

By Grace I'm Saved

Lutheran Service Book 566 | study by Robert A. Sorensen

Introduction

The word “grace” has a broad range of meanings. For example, when someone is overdue with a credit card or mortgage payment, we sometimes hear about a lender willing to extend a “grace period.” We often hear references to the prayer that precedes a meal as “saying grace.”

When this word “grace” is used in connection with the Bible and Christian doctrine, however, it has a very specific meaning. Given the central place this word occupies in our

Lutheran understanding, it is crucial that we be able to answer questions such as these:

- In simple terms, what does the Bible mean when it uses the word “grace”?
- Do any of the examples above use the word in this specifically biblical and Christian sense? Why or why not?

Exploring the Scriptures

All three of today’s appointed Scripture Readings address the issue of our fallen human condition and our resultant standing before God. They make clear that we are not able to claim any merit or worthiness before God.

Let’s look first at Deut. 4:1–2, 6–9, today’s Old Testament Reading. It simply identifies the obligations God’s people owe Him by virtue of their covenanted status.

- What is the one thing God most desires from His people? How well do we give Him what He seeks?
- What are some of our most common failures?

In today’s Gospel, Mark 7:14–23, Jesus identifies the root cause of our failures to live up to our high calling as God’s

people. His words make clear that our problem is as personal as it is deeply seated.

- What is the root cause of our ethical lapses and offensive behaviors?
- Is this root cause a flaw in the way God created us? Explain.

After reviewing Eph. 6:10–20, consider these questions:

- What external forces assault the individual Christian and the Church? According to 1 Peter 5:8, what is the goal of such attacks?
- Have you ever felt as if you were undergoing such an attack? If so, when and how?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

The author of this famous hymn, Christian Ludwig Scheidt (1709–61), was not a pastor; he was a layman. His professional life was devoted to academic pursuits; he worked as a librarian and a university lecturer.

Despite the many changes in his life’s circumstances — Scheidt worked in a variety of institutional settings in both Germany and Denmark — the constant in his life was a steadfast faith in Christ. By his early 30s, he had published this classic hymn, “By Grace I’m Saved.”

Though successful in most of his professional endeavors, Scheidt experienced great heartache in his personal life. His wife bore eight children, and all died in childhood.

- Can you relate to the aforementioned trials and tribulations of this hymn writer?
- Or does a story about a couple losing eight children to childhood diseases sound more like the product of an age gone by? Explain your answer.

After their last child died, Scheidt discovered that his wife had committed adultery. Over against his desire to reconcile the marriage, the couple was finally divorced. Scheidt remarried but did not have many good years with his second wife. After suffering ill health over his last years, he died at age 52.

- What does it say about Scheidt that he wished to reconcile with his wife after her adultery rather than divorce her?
- How would you relate his desire to forgive rather than divorce to the hymn “By Grace I’m Saved”?

Text

Both in the original German and in the English translation, the first words of each stanza set the tone and theme. These words are “By grace.”

- In the biblical sense, exactly what is grace? What do Eph. 2:1–10 and Rom. 11:6 contribute to your formulation of an answer to this question?
- How does this concept of grace shape our Lutheran understanding of our status before God?

The second stanza of this hymn says, “Our works and conduct have no worth.” Carefully, taking into account the context, consider the following questions.

- Does this statement mean that all human conduct and attempts at goodness are worthless? In other words, is our striving to do good works a waste of time? Why or why not?
- What do Matt. 5:16 and John 15:1–8 contribute to this discussion?

Stanza 3 begins with these words: “By grace God’s Son, our only Savior, / Came down to earth to bear our sin.” This line beautifully encapsulates both the manner and goal of Jesus’ ministry.

Making the Connection

This hymn powerfully underlines both the nature and effect of God’s grace. In order to reinforce our understanding of the term “grace” — the undeserved, divine favor bestowed on us for Christ’s sake — please answer the following questions.

- “By grace God’s Son, our only Savior, / Came down to earth to bear our sin” (st. 3). Can you think of a Bible passage besides the ones referred to above, or perhaps a part of the catechism or liturgy, that testifies to the same truth?

In Closing

In its explanation of the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed, the Small Catechism has a long list of all the things that our heavenly Father has given and still provides for us. This list includes our body and all its members; food, clothing and shelter; wife, children, land and animals; and so forth. The catechism’s explanation then continues with this line: “All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me” (*LSB*, p. 322).

This last sentence emphasizes the undeserved nature of grace. Even more important to a Christian understanding of grace is the idea that God has not merely given us bodies, lives and daily needs; He has given us His own Son, that we might have forgiveness and the hope of eternal life in Christ. God’s grace is indeed amazing, far beyond our lowly capacity to comprehend it.

- With what other words and images does Scripture describe Jesus’ saving work? What are some of your favorite expressions of the Gospel message?
- What do Titus 3:4–7; Col. 1:13–14; 1 John 3:8b; and John 6:37–40 have to say in this regard?

The concluding two stanzas aver that only Christ’s grace can avail in “tribulation’s furnace” and at the hour of death. In fact, the hymn concludes on a rather triumphant note, exulting: “My heart is glad, all grief has flown / Since I am saved by grace alone.”

- Have you memorized any Scripture promises that make similar points? In other words, what Bible passages would you recite if you were in a foxhole?
- Some passages that fit the bill include the following: Psalm 23 (especially vv. 4–6); John 10:27–30; and Rom. 8:31–39. What is it about these verses that make them so comforting?

- “By grace, in spite of fear and trouble, / The Father’s heart is open wide” (st. 5). Describe a moment of forgiveness, reconciliation or divine grace you have experienced, either as a witness or as a participant.
- “By grace! On this I’ll rest when dying; / In Jesus’ promise I rejoice” (st. 6). Have you witnessed a Christian brother or sister exhibiting this kind of faith in the face of death? Or have you perhaps heard a story of such steadfastness?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 566.

Prayer

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, Your mercies are new every morning; and though we deserved only punishment, You receive us as Your children and provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant that we may heartily acknowledge Your merciful goodness, give thanks for all Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Lent 4C).