

THE “LAWS” OF GRACE

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*“The mystical life is due to the divine arbitrariness,
nevertheless it is subject to the most severe rules.”*

Simone Weil

The Paradox of Grace

There is an enduring debate in popular Christian theology over whether we are saved by “works” or by Grace. The statement of St. Paul that we are “saved by Grace” and not by “works” has led many to think that human preparedness has no part to play, or is ineffective, in facilitating genuine spiritual breakthrough or “salvation.” If what we do, does not matter, then we would be foolish, if given the option, not to elect to be saved by Grace. If it is all free and our individual efforts superfluous, then any sane and logical person would prefer to be saved by Grace instead of choosing to work for a salvation which they might very well miss out on since it is not available through this channel.

The workings of Grace are paradoxical, for indeed, as the aforementioned apostle stated, we are saved by Grace,¹ but what he doesn’t make clear is that for Grace to do its saving work, it must be aided by our individual efforts. We need to work to make room in our lives for Grace. Thus, the distinction between “works” and Grace is false, and this error is due, in part, to a misunderstanding of what “salvation” is. If we think of salvation, not as an end-of-life reward, but as an in-life process of spiritual transformation and awakening of a higher consciousness, then the notion that individual effort does not help is obviously absurd.

We go a long way in resolving the paradox (which is really a pseudo-paradox) between works and Grace by understanding that the only true salvation available to us is a transformed consciousness. And for this, we require both effort and Grace working together. Grace is needed because we require help to overcome gravity—the pull of our nature and our history. On the other hand, effort is needed as we each have to overcome entropy. This force, entropy, is the natural tendency for systems to dissipate energy and lose their organizational integrity. When this happens in organic matter, decay occurs; in political structures, chaos; and in society and personal life, moral descent or degradation.

¹ “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8 ESV).

A more general perspective on Grace is that it is the underlying premise of all of Life. There is nothing that is good that is not of Grace—that does not form part of God’s plan to draw the world, meaning you and me and all of life—unto Him/Itself. Therefore, Grace is the gift of Life itself which we enjoy in all its manifestations and expressions. It also accounts for the very Ground of Love upon which we exist. But Grace is also those forces that engender fundamental change in our human psyche and consciousness in order to propel the expressions of our lives to a higher level. Grace comes from beyond, from a dimension that transcends egoic efforts and demands. It is a demonstration of God’s power to save, pure and simple; but it is a power that respects our individual prerogative to refuse. Grace therefore presents us with opportunities more than “done deals.” It does not intervene in our lives so as to take away from us the challenge of being human, or the challenges inherent in the human journey.

Grace Is Freely Given, But Not Free

Because Grace is help which comes from beyond ourselves, we may have the misconceived notion that we are getting something for “free.” Sometimes our attitude towards “salvation” is like that of a crafty businessman who enters into an agreement with the expectation that his lawyer will get him out of it without penalty should events not turn out to his advantage. Such a businessman looks to exploit loopholes in a contract for personal gain. This is the type of attitude that a traditional view of salvation fosters, as it encourages us to do the absolute minimum we feel necessary to secure the “agreement” with God. However, once we understand that salvation is really a transformation of consciousness, we will realize that we only deprive ourselves by such an effort-minimizing strategy.

The Grace that bears fruit in fundamental spiritual change is freely given but is not free. In reality, nothing is free, as there is always some sort of exchange taking place at some level of the psyche. It is a ransom, costing “not less than everything,” to borrow an expression from a poem by T. S. Eliot.² Grace is freely given because it is God’s drawing force by which he “reconciles the world to himself.” However its cost is measured in terms of what we must do to make room in our lives for this force to accomplish its task. The cost of Grace is therefore everything we cling to—and must eventually get rid of—that interferes with the desire of God to draw us to himself. We pay the price of Grace by making room in our lives for Grace.

Becoming Candidates for Grace

Grace sets and obeys its own rules and it is only in the sense that we can cooperate with the action of Grace by making room for it that we can speak of Laws of Grace. The notion of Laws of Grace refers to those principles, which, when incorporated into our spiritual practice, can render our desire to undergo fundamental change and achieve spiritual breakthrough into a living prayer and invoke help from beyond ourselves.

² From the poem, *Four Quartets*, Little Gidding, “a condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything,” T.S. Eliot.

So, though we speak of Laws of Grace we are not presuming to put structures around the various ways that God chooses to give Himself to us. Rather, we are speaking about the conditions in us that can influence our state of readiness to receive God in whatever way, and in whichever time He may choose to come to us. While we cannot summon or command Grace, we can make room for and become candidates for Grace. There is a similar understanding in Buddhism, to the effect that the mystical state referred to as enlightenment is achieved by accident, but that we can practice to become accident prone³.

Grace Responds To Conditions—Not To Persons

Because Grace always operates from the larger perspective, its gifts, such as that of mystical insight, may appear arbitrary. The quote from Simone Weil found at the beginning of the article speaks of this “divine arbitrariness.” However, Grace is hardly a random process, hardly a Cosmic lottery. Grace calls us into the service of Life, and it uses whatever the means required to facilitate our individual and collective evolution. It is important that we understand that the “divine arbitrariness” aspect to Grace is not the same as human arbitrariness.

If there is a governing, objective principle to Grace, it is that it responds to conditions rather than to persons. From an individual perspective, it might appear that someone may not have “deserved” or “merited” what we might consider to be a condition of Grace, such as a particular spiritual gift or an experience. However, we do not know what spiritual laws are at play to allocate spiritual gifts, and we certainly do not know how Life as a whole is served by a spiritual gift to a specific individual, irrespective of his or her degree of apparent personal merit. If we make the mistake of looking at things only from an individual perspective, we fail to discern that the true function of the mystical life is to serve a divine (or collective) purpose, rather than an ego-directed one. When we understand this principle, we will be able to see that, although a particular faculty, or gift, or talent, expresses itself through an individual, it really belongs to humanity at large. In this sense, the individual human being is merely a vessel for a larger humanity—and not simply a case of God selecting someone for special status.

If there’s an overall, subjective principle that governs how we can best fulfill our candidacy for Grace, it is that we always take the initiative to stay abreast of God’s unfolding agenda for us, individually, and as a species. This is crucial, because if the forces of change come into our lives uninvited, or when we are unprepared, the result could be missed opportunities or a shattered or inflated ego. For indeed, what might be Grace to one person, might be regarded as an assault, and therefore destructive, to another. The same set of external events can lead to a spiritual breakthrough in one person and breakdown in another. It all depends on the receptivity and preparedness of the individual who comes into direct contact with the forces of Grace. Our preparedness, namely, our ability to

³ The idea is attributed to Zen Master Richard Baker Roshi in the quote, "Enlightenment is an accident. Meditation makes you accident prone."

recognize and respond to opportunity, determines our scope for responding positively to Grace.

The Reach of Grace Transcends Our Perceptible Needs

Grace is the larger, overseeing Force within which the process of transformation operates. It acts from the bigger frame—one that contains our potentials and capabilities—and is not constrained by our notions of our limitations and needs. Grace ensures that the forces of transformation do not stop until our entire life is healed, and not just our personal life, but our life as a human being.

There was a story in the news a number of years ago about a major league baseball player who was struck in the groin by a wild pitch. While receiving medical attention at the hospital, the doctors discovered a cancerous tumour on one of his testicles. The cancer was in its very early and still treatable stage. The irony is that, were it not for the blow he received, the cancer might not have been detected at such an early stage. After being successfully treated, he credited the offending pitcher, with whom he had been quite angry at the time of the mishap, with saving his life. That is how Grace sometimes works, by wounding us to bring us to a greater healing.

Like the injured baseball player, we may have started out on our individual spiritual quests simply to seek a cure for our obvious wounds, be they physical or emotional, before coming into the realization that the healing we really needed goes beyond our identifiable wounds. We also realize that the wound that motivated us to seek healing served as Life's pretext to expose our entire life to the forces of healing and transformation. This is another reason why the distinction between works and Grace is false, because, being saved by Grace is something we realize only in retrospect, *after the fact*. It is from a place of higher consciousness that the realization comes that we cannot point to any specific thing that we may have done that is responsible for the changes we may be experiencing in ourselves and our circumstances. Instead, we see that the entire movement of our life towards transformational change has been one unbroken movement of Grace.

Looking at our lives from the perspective of a transformed consciousness, we see that it is the action of Grace itself that wounded us, prompting us to seek healing. We see also that it is Grace that progressively enlarges the quest for healing into what eventually becomes the Ultimate Quest—finding the fullest and most complete truth of what we are. Along the way, we complement the action of Grace every time we're able to say Yes to the unknown, and Yes even to the pain of obtaining objective knowledge of ourselves.

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