

By Grace Alone

A Bible Study

Opening Prayer: O Lord, open our eyes that we may see wonderful things in your Word. Increase our joy in our salvation. It is certain and it is ours by your grace alone. Amen.

The study leader will want to be aware of the time allotted to complete the entire study. Without rushing, the first two sections of the study can be covered without a great deal of discussion. The leader will want to make certain to leave enough time to cover thoroughly the third section of the study, especially the last page of the student's copy.

Introduction

“What must I do to be saved” (Acts 16:30)? The question was asked by a jailor in the city of Philippi who, a moment earlier, was about to take his life. Because God “has set eternity in the hearts of men” (Ecclesiastes 3:11), the jailor understood that there is an afterlife; his conscience, roused by the near-death experience, told him he wasn't ready for it. He pleaded, “What must I do to be saved?”

All humankind, either with the lips or in the secret heart, has asked the same question. Praise God that he has not kept the answer a mystery. We are saved by God's grace alone.

The necessity of grace

No one can truly understand the grace of God and salvation by God's grace alone unless he first understands original sin and the total depravity of every member of the human race.

Romans 5:12,18: “Therefore just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned...the result of the one trespass was condemnation for all men.”

- What happened to the entire human race when Adam, the representative of the human race, fell into sin?

Paul is not writing here about the personal sinful actions of all people. He is speaking about the one sin of Adam that was credited against the entire human race. Even if a person never sinned, he would die because he has inherited the guilt of Adam's sin that brought God's just and eternal condemnation. Someone might argue, “That's not fair: to be condemned for something that Adam did.” At this point in the study, it might be best to simply respond: “We'll see that God has done the same with the righteousness of Christ.”

John 3:6 Flesh give birth to flesh.

Ephesians 2:1 *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.*

Romans 8:7,8 *The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.*

Matthew 15:19 *Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.*

- What is a further result of Adam's fall into sin? How is this exhibited in people's lives?

As a result of Adam's fall into sin, all people are now conceived and born with a sinful nature that is only hostile toward God all of the time. This nature rebels against God as the totally depraved heart and the mind of the flesh overflow with sinful words, actions and thoughts. In fact, natural man with his natural heart and mind can do nothing else; he is spiritually dead by nature and incapable of choosing or doing anything that is pleasing to God in any way. As a result, he is a slave to the sin that condemns him eternally.

Romans 3:10-12 *There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.*

Romans 3:23 *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*

Romans 6:23 *The wages of sin is death.*

- To whom do the above verses apply?

The words "all" and "no one" clearly indicate that Paul is speaking about all members of the human race without exception. He is, in fact, speaking about each of us.

- Mark (X) the statements that accurately reflect the truths that Paul is asserting in the above verses.

- All people have inherited a spiritual weakness.
- Although sinful, people are nonetheless able to seek and find the true God.
- By nature, all people are totally depraved and corrupt.
- No one has any righteousness whatsoever before God.
- There are degrees of spiritual corruption and depravity.
- People by nature are not able to offer a thing to God that would earn his favor.
- All people have earned (and are able to earn) nothing but God's eternal hatred and condemnation.
- God would be perfectly fair and just in sending all of us to hell.

James 2:10 *Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.*

Isaiah 64:6 *All our righteous acts are like filthy rags.*

Romans 3:20 *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.*

- Respond to someone who contends, “In spite of their natural spiritual corruption, many people today are able to live a mostly decent life that lines up with God’s commandments. God knows and sees this and takes it into consideration.”

James confirms the unit concept of God’s law. A person may commit only one sin in his entire life, yet by that one sin has become guilty of breaking the entire law of God. What is more, even the seemingly righteous acts in his life – his very best – are defiled by sin and disgusting in God’s eyes. Paul states the sad and conclusive truth: No one can claim even a trace of righteousness before God on the basis of obedience to God’s law. The law, in fact, silences those who attempt to do so and makes them conscious of their sin and total depravity.

Born in sin and totally depraved by nature, we are unable to save ourselves or even to contribute somehow to our salvation. Furthermore, there is nothing in us that would prompt God to forgive and save us. Left to ourselves, we and all mankind stand hopelessly condemned.

Saved by grace alone, or not at all

People can do nothing at all to save themselves and have nothing to offer toward their salvation. Yet, the world has been saved. It has been saved by God’s grace alone.

Isaiah 43:24,25 *But you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offenses. I even I, am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.*

- Where is God’s motive for blotting out the sins of fallen mankind found?

God forgives sin “for (his) own sake.” He is not influenced by man, by anything in man, any effort of man or any good thing that man might achieve. Entirely independent of man and his works, God forgives because of a quality in himself that prompts him to forgive. The motive is – in fact, must be – in God.

Exodus 34:6,7 *The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.*

Ephesians 2:8,9 *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.*

- What quality in God has prompted him to forgive and save us and all fallen mankind?

God’s grace – his undeserved love, favor and kindly disposition toward fallen mankind.

2 Corinthians 5:21 *God made (Christ Jesus) who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Acts 4:12 *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.*

- How did God, moved by his grace alone, demonstrate his grace and bring about mankind's salvation?

God's grace prompted him to send his Son Jesus into the world to save us. Through his active and passive obedience, Christ has satisfied the demands of God's justice and has done so as our substitute before God. On the basis of Christ's completed work in our place, God graciously forgives the sins of the world.

- Explain: One who trusts in God's grace alone for salvation yet rejects the vicarious work of Christ cannot be saved.

There is no saving grace apart from Christ! It was through his Son alone that God chose to save mankind. God himself made the necessary payment for sin by offering up Jesus, the spotless Lamb of God, as the only sufficient payment for the sins. In Christ alone, God graciously redeems, reconciles and forgives us.

- God's grace is undeserved, unearned, unprompted by man, and in Christ alone. Use the following Bible verses to identify further attributes of God's grace.

John 3:16 *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.*

God's grace extends to all people; it is universal.

John 19:30 *Jesus said, "It is finished."*

God's grace provided everything that was necessary for our salvation; it is certain and complete.

Romans 3:22-24 *There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

God's saving grace is an unconditional and free gift.

Romans 1:16 *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.*

God's saving grace is offered and conveyed through the gospel, the good news of God's grace that is effective in accomplishing God's purpose.

The leader might mention the term Means of Grace: the gospel in Word and Sacrament.

John 3:36 *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life.*

We receive the benefits of God's saving grace through Spirit-worked faith.

Acts 7:51 You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!

Even though God's power is in his gospel message of grace, grace can be resisted/rejected.

Romans 11:6 If (it is) by grace, then it is no longer works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.

Galatians 5:4 You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.

- Agree or disagree. In the above verses, Paul is saying that salvation is by grace alone or not at all.

This is what Paul is saying. The grace of God and the works of man are mutually exclusive terms. Salvation is either by grace alone or it is not by grace at all. A person cannot be saved partly by grace and partly by his own work and efforts; it might conceivably be one or the other, but never both. Paul rejects all forms of synergism. To state it further: if any person tries to take any credit at all for his salvation, the very concept of grace is destroyed. If any person tries to contribute to his salvation, again, the very concept of grace is destroyed.

Grace is a quality in God. It is his undeserved and unmerited favor and kindly disposition toward fallen mankind by which he independently and apart from man freely forgives sinful mankind because of the redemptive work of Christ the Savior alone. Any claim or attempt to merit or contribute to salvation destroys salvation by grace.

Rejecting grace

The Bible clearly teaches that salvation is by God's grace alone. Yet there is something in the natural heart of every person that rejects this message of unequalled comfort. Theologians call it the *opinio legis* – the faulty religion ingrained in our sinful nature that believes we can save ourselves (or, at the very least, contribute somehow to our salvation) by what we do or don't do. The gospel of salvation by God's grace alone is utter foolishness and an offense to the proud, sinful nature in all of us.

Luke 15:18,19 Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.

- Briefly review Jesus' parable of the lost son. The runaway boy, humbled and repentant, made the decision to return home. How did he hope and intend to regain his father's favor? What led him to this idea?

The parable is familiar and can be recounted quickly. The *opinio legis* led the lost son to believe that, if the father allowed it, he could and would regain his father's favor through his faithful service and good conduct.

Luke 15:20 *While (the lost son) was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.*

- What details in the parable indicate that it was impossible for the lost son to regain the father's favorable disposition?

It was impossible to regain the father's favorable disposition because it had never been lost; the father's love for his son had never lapsed. Furthermore, the father's favorable disposition was unconditional; it was not based on the boy's repentance, on his confession or apology, on his willingness and promise to serve, on his performance and worthiness, or on a period of probation to follow his return. Neither was it based on the boy's trust in his father's forgiveness and mercy. In short, it was not based on anything in the boy at all, but on the father's own gracious heart. Our minds tell us this is not fair. Yet this is the grace of the God whom we worship.

Luke 15:29-31 *(The older brother) answered his father, "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends." "My son," the father said, "you are always with me, and everything I have is yours."*

- Agree or disagree. Since the father in Jesus' parable represents the heavenly Father, Jesus is teaching that even those who live under the Father's roof may nonetheless be lost.

Jesus' parable was directed to the Pharisees and teachers of the law (Luke 15:2). Although, outwardly, they were members of God's household who lived under "the Father's roof," they were lost because of their self-righteousness. Like the older son, they rejected and were angered by the Father's grace, resented the undeserving recipients of grace, argued against the fairness of grace, and boasted of their good and hard work. Although they appeared to be members of God's family, they were actually lost because they relied on themselves rather than on God's grace alone. Yes, it is possible for those in the visible church to be lost.

- Which good works in our own lives may be a special temptation leading us to think that we have earned God's favor and, in so thinking, to deny God's grace?

Answers will vary. Perhaps some are prone to find special comfort and self-assurance in those acts that are most often associated with the Christian faith and with being a faithful follower of Christ: public worship, reception of the Lord's Supper, service in the congregation, etc. The point of the question is to have us understand that we, too, are always in danger of falling into some degree of work-righteousness and, in

doing so, undermining and denying the saving grace of God. There is not a single act that can possibly impress or earn the favor of God.

Because the slightest injection of man's works or worthiness contaminates and destroys the truth of salvation by God's grace alone, Satan loves this false doctrine. Sadly, he has slithered into the realm of the Christian church with this teaching and has found receptive ears.

- Briefly respond to each of the following statements made by Christian churches today. We believe that salvation is by grace. Grace is not something in God, but it is a gift from God – a quality that God infuses into the soul of a person by which that person can do good and obtain forgiveness.

Much can be said in response to this and the following statements. While it is important to be aware of and to be able to recognize some of the false teachings in today's Christian church that are always a threat to us and our church, it might be best, for the sake of time, to keep the responses simple and brief.

This is Roman Catholicism's false understanding of grace. Denying that grace is a personal attribute of God by which he saves, Catholicism teaches that grace is something that God gives to man with which man can save himself.

We believe that salvation is by grace. We understand that if one is to receive God's saving grace, he must make the decision to do so; he must invite Jesus into his life. There must be mental and intellectual assent to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Reformed churches deny the total depravity of man by contending that natural man, though weakened, has been left with an ability (and must use the ability) to consciously choose and accept God's grace in Christ. The result is that grace is no longer grace. A work (albeit small in the grand scheme) is required: one must choose grace and make the decision to trust Christ completely.

We believe that salvation is by grace. We believe that grace will and must be experienced through human emotions and inner stirrings that may or may not manifest themselves outwardly, as through miraculous healings or speaking in tongues. Religious experiences and feelings are the seal and guarantee of God's saving grace.

Some reformed churches make God's grace contingent on human emotions, contending that without the proper type of religious feelings or stirrings in the soul that may or may not manifest themselves outwardly, one cannot be certain that he or she is truly the object of that grace. It naturally follows, then, that worship services in churches that hold to this false understanding of grace are often designed to stir human emotions, thus supplementing or confirming grace. Although subtle, this is a work-righteous teaching – the work of feeling is required – and an attack on salvation by grace alone.

We believe that salvation is by grace. We understand that those who have been saved by grace will obediently submit to Jesus and his will for their lives. The sincere effort of the Christian to reform and to live a Christ-like life makes God's grace in one's life real.

Giving little attention to the truth that Jesus is Savior who, as our divine Stand-In, satisfied the requirements of the law in our place, this false teaching, ironically, presents Jesus as a new law-giver. The gospel message of “Done!” is subtly replaced by the old, worn-out “Do!” The seal and assurance of God’s grace and salvation are sought, not so much in the completed work of Christ – his life, death and resurrection – but in the life of the Christian who will legalistically obey Jesus’ rules for the lives of his followers.

We believe that salvation is by grace. We believe that preaching about damning sin and the total depravity of people is counterproductive to the message of grace.

A growing number of Christian churches are shying away from or avoiding completely the message of God’s law, claiming that it is counterproductive to what God wants to do in people’s lives through the good news of his grace. However, without the truth about sin and people’s total depravity, the good news of God’s saving grace is superfluous and moot.

If time allows, it might be beneficial, because of the rise in popularity of false teachers like Joel Osteen, to mention the theology of glory and its attack on *sola gratia*. However, the leader will want to be certain to spend sufficient time discussing the next three questions.

- What makes the above statements so appealing and therefore so dangerous?

Each of the above statements, to some degree, attributes salvation to some act or some attribute in man. These statements naturally appeal to the itching ears of the *opinio legis* in every person (including each of us), rejuvenating sinful pride. The danger is great: the certainty of salvation, then, rests on something in man. That certainty, however, is found only in the objective truth of God’s saving grace in Christ as revealed on the pages of Scripture; it can never be found in subjective feelings or personal works.

- Even the most subtle denial of salvation by grace alone will lead to one of two places: self-righteousness and pride or uncertainty and despair. Explain.

On the one hand, a denial of salvation by grace alone may lead to the delusion of self-righteousness as one looks to his life of worship attendance, offerings and the other fine works in his life, concluding that God simply must love such a person. On the other hand, it may lead to despair as a person works and labors and struggles and strives to measure up, but deep down knows that even “our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6) before the Holy One. In either case, the good news of God’s grace that freely saves is undermined and destroyed.

- There is a relationship between grace on the one hand, and good works, assent, religious feelings and the effort to be more Christ-like on the other. What is it?

It is important to remember that before any good work on our part, before any assent to the gospel, before any religious feelings or experience, and before any effort to be more Christ-like, there was grace. In the beginning is grace. In the middle is grace. In the end is grace. God’s grace is not affected, produced, made more certain or supplemented by any effort of man, rather grace produces in man the good works, the assent, the feelings and the effort to live for Christ.

The proud, natural heart is deeply offended by and rejects the truth that salvation is by God's grace alone. Satan, too, hates this truth that saves and has worked his way into the Christian church to contaminate it to the destruction of immortal souls. Christians must remain ever vigilant.

Conclusion

The jailor asked, "What must I do to be saved?" "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ" was the reply. In essence, Paul and Silas were saying, "Nothing. There is nothing you can do to be saved. Not only are you incapable of doing anything, but it's already been done, and you cannot do or finish what has already been completed. For it is by grace you have been saved."

Cherish and guard this saving truth. Live each day in the certainty of your salvation. It is God's work from start to finish. It is done. It is by grace alone, and that is more than enough.