
God Is Gracious

by: Ronald L. Dart

It had been a hard three days, David and the handful of young men with him had left in a hurry and they had taken no food. By the time they had come to a place called Nob (1 Samuel 21:1), they were in a bad way. They needed food and there was only one place that David thought they might get something to eat. So, he went to the priest at the Tabernacle, a man named Ahimelech.

Ahimelech was afraid when he saw David, when there was no major group of people with him and he said to David, "Why are you alone, and nobody with you?" {2} And David said to Ahimelech, "The king has commanded me on business and has said to me, "Don't let any man know anything of the business, whereupon I send you and of what I commanded you." And I have sent my servants on ahead."

Now David lied to the priest, because Saul had not sent him anywhere. David was running for his life from Saul, because Saul had ordered him to be killed.

Should David have lied to the priest? Well, he goes on to compound his lawbreaking.

David Eats the Showbread

David says, 1 Samuel 21 verse 3, "Now, therefore, what do you have here in your hand? Give me five loaves of bread or what you can find." {4} And the priest answered David and said, "There's no common bread here. There is only the hallowed bread. If the young men have kept themselves at least from women." {5} And David answered the priest, and said, "Of a truth women have been kept from us these three days, since I came out, and the vessels of the young men are holy, and the bread is in a matter common." {6} So the priest gave him the hallowed bread, for there was nothing else there, but the showbread, that was taken from before the LORD, to put hot bread in its place."

Now this is a real classic of rationalization, of reasoning your way around the law, because the law was clear as crystal. If you were the judge, what would you do about this infraction? Because it was an infraction of the law. This is beyond dispute. Only the priests were allowed by law to eat the holy bread.

How Would God Judge David Eating the Showbread?

How do you think God would judge it? Well, fortunately, we have a clue, because Jesus Himself evaluated this instance.

There was a day, this story is in Matthew 12 verse 1, "When Jesus and his disciples were walking through the cornfield on the Sabbath day, his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck the ears of grain and to eat as they went through the place. {2} And when the Pharisees saw it, they said, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do upon the Sabbath day."

Well, wait a minute. There's nothing in the law that says they couldn't do what they were doing, but pharisaic tradition says to pluck grain is harvesting. So, you can't do that on the Sabbath day, not even so much as one handful on the Sabbath day.

"Jesus said to them, {3} "Haven't you read what David did when he was hungry, and the ones that were with him. {4} How he entered into the house of God, and ate the showbread, which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them that were with him, but only for the priests.""

Now it is plain enough as you read this, that Jesus is ready to let David off for this infraction. Otherwise He would not have brought it up this way, because He's using it to justify what His disciples did. But how does Jesus do that? How does He do it and on what basis?

There is this crowd that says, "Give them an inch and they will take a mile." They would say you shouldn't give on anything, and that's the way the Pharisees were. A Pharisee would say "We have to spell these things out. We must build a fence around the law, less one accidentally steps over the line."

There's a strange fear that if we begin to let the barriers down people will take liberties and abuse the law. Plainly, Jesus and the Pharisees were on opposite sides of this fence.

Someone might well have walked up to Jesus, after this saying, and quoted Him this Scripture, Exodus 29 and verse 32, "And Aaron and his sons shall eat the flesh of the ram and the bread that is in the basket by the door of the tabernacle of the congregation." Aaron and his sons, the priests. {33} "They shall eat these things where the atonement was made, to consecrate and to sanctify them but a stranger shall not eat thereof because the bread is holy."

How Can Jesus Justify David?

A person would want to know how can Jesus justify the actions of David and the priests when the law is so plain?

How do you suppose Jesus would've answered that question? I'm going to answer the question for you in some detail, and in the process, I'm going to explain to you one of the most important things you will ever learn about God and His law. If you can grasp what I'm going to explain, it

may revolutionize the way you read the Bible, the way you relate to God, and the way you relate to one another. If this sounds a little presumptuous to you, hang on, let's see where we can go with it from here.

First of all, I want to get a couple things clear. 1. The Law of the Showbread was not superseded or set aside by any actions of David, nor by Jesus justifying David for what he did. David did not have that kind of authority and Jesus did not take it. The law of the showbread was not unimportant. It was as important as any other law of God. It was the law then, it will be the law again if and when there is another Tabernacle or a Temple.

Second, I'm a radical believer in the law of God. I take Jesus at His word, when He says, "Not one jot or one tittle shall pass from the law until everything has come to pass" (Matthew 5:18).

Now all rationalizations considered, David did break the law. Jesus said, "He ate the bread which was not lawful for him to eat" (Matthew 12:4).

Why then does Jesus use this example, in reply to the accusation that His disciples were breaking the Sabbath? How is it possible for Him to justify David and how can he justify David when there is not a hint of repentance on David's part? Not anything to make up for his error.

The answer comes in one word, a familiar word, a word that has been used so much that no one seems really sure about what it means anymore. The word is 'grace.'

Grace is an Old Testament Doctrine

And here is a sentence so important, you may want to write it down. 'Grace is an Old Testament doctrine.' Oh sure, it is taught in the New Testament, but it is not limited to that.

God is Gracious

Grace is an Old Testament doctrine and David was justified, not because what he did was right, but because God is gracious.

Now we all know this but sometimes, I wonder, what we think it means? Well, what does it mean to say that God is gracious? Let me see if I can explain.

There is a beautiful example of the graciousness of God, right in the beginning of His relationship with man. God created man in his own image, male and female, the man and woman were naked, and they were not ashamed. God then told them, "Be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:27-28), and then He left them alone.

Now there are two categories of people listening to me today. Those who believe that God is all seeing that he knows everything is happening all the time that nothing is ever hidden from him, on the one hand, and those who believe on the other side, the book of Genesis, which says otherwise.

God went away. He didn't watch. I'm totally charmed by the Genesis account because God did what a gracious man would do. He created these two perfect physical specimens, put them in a gorgeous outdoor garden, totally naked and then granted them total privacy. He did not hide in the bushes and watch. Why? Because He is gracious.

Graciousness is that character trait that responds to awkward situations with grace. Now there are those who believe that God is like a computer, you press the delete button and things disappear, automatically, remorselessly. 'God at the console' is the model I like to call it, and I remember seeing a cartoon once, showing God at a big old console and right by his right hand was a big round button with the word 'smite' on it. Now if you press that, things disappear. They believe God enforces the law like a computer. You break the law and the law breaks you.

That is not what happened to David. Why? Because God is not a computer. He's a person. Not only is He a person, He is a kind person, a gentle person, compassionate, forgiving and above all gracious.

Now it is true that God can be very strict at times because He is also just. Without justice you have only caprice (to change your mind without a motive) and there is a great gulf between a god who is gracious and one who is capricious. And because there was justice, Adam and Eve were eventually shut out of the Garden of Eden and denied access to the tree of life, but that was because of a choice they had made. They could've had either tree, but apparently not both.

Well time passes, and two sons were born, Cain and Able (Genesis 4). In a fit of anger, Cain killed his brother Able, and then he lied about it. Justice would have called for the death of Cain as well. Why did God not kill Cain? Why did God merely exile him and set a mark on him to protect him from somebody else killing him? Answer, because God is gracious.

Well more time passes, and things really deteriorate on planet earth. And we are going to have to consider what all that means?

God was Sorry that He had Made Man

In the years following the time when Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, things got really bad. The earth was filled with violence. Things got so bad, that God was sorry He ever started Project Earth.

Now I know, that this runs counter to the idea that many people have that God knows everything in advance, but what can I tell you. It seems better to me that if I want to know God, I'd better take him as He is, not as I want Him to be, or think He ought to be.

Remember God is not a computer, He is a personal being, and why does He not know everything that's going to happen in the future, because He left us free to make decisions which would affect the future and as I said, things got so bad, He just was sorry, He ever started.

How do I know that? Genesis 6, verse five, "God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. {6} And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth and it grieved him in his heart."

You can go from translation to translation, and you get no relief on this. God was sorry that He had made man on the earth. God wished He had not done it. He said He was grieved by it.

And the LORD said, {7} "I'm going to destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, man and beast, creeping things, fowls of the air, it repents me, I'm sorry, that I ever made them."

Now there's a God that the Greentree people would really enjoy. They have this thing about saving the planet from human beings. Well, God was going to do just that.

Somehow it seems foolish to go around apologizing for God and finding explanations that sound good to us. Now I'm sorry if it's upsetting to learn that God does not control everything. It is not that He can't, by his own choice, He doesn't!

So, God decided to end the whole earth project and wipe it all out, except for one thing, He would have. That one thing is found in verse eight of Genesis 6, "Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD."

Now mind you, Noah was a good man. He was righteous in his generations, but if you think that's the reason he and his family survived the flood you have it all wrong. Noah was a good man, but he wasn't that good. He survived because God was gracious to him. That's the Scripture record.

Abraham was a Friend of God

Well more time passes, and God strikes up a friendship with a man named Abraham. This friendship is remarkably personal, but then God is not a computer, He is a person. God wanted Abraham to have a son by Sarah, his wife, and tells him so. Abraham laughs, he not only laughs, he falls on the ground laughing (Genesis 17:17). He is not laughing for joy, he's laughing because the idea that he and Sarah having a baby was funny. He was an old man, 100 years old, and Sarah was nearly as old, 90 years old. Everything involved with having a baby was through between them.

Now what does this tell you about the relationship between God and Abraham. Most of you would not be able to laugh in the presence of God, no matter what He said. And God did not smite Abraham with boils for laughing as an ungracious god might do. He did not punish him or chastise him. He didn't even verbally chastise him. God just said, "You'll see!"

I think God took a certain amount of pleasure in doing all this, the hard way, because He certainly could have given Abraham a son at a much younger age.

God also has a sense of humor. Actually, you know, it's right here, on the page, Sarah laughed (Genesis 18:12-15), and God said, "What are you laughing about?" And she said, "I didn't laugh." Then God said, "Oh yes you did!" God fixed them up and they had their own child instead of somebody else's child, as they got even older.

More time passes. God comes to call on Abraham on His way to Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18). Now if you had been hiding nearby and watching this encounter, here's what you would have seen. You would have seen three men come walking down the road. You would have seen Abraham run out to greet them in the customary fashion of the day. You would have seen them have water brought so the men could wash their feet. You would have seen them wash their feet, you would've seen food brought and you would have watched them eat. All very ordinary, right? Yes, except two of these three men were angels (Genesis 19:1), and the third was God himself.

Now, does it seem out of the ordinary, that God and two angels washed their feet and ate a meal? Do spirit beings get dirty feet? Do they get hungry? Well, when they're in the flesh, apparently, they do.

On the other hand, God created food to be enjoyed, He may simply have come by Abraham's place because he knew Abraham would serve it up well.

As God left to go on towards Sodom, He paused, and He said to Himself, "Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great their sin is very grievous. I'm going to go down now and see whether they have done all together, according to the cry of it, which is come to me and if not, I will know" (Genesis 18:20-21). What? Do you mean God didn't know? Yes, He knew, because witnesses had come to him, spirit beings, I suppose angels had come to Him and testified to Him about it.

But God said, "I want to go down there and see if what I have heard is true, I fully expect it to be true," He might've said. "If it isn't that way, I'll know." Why is He doing this? Well, the answer is fairly simple. He's not going to pass a judgment of death and destruction on hundreds, perhaps thousands of people, in absentia. He actually has to go and look upon it Himself to properly judge it.

Abraham walked a little closer to God and said, {23} "Will You destroy the righteous with the wicked? {24} What if there are 50 righteous in the city, will You destroy the place for the 50 righteous there? {25} That is not like you, to slay the righteous with the wicked, that the righteous should be as the wicked. That is not like you. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

Abraham is very bold in the way he comes to God on this.

Verse 26, "The LORD says, "If I find 50 righteous in Sodom, then I will spare the city for their sakes." {32} "And Abraham said, "Please don't be angry, I'll speak one more time, maybe 10 will be found there?" And the LORD said, "I will not destroy it for the ten's sake" {33} And the LORD went His way, as soon as he left communing with Abraham and Abraham went back to his place."

Tell me, why do you think God let Abraham talk him down like this? Answer, it is simple, because God is gracious. God does not like the idea of executing judgment. He is merciful. He doesn't like killing people even when they have it coming, and He is willing to accept almost any excuse for not doing so. Think about that! Just give me a reason and I will not do it.

There is so many examples of this in the Old Testament, we could be here all day reviewing them.

God was Gracious to Nineveh

Still more time passes, and God taps a prophet named Jonah, and says, "I want you to go to Nineveh and tell them the message I'm going to give you." Jonah didn't want to go, so he grabbed the ship and went the opposite direction. It's a long story. Everybody knows about Jonah and the whale. Jonah comes back, marches into Nineveh and begins to preach the message from the LORD, (Jonah 3:4) "Jonah cried out, "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown.""

And then one of the strangest things that has ever happened in the history of the world took place. The people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast, humbled themselves by putting on sackcloth from the least of them to the greatest of them because word got all the way to the King. He got up, took his robe off and sat in ashes. In fact, they even stopped feeding the animals. You think we have noise of people complaining about not being able to eat, what do you think the animals were saying about not being fed?

But here's what the King said, having given his decree, "Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink" (Jonah 3:7). {9} "He said, "Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?" {10} And God saw what they did, He saw them turn from their evil way."

It was violence that God was fed up with. God repented of the evil He said He would do and He didn't do it.

Now Jonah was not so gracious about this. He was upset, angry, and he prayed to the Lord, Jonah 4 verse 2, and said, "Is this not what I said when I was still at home? That's why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity." "I knew it." {3} "Take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."

Is God the Way You Want Him to Be?

Now here's the thing, Jehovah was not the kind of god Jonah wanted Him to be. Jonah wanted Nineveh wiped out. Jonah's own reputation was at stake. Jonah is the archetype of a man who wants his religion by the numbers. Exceptions to the rules drives him nuts! Life is not worth living if sinners can get off so easily.

But what if God had been the kind of god Jonah said he wanted? Well, He would have taken, at this point, a giant flyswatter and turned Jonah into so much roadkill, but he didn't. Why didn't He?

And God said to Jonah, "Are you doing well to be angry?" {5} Jonah went out of the city, and sat on the hillside, made a booth, sat in the shadow, to watch and see what would happen" (Jonah 4:4-5).

Well, the story of how God worked Jonah through this situation is all there for us, but perhaps by now you can begin to see what I'm driving at, when I say that grace is an Old Testament doctrine.

Does it seem odd that I should talk to you about grace as a doctrine or doesn't it seem odd that we have so much to say about doctrine and so little to say about grace.

Grace in The New Testament

There is a funny thing about grace in the New Testament, that you should know. In all four Gospels, there's not a single instance where Jesus used the word grace! Grace was not a doctrine He preached.

Well what roll did grace play in His ministry? Luke tells us about Jesus as a very young child, Luke 2 verse 40, and he said, "The child grew, and became strong, and was filled with wisdom and the grace of God was upon him."

Oh, so the grace of God was upon this child. John in his gospel, chapter one and verse 14 says, "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. {15} John bare witness of him, and cried, saying, "This was he of whom I spoke, He that comes after me is preferred before me: because he was before me. {16} And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace. {17} For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ."

But where? When? How? Do you remember the occasion where Jesus was out in the wilderness and about 5,000 people were around Him (Matthew 14:16-21) and nobody had any food with them except for 5 loaves and 2 fish? Jesus miraculously fed them all! What character trait led him to do that? It was grace.

When John tried to get Jesus to stop a man who was successfully casting out demons in Jesus' name, for no other reason than that the man was not in their group (Mark 9:38-40). What character trait led Jesus to tell John to let the man alone. It was grace.

When Jesus' disciples wanted to call down fire from heaven upon a Samaritan town that refused to accept Jesus on his way to Jerusalem (Luke 8: 52-54), what character trait led Jesus to correct them for the wrong spirit?

By now you are with me, aren't you? It was grace.

Jesus healed the Syrophenician woman's daughter, first of all having said He wouldn't do it (Mark 7:26-29). Jesus refused to condemn the woman who washed his feet with her tears (Luke 7:44-47). Jesus refused to condemn the woman taken in adultery (John 8).

Why did Jesus do all these things? It is simple. Jesus did what He did because He was gracious.

After Pentecost the disciples of Jesus were very different men. Something had happened to them, something we seem not to notice, it's in Acts 4 verse 33, "And with great power the apostles gave witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and great grace was upon them all."

What's Wrong with Christianity Today?

You know, if you want to know what's wrong with Christianity today, the answer is simple enough. Great grace is not upon us. When we are unforgiving, when we take offense easily, when we make a brother an offender for a word, when we make ourselves, and our church better than other people. This is not grace.

When we envy others, when we are suspicious and negative and looking for flaws and failures and weaknesses in other people. That's not grace.

And if as you listen to me recite this ungracious list, you are thinking of all the people you know who display these characteristics, that's not grace either.

The truth is, we have not received in ourselves enough of God's grace that we can share it with others.

Do you remember the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and what Jesus said, "He who has been forgiven much, loves much (Luke 7:47)?"

He who has received much grace has much grace to give.

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. What is your opinion about David eating the Showbread?
2. Have you ever thought that "Give them an inch and they will take a mile?"

3. Is the idea that “Grace is an Old Testament Doctrine” a new idea for you or did you already know that?
4. If you already knew that, what story or stories from the Old Testament made you come to that conclusion?
5. What does grace mean to you?
6. What are your feelings about Mr. Dart’s idea that God “is a personal being” and does not know everything that is going to happen in the future?
7. What are your thoughts on the point that God wanted to check to see if the reports about Sodom and Gomorrah were true?
8. How would you answer Mr. Dart’s question: “Is God the way you want him to be?”
9. What are your thoughts about the fact that Jesus never used the word grace, yet He definitely showed it?
10. Are we leaving by Jesus’ example and showing others grace?