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INTRODUCTION

What is grace?

If you hear the word "grace," what do you think of? Well ... like Faith, Hope, and Charity, it can be a girl's name (Grace Kelly). Or it can refer to a prayer, especially before meals. (Who wants to say grace?) Sometimes it's a title for some sort of royalty or nobility (Your Grace). We sometimes use the word to talk about good manners (the social graces) or being favored by someone (in someone's good graces). We can use the word to describe a person's ability to handle tough situations. (She handled herself with grace.)

But what about the grace of God? What does that term signify? Unfortunately, the word "grace"—like "church" and "atonement"—might be one of those church-y words that people throw around and don't really understand, a word that does more to obscure than to reveal. Since the Bible is a book about God's grace, since that's really the point of this story, we

need to take some time to understand what we're talking about. I don't mean we should just get a good definition of "grace" and move on. We've put together these studies in order to help illuminate grace, to present a vision of it, or, rather, a series of visions.

But, definitions are helpful, so let's go there.

What is grace? If you ask this question at church, someone is going to say, "unmerited favor." Or how about this one—"grace is when God gives us what we don't deserve; mercy is when God doesn't give us what we do deserve."

These are helpful ways of thinking about God's grace toward us—unmerited favor, giving us what we don't deserve—but maybe we can press further.

We could talk about the English word. The word "grace" comes from French *grase*, which derives from Latin *gratia*. The word "grace" has been used in English since the thirteenth century. It appears in the KJV 170 times (39 of which are in the Old Testament). We've already seen that in English we've got all kinds of meanings for "grace," but we really care about what the words mean in the Bible. To figure that out, we're not going to rely on the English language but on the biblical languages of Greek and Hebrew.

The Greek word often translated "grace" (χάρις,

charis) appears 155 times in the New Testament, exactly a hundred of which are in the thirteen letters of Paul. The word appears at least once in 23 New Testament writings (not Matthew, Mark, or 1 John, or 3 John). It also appears 132 times in the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint or LXX).

The standard dictionary of New Testament Greek, edited about two decades ago by Fred Danker, provides these definitions for our word.[1]

1. a winning quality or attractiveness that invites a favorable reactions, graciousness, attractiveness, charm, winsomeness
2. a beneficent disposition toward someone, favor, grace, gracious care/help, goodwill
3. practical application of goodwill, (a sign of) favor, gracious deed/gift, benefaction
4. exceptional effect produced by generosity, favor
5. response to generosity or beneficence, thanks, gratitude

A recent book on "grace" in Paul simplifies these five definitions to three.[2]

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[1] Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1079–80.

[2] John M. G. Barclay, *Paul & the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2015), 576–78.

- charm, delight. This meaning is common in the LXX (as a translation of חֵן). In the New Testament, see Luke 1:30; 2:52; Acts 7:46; 1 Pet 2:19–20; Col 4:6.
- the attitude of benevolence, or the favor or benefit given. This is the meaning we commonly associate with God.
- gratitude or thanksgiving. See 1 Cor 10:30; 2 Cor 9:11–12, 15.

These definitions apply to the single noun, but there are also other, related words, like **χαρίζομαι** (*charizomai*) and **χάρισμα** (*charisma*) and **χαριτόω** (*charitóō*), that all have something to do with favor or giving. If we free the concept of God's grace from this one domain of Greek words, we will want to talk about more terms and passages. For instance, the way Paul talks about "kindness" (**χρηστότης**; *chrēstotēs*; cf. Rom 2:4; 11:22) or "mercy" (**ἔλεος**, *eleos*; cf. Rom 15:29) or "blessing" (**εὐλογία**, eulogia; cf. Rom 15:29) or "love of people" (**φιλανθρωπία**, *philanthrōpia*; cf. Titus 3:4) illuminates in many ways the graciousness of God.[3]

In Hebrew, there are also a variety of terms associated with the concept of "grace," but the Hebrew word usually translated with "grace" is ḥen (חֵן), or the verb

[3]See the brief discussion of these other terms in Barclay, *Paul & the Gift*, 575n1.

"show favor," ḥanan (חָנָן), or the adjective "gracious," ḥannun (חַנּוּן). This is how God reveals himself to Moses on Sinai, when Moses asks to see God's glory and all God will show him is his "back."

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful (רַחוּם, raḥum) and gracious (חַנּוּן, ḥannun), slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. (Exod 34:6)

That's just a quick review of some of the basic terminology in the Bible that will help you as you work your way through these lessons. We hope this vocabulary is helpful, but the vocabulary is not ultimately the point. What we really want to do is to show you pictures, visions, of our gracious God, and to motivate you to live graciously and gratefully in response to his bounteous gifts.