be enough were it not for Jesus Christ and His loving grace.• He continued, Unfortunately, there are some within the Church who have become so preoccupied with performing good works that they forget that those works as good as they may be are hollow unless they are accompanied by a complete dependence on Christ.

Grounded in the teachings of Lehi's Dream and 2 Nephi 31, Elder Bruce R. McConkie taught on more than one occasion, if you are on that path and pressing forward, and you die, you'll never get off the path. There is no such thing as falling off the straight and narrow path in the life to come, and the reason is that this life is the time that is given to men to prepare for eternity... So if you're working zealously in this life though you haven't done all you hoped you might do you're still going to be saved. You don't have to live a life that is truer than true. You don't have to have an excessive zeal that becomes fanatical and unbalancing. Elder McConkie didn't say we are saved based on how fast we are going along the path or how close we are to the Tree when we die he said, if we are on the path and going in the right direction, pressing forward when we die, we will be saved in the Celestial Kingdom.

My Personal Discovery

I have not always recognized this profound truth in our scriptures or teachings of latter-day authorities. The

catalyst for me occurred about 25 years ago, coming in the form of a student's observation about her former LDS ward. I had been teaching released-time seminary for about five years when a student I had taught when she was a sophomore came back to visit me when she was a senior in high school. After a few pleasantries, she informed me that she was no longer attending The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; she told me she now attended a Protestant church in the area. I felt as though she wanted me to react with alarm when she made this announcement, so I remained calm and simply said, Oh, that is interesting, what led you to that decision?• Her answer shook me from my calm demeanor because it was not at all what I expected. She said, When I attended my LDS ward, we talked about being honest, the importance of reading scriptures and getting married in the Temple, and the importance of a living prophet, but I never heard much about Jesus Christ. In this new church I attend, Jesus is the heart and soul of all their sermons.•

My first reaction was denial. In my thoughts I was arguing that she wasn't listening when she had attended the LDS Church because certainly the Savior is at the heart of all that we believe and understand. In an attempt to validate these assumptions, I asked all of the students in my five classes the next day what they thought of this girl's observations about her ward. To my amazement, the great majority in every class agreed with her, concluding that we didn't speak, teach, or mention much about the Savior other than in our hymns and at the end of prayers and talks.

I made a silent vow that day that I would never teach a lesson or give a talk without making a connection between the topic or scripture block and the Atonement of Jesus Christ. My motivation in the beginning was to prove to my students that we did indeed teach of Christ and rejoice in Christ. That reason, however, changed rather quickly. In seeking to find connections to the Savior and His Atonement to present in class, I discovered a deeper, more meaningful scripture study experience. Instead of looking first for ways that the passage applied to me, I sought to understand what it taught about the Redeemer. Students responded to our class discussions differently after I consistently made connections to the Atonement. There was a feeling of reverence in the room. After class, students often reported that the scriptures we had explored that day were the very ones that they needed in their personal challenges. Perhaps most dramatic, I noticed a change that was occurring in me. My reverence for the Redeemer increased beyond anything I had previously known. I also found a new sense of confidence that motivated me to action. I wanted to do and say whatever the Lord wanted me to do and say and felt an added energy to actually do it. Too often before this experience, I had looked beyond the mark,• or the target upon which to focus. Looking beyond the Savior, I stumbled trying to explain tangents and ancillary principles, getting caught up in faddish topics scintillating stories instead of remembering the foundation of faith in Christ and repentance through the Atonement.

During Ezra Taft Benson's presidency, he often reminded the membership of the Church about the revelation given to Joseph Smith about the Church being under condemnation because of the Book of Mormon. And [the church] shall remain under this condemnation until they repent and remember the new covenant, even the Book of Mormon and the former commandments which I have given them, not only to say, but to do according to that which I have written• (D&C 84:57). Many thought he meant that we needed to read the Book of Mormon more often. Although frequent study of this great book of scripture is always a great habit, my experience with finding connections to Christ in all scripture suggested there was something more. Shortly after President Benson passed away, Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve reviewed the many speeches that he gave on the subject and concluded that the President of the Church had something more specific in mind. In my opinion,• he wrote, one of the principal reasons our Heavenly Father had His prophet direct us into a more intensive study of the Book of Mormon is to help us counteract [the] modern tendency to try to diminish the divinity and mission of our Savior.... In too many of our classes, in too many of our worship services, we are not teaching of Christ and testifying of Christ in the way that we should.

Conclusion

Returning to my earlier question, why are we confused at the grace that so fully [Jesus] proffers me? Because the grace of Christ isn't fair. Not in this fallen world that defines fairness through an eye-for-an-eye mentality. Grace is a gift an infinite gift and we are the recipients, not the givers. Grace is receiving what we don't earn and getting what we frankly don't deserve. In a legalistic world filled with warnings about being taken advantage of, we struggle to accept that Christ gives us more infinitely more than we can ever repay. After worldly bombardments of, If you think it's too good to be true, it probably is, and you get what you pay for, we try to get our heads and hearts around the Savior's gift of enabling power. And in our modern world, that seems just too good to be true. In contrast to pay as you go and earn what you receive and it's better to give than to receive, we encounter the doctrine of grace. And we become confused.

Grace requires us to look beyond the treasures of a fallen world. It demands our focus to be on the One whose power, knowledge, and love supersede the greatest accomplishments that all the Korihors and Nehors can muster. It teaches us to be gracious receivers. Grace leads us to finally accept our status as unprofitable servants and admit that we can never "pay back" the only One who rescues us. We call Jesus the Savior because He saves us. In truth, that is good news.

Accepting the grace of Jesus Christ is not a weakness it is our only strength. In all that we want to do, His gift intercedes to support and enable. How can we receive His gift? What is all we can do? We can put our trust in the Lord and His unique and essential gift of the Atonement. We will stop trying to cover our sins, but turn them over to the Savior, accepting His generous offer of repentance in return. We can more consciously acknowledge His strength and wisdom in all of our successes. In the final verses of the Book of Mormon, Moroni left us his final plea: Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in Him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind, and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by His grace ye may be perfect in Christ; and if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in nowise deny the power of God. • (Moroni 10:32)