

WORKGROUP



BACK TO THE BIBLE

Kampen, 15 November 2008

Dear brothers and sisters, elders and pastors,

1 Introduction

"Mercy, ask for mercy", shouted the boy who sat on top of me and he pushed my face even harder against the paving bricks. I had called him a softy during a game on the school playground. He did not take that and after a short fight I had to get the worst of it. I was completely in his power and in this hopeless position, was told to beg for mercy. For a little while I persevered and kept my mouth shut. All children of the classes of my attacker and of myself stood in a circle and watched us. They wanted to know if and when I would say the saving word. And when the pain in my face got unbearable at last I whispered: mercy. "Louder", the boy on top of me shouted and I gave in and had to beg for mercy loud and clearly, for all the bystanders to hear. When at last my opponent was satisfied, we both stood up and shook the sand from our clothes. There he stood, the winner and I was the humiliated loser. After I had slinked off and was far enough out of his reach, I shouted again "softy" and run for my safe home.

Is this what the Bible means when the concept mercy, grace is used? We cannot skip the word, because it occurs very often. Also in the churches we cannot put away the concept grace. If we would dare strike off the word, it would mean rejecting a big part of the creed of the church. No, grace forms a very important concept in the Bible as well as in the church. Now during the past few years the word grace is sometimes treated very carelessly. We use the word like a modern one, like for example the word computer, a modern word belonging to our every-day linguistic usage. That of course, is not true at all. There are some Christians, mostly those who belong to the "severe direction", look at you pityingly when you speak about grace. Often, their conclusion at the end of the conversation is: it is all grace, isn't it! Then they move on fast, looking somewhat guilty, because after all a person is not allowed to show a happy face!

Now other Christians, often the Evangelical ones, move about showing a happy face. In their meetings, in most cases joyful hymns are selected and sung with gusto. The songs are accompanied with clapping of hands or waving of arms. No, they do not react pityingly when there is singing and speaking about grace. To them there does not seem to be a problem, yes, all of it is grace. And because of that grace they may be happy and full of joy, is their conclusion.

Now who is right, the members of the "heavy" or "severe" churches or the members of the Evangelical ones? Why, speaking about grace, the members of the heavy churches make things very difficult, while the evangelical members take it quite easily?

2 The word Grace linguistically

In several dictionaries we found the following possibilities. For every day use grace is: willingness to forgive, mercifulness or charity, tempering justice with mercy, beg for mercy, restore to favour. In our daily life some of these words are rarely used. Charity is the giving of aid to the poor, a fund for the help of the needy, a feeling of goodwill or kindness towards others, an act of goodwill or kindness, tolerance, leniency. So the overall meaning and the every day use of the word grace has the following aspects: forgiveness, compassion, willingness to pass by the rules of the law, an extension of time granted, find favour with somebody. In the same dictionaries a distinction is made for the theological meaning of the word grace. God's infinite grace is: forgiving mercy, conferred by God to sinners.

Now we first go to the Old Testament, where we will study three texts, that we think are distinctive for the concept of grace. There are many more texts we could use, but that would make our study too long. The students among us, please use your concordance, that will make your study more complete.

3 The word Grace in the Old Testament

After the Fall God could no longer bear to watch the sin of the inhabitants of the earth. He decided to punish them by means of the Flood. Noah and his family formed an exception. *"But Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord.Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God."* Gen.6:8.9

Moses, after he comes down from the mountain with the two stone tablets, on which the Law was written, discovers that during his stay on the mountain, the people of Israel had started to serve idols. In desperation or in anger he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces. He understands immediately that this means disaster. And he is right. God refuses to go with the Israelites any longer. Then Moses starts his now famous plea to try to mollify God and beg Him, as yet to go with them. *"Moses said to the Lord, you have been telling me, Lead these people, but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, I know you by name and you have found favour with me. If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favour with you. Remember that this nation is your people."*

The Lord replied, My Presence will go with you and I will give you rest.

Then Moses said to him, If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" Ex.33:12-16

Jonah the prophet initially fled to the sea, to escape God's assignment. This did not work out very well for him, because he had to stay for three days in the entrails of a big fish and was spit out on land afterwards. Obediently he then started walking to yet carry out his assignment. When the inhabitants of Nineveh in reaction on his call, got converted, he got very frustrated:

"But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the Lord, O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is 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." Jonah 4:1-3

3 Summary of the concept Grace in the Old Testament

From these three stories from the Old Testament we can distillate a few characteristics of the concept grace.

...**Grace** is always connected with a relationship between God and men. In this relationship it is God who offers grace. Never it is the other way round, man offering grace to God. "That is only logical", you will say. But sometimes the pride of sinful man has risen so high, he dares to stand in God's place. *"Lamech married two women, one named Adah and the other Zillah....*

Lamech said to his wives, Adah and Zillah, listen to me; wives of Lamech, hear my words. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times." Gen.4:19-24

These words of Lamech are based on the promise of God in verse 15 of this part of the Bible. It says there that the one who kills Cain as revenge for the murder of Abel, will be punished sevenfold. Now Lamech's pride has gone to his head in such a way, that he decides for himself, if somebody kills him, that person will be punished seventy-seven times. Here he rises above God's statement and "brags" as it were to his wives, this is up to him to decide. Lamech moves God aside and acts so consciously.

...**Grace** is always connected with sinful behaviour of men. All three examples handle about gross sins. *"So God said to Noah, I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth." Gen.6:13*

Moses has to make his plea for Israel to God, because some time ago the Israelites had made themselves a golden calf. When Moses came back from the Mount Sinai the people were busy feasting in honour of this new idol. Ex.32 This was one of the sins that were most insulting towards God.

The order the prophet Jonah received was: *"Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." Jonah 1:1* It was not for nothing Jonah was sent to Nineveh. In that time Nineveh was a well-known and

sinful city. The people of the great city turned from their evil ways as a result of Jonah's message. But from the archaeological history we know they did fall back and that later the city was destroyed completely.

...**Grace** shows God is not a hard-hearted ruler. The story proves God is occupied with mankind and clearly watches them from his residence in heaven. In spite of the Fall in paradise, He did not let them down. This fact also is a great consolation to us. Sometimes we lose courage watching all the misery on television.

...**Grace** shows God does not resemble earthen dictators at all. When, in their time, the Medes and the Persians issued an edict, it could not be repealed. Daniel 6:9 But God is a gracious God and will be mollified, when people convert or a plea is made.

4 Prophecy about Grace in the Old Testament

The Old Testament covers a period of several thousands years. Reading the stories we come to the conclusion that man is not a very good species. But God is occupied intensively with mankind's welfare. This goes especially for the spiritual welfare of the human race. In the one but last book of the Old Testament, Zechariah, God shows his great love. He clearly opens up his heart. By way of the prophet God makes a promise for the coming period of the New-Testament.

"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child..." Zech.12:10

God has shown in the Old Testament how gracious a God He is. But He promises much, much more: the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of grace, only sporadically at

work in the Old Testament, will, in the new area be poured out over much more people. The prophet Joel writes about this: *"And afterwards I will pour out my Spirit on all people....Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days."* Joel 2:28,29

Not only God promises to pour out the Spirit of grace, also He links to this promise the pouring out of the Spirit of prayer. In this prophecy grace and prayer are inextricably bound up with one another. Prayers can be defined as dialogues between God and men. In this prophecy God announces that times will change. Up till then people only prayed in the temple in Jerusalem, it was mostly done by the priests. During the dialogue in the story in the New Testament about Jesus and the Samaritan woman, Jesus probably refers to this prophesied change: *"Sir, the woman said, I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."*

Jesus declared, Believe me woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem....Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks." Joh.4:19-24

5 The concept Grace in the New Testament

The promise of God, spoken by Zechariah in Zech.12:10, describes yet another aspect of God's love. Here we find also the following:

"They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him..... " Here is being prophesied about the death on the cross of Jesus Christ. So the outpouring of the Spirit of grace is connected with his work of reconciliation that was coming on this earth. Now while looking at this text we will pass by the specific explanation concerning the future of the people of Israel. This vision shared by a part of Christendom, is left out of our consideration in this letter. Also you will find in this letter a few ideas about grace that are deviating from our opinions. That will be studied later on.

6 Why grace in the Christian teaching?

Perhaps we evangelical Christians have not been thinking too much about this, while the more conservative churches give it too much attention. Now grace appears at least 125 times in the New Testament, so here they are right. One look in the concordance and we know about it. So, whatever church direction we belong to, grace is a very important item. So let us look first how and where we find it. It is impossible to study all "grace texts", we will take a representative selection.

PS On this point of our study, we will remark, that we have to make use of old-fashioned words. We try to make use of contemporary words but when dictionaries give older words, we will have to make do.

6.1----*"Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David,.... "* Luke 4:22 This foretelling of the angel Gabriel was the early beginning of a major event. What has happened to Mary is called by the angel a favour, a grace of God. Here the word means unmerited favour of God. The same meaning of the word we find in the text: *"And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him."* Lukas 2:40 God reveals himself as the God whose heart is open to Mary and to the young child Jesus. Later on people say about the preaching of Jesus: *"All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips"* Luke 4:22

The writer of these biblical happenings, the M.D. Luke supposes, that his readers (us included), understand what is involved in the concept grace. He does not give an extra explanation. Neither will we, but we will round off this part concluding that God is pictured as a loving God who is unfolding his plan of redemption. And in the way He does this He shows his kind benevolence to his creatures. God is not a harsh, condemning judge.

Remark The Roman Catholic Church has, in connection with the Mary-worship, introduced the term Mary "full of grace". The following doctrine about this is found in her Catechism of 1995:

"Through the centuries the Church has become ever more aware that Mary "full of grace" (Luke 1:30) through God, was redeemed from the moment of her conception. That is what the dogma of the Immaculate Conception confesses, as Pope Pius the ninth proclaimed in 1894:

The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Saviour of the human race, preserved immune of all stain of original sin. (Cat.par.491)"

So the Roman Catholic Church speaks out herself about the immunity of all stain of original sin of Mary. Also she says about her every-day life on earth:

"By the grace of God Mary remained free of every personal sin her whole life long. (Cat.par.491)"

As workgroup we cannot back this up. We do find in the Bible a high estimation for Mary, and if it was up to us we would gladly give her a place in the row of heroes of faith of Hebrews 11. But, to declare Mary sinless, on the basis of the word of grace spoken by the angel when he announced the birth of Jesus, is not taught in the Bible. It is an invention of the Roman Catholic Church.

6.2....*"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, God, have mercy on me, a sinner!"* Luke 18:13 Here we see another aspect of the concept grace: the sin of a person. The tax collector in this parable of Jesus is convicted of his sinful life and begs for mercy. Perhaps you think: Is that necessary? You just gave us a description of the loving grace of God. What is the matter with this tax collector? Is this sin so bad, was the tax collector such a bad guy?

"But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Is.53:5-6

God's judgement over sins, called iniquities in our text, is so serious, God has to hand out a punishment. From diverse stories of the Old Testament it is known to us that God punishes sin. It starts directly after the Fall, when Adam and Eve are driven out of paradise. In the times of the Old Testament everybody knew God punishes as a result of sin. So when the tax collector calls out: God, have mercy on me, a sinner this is not a strange phenomena. In this ambience Jesus lived on earth and in this ambience He preached.

Was it the case for everyone in this time or did it only concern the very bad people? At that time the Jews judged there was a big difference between the good guys and the bad guys. And that was exactly the reason why Jesus spoke out this parable. Before the tax collector is mentioned, we read the following: *"To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax*

collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: God, I thank you that I am not like other men-robbers, evildoers, adulterers-or even like this tax collector ...” Luke 18:9-12

In this our time we do not like to hear about a punishing God. It seems that in the last few decades our estimation of God has changed. Is it not that often in our services we hear the love of God being praised? Much more often than speaking or preaching about the punishing of God love of God. Is then the handing out of punishment by God something of the past? Does God no longer punish in the period of the New Testament? The answer on this penetrating question is as much no as it is yes!

6.3....Punishment opposite Grace

Now in our study we have reached a very complicated part. We saw that God in the times of the Old Testament often announces punishments and also carries them out. On the other hand, in the period of the New testament little is written about real punishments from God. Now probably you remember straight away the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11. They tried to make a good impression on the members of the church and the apostles by donating the profit of a piece of land to the church. But they held back a part and did not tell that. Of course God knew about it and He punished this unfairness openly. As a result both people, the man as well as the woman died on the spot. Except for this we find little direct punishment from God to the people, at least when we do not open Revelation.

Revelation is a book in the New Testament, that tells us much about the punishments of God, that are going to happen in the future. Some of the stories are so penetrating, they are shocking to the reader. In the book Revelation we find stories about God, giving orders to his angels to roam through the earth and hand out punishments in many cases. *“When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice: How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?.....and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow-servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.....” Rev.6:9-11*

When God comes to punish, all persons it concerns are panicking greatly. God punishes radically and He punishes every unbelieving person. *“Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks: Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?” Rev.6:15-17*

But even during the handing out of the punishments, that are usually very heavy, there still is opportunity for the people concerned to repent. In Rev.9:20-21 we read: *“The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshipping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood – idols that cannot see or hear or walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts.”*

Not only unbelievers will be punished by God, also in the book of Revelation much is said about the punishment God will hand out to the devil and his comrades. Their lot is a very bad one and for them there is no possibility of repentance or grace from the side of God. Satan, who held a high position as archangel in the nearness of God, receives in Revelation his final destination: in the lake of burning sulphur, that burns for ever and ever. *"And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever."* Rev. 20:10

When Jesus walked on the earth He was sometimes very gentle and loving, as happened with the Samaritan woman and the mothers who brought their children to Him to be blessed. But sometimes He lashed out with words against the scribes and Pharisees. He uses the word hypocrites about twenty times. In his speech to the Pharisees in Matth.23 He finishes in the verses 32 and 33 with the words: *"Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers! You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?"*

Jesus believed in the existence and function of hell, we read that in the above mentioned text, and also in the story of the rich man and the poor man Lazarus. Luke 16:19-31 We can learn a lot from this story, but will restrict ourselves to the fact that the rich man was punished because during his life he did not live according to the rules of God. The poor man, on the contrary, had lived a very difficult life, but deserved a place in heaven and the angels carried him to Abraham's side.

Also in other places in the Bible Jesus very clearly mentions hell as the place where sinners go as punishment for their sins. *"And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell."* Matth.18:9 (also see Matth.5:29;Marc.9:47)

6.4 Grace against punishment

God does not punish arbitrary, does not have special friends, but is always very clear whom and why He punishes. Also He indicates clearly, whom He grants grace, whom He, though there is a clear accusation of sin, sets free of it.

The most wonderful example of this is the grace God grants to one of the criminals on the cross of Golgotha. This criminal admits his sin, defends Jesus and asks Him: *"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Jesus answered him, I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."* Luke 23:42,43 The other criminal on the cross kept ridiculing Jesus, as did most of the bystanders on Golgotha. This man did not receive grace from God and did not go to paradise as his colleague did. His destination we read in Rev.21:8; *"But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practise magic arts, the idolaters and all liars - their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulphur."*

When the scribes and the Pharisees bring a woman caught in adultery to Jesus and ask what should be done to her, Jesus first is silent. In such a case the law of Moses clearly demanded to stone such a woman and they tell Jesus that. What will Jesus do now? Strangely enough He does not contradict them, but says: *"If any of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."* John 8:7 The accusing older

ones hesitate for a while, then they leave one by one. *"Jesus straightened up and asked her: Woman, where are they? Has no-one condemned you? No-one sir, she said. Then neither do I condemn you, Jesus declared. Go now and leave your life of sin!"* John 8:10,11 The story makes clear how Jesus grants grace to the sinful woman. According to the Jewish Law, the Law of Moses, given by God Himself, she had earned to be stoned to death. But Jesus grants her grace and only tells her to sin no more.

Now if we make a jump and go back to the Old Testament, to the prophet Isaiah, we find a special prophecy in Isaiah 53:5-12, that has to do with the granting of grace by God. *"But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all....Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring.....; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many and he will bear their iniquities."* Here the prophet Isaiah prophecies about 700 years before this is fulfilled, that God will send someone who will bear the punishment for the iniquities. This person will have to suffer much and also die. We know that person is Jesus Christ who being God's own son, died on Golgotha to take away the burden of sin of mankind. After this prophecy, about 500 years before it was fulfilled, God speaks again, now by mouth of the prophet Zechariah. This prophet prophecies in Zech.12-10, a text we used before in this study, that God will pour out in the future the spirit of grace and supplication. Here also the death of the Messiah is mentioned: *"They will look on me, the one they have pierced,....."*

We can and must conclude from these and other texts that God forgives sins and grants grace, because, somebody else has taken on himself the punishment for these sins. Now we must go back to the New Testament to the most impressive and terrible story, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ on Golgotha. Jesus Christ, just before this takes place in the garden of Gethsemane, is struggling with himself, finishes his prayer with the words: *"My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."* Matth.26:42 As the prophet Isaiah prophesied, Jesus took willingly the whole burden of sin of mankind. All iniquities, yours and mine included, were laid on Him. His last words were: *"Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said: I am thirsty.....When he had received the drink, Jesus said: It is finished. With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit."* John 19:28-30

6.5 Is the Grace of God an all over reconciliation?

There are people who believe that. Their teaching is called the teaching of all over reconciliation. In the year 2007 there was a big "fight" about the asylum seekers, who lived already a long time in the Netherlands and still not had received a residence permit. Ultimately, with a majority of votes, the Parliament decided to give a general pardon to 27000 asylum seekers.

When the Son of God died for the burden of sin of mankind, God could grant grace to sinful man. Though the comparison is somewhat faulty, we can compare these sinful men with asylum seekers. They have to get into action to get a residence permit. When they do not present themselves at the concerning office windows of the authorities, nothing happens and then they live illegally in the Netherlands. In the same way the people who will make use of God's offer of grace, must present themselves to God. They will have to admit to being sinners and have to believe only Jesus Christ as mediator is able to save them from punishment for their sins. In John1:11,12 this is represented in a nutshell: *"He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,..."* When Paul is working out this theme in Eph.2:2-10, he brings this in connexion with grace. *"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,....Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ - even when we were dead in transgressions-.....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."*

6.6 The Grace of God only for a select part of humanity?

Although the grace of God is offered to us as a gift, part of the Protestant believers add a restriction. Yes but, they say, that only applies to those elected by God. This doctrine came into being via Calvin and was strongly propagated by him. In 1609 the theologian Arminius stood up against this doctrine and for twelve years they fought one another tooth and nail. On a special synod in Dordrecht (in the Netherlands) in 1619 Arminius was judged to be in the wrong and the teaching of the chosen people was confirmed and laid down in the eighteen "Dordtse Leerregels (Rules). We quote a few sentences from rule ten:

" The only ground for this graceful is only God's favour; this does not mean He has chosen from all kinds of possible conditions certain qualities or works of mankind as conditional for the salvation, but it means He has accepted as his own certain persons out of the whole community of sinners.....As is written in Romans 9:13: Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated. Likewise as in Acts13:48: And all who were appointed to eternal life believed."

As workgroup we cannot agree with this interpretation by the Calvinists. When using Bible texts, like in this rule ten, they must be tested to the whole teaching of the Bible. When we do so, we just discover again, that God offers his gospel message for free to everybody, who believes. There is no restriction. The prophet Isaiah who prophesied many times about the coming of the Messiah, says in Isa.55:1 *"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.....Give ear and come to me; hear*

me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David."

6.7 Is God's Grace for ever valid?

You will have heard or read about the expression "once saved, always saved". Christians who believe this are found among the Evangelicals as well as among the Calvinists. The Calvinists use different words. Rule 11 of the "Dordtse leerregels" says: *"As God himself is completely wise, unchangeable, omniscient and almighty, the choices made by Him, cannot be interrupted or changed,, revoked, or undone and neither can the chosen people be rejected or lessened in number."*

"Once saved, always saved" means that once someone has become a Christian, nothing can go wrong any more. The person is set free from the punishment of hell, has been born again, is filled with God's Spirit, nothing can go wrong any more concerning the eternal life. Even when one falls during life in serious sin, the person does not fall out of God's grace. And all this even when somebody goes on sinning and dies without repentance.

These people look upon God as a rigid personality, who cannot pass by rules once set down. They bring the ways of our God back to earthly ideas, like in the old times the eastern rulers handled the law of the Medes and the Persians. But they eagerly make use of the grace God offers. When this grace is theirs, they sit on a bed of roses.

What does the Bible teach us about this? Is this attitude of ease and selfishness, of enjoying the grace of God a biblical principle? No, the Bible teaches otherwise. In the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament are stories about persons who started living their spiritual lives well. Because they strayed off, their situations deteriorated rapidly. Their end was not a happy end. Some examples:

King Solomon was a great and very colourful ruler in Israel. He asked for wisdom instead of power and riches and God was pleased with him. He received the one as well as the other and God was favourable towards him. But during his life time he married just about every woman he encountered. And then Solomon started to serve many idols, the idols of these women. In the end he died as husband of thousand women and as a fervent idol server. As result of his exploits and all his debaucheries, his kingdom Israel was ripped in two after his death.

The prophet Ezekiel was surrounded by contemporaries who lived in sin and he was shocked by what he saw. He said the following: *"But if a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin and does the same detestable things the wicked man does, will he live? None of the righteous things he has done will be remembered.*

Because of the unfaithfulness he is guilty and because of the sins he has committed, he will die." Ez.18:24 The listeners did not agree with God here, because all the good things the righteous man had done should also be taken into account in God's judgement. So they started a protest action against the prophet. But the prophet is imperturbable and holds on to his standpoint: *"If a righteous turns from his righteousness and commits sin, he will die for it; because of the sin he has committed he will die. But if a wicked man turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he will save his life. Because he considers all the offences he*

has committed and turns away from them, he will surely live; he will not die." Ez.18:26-28

Also in the New Testament we nowhere find: hurray, hurray, because "once saved, always saved". On the contrary, the writers of the letters and Revelation, all warn against interpreting too easily the gift of the grace of God. In Heb.6:4-7 it is written very clearly: *"It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace."*

So far the study of this part. The bible does not teach: "once saved, always saved", but: "Be holy, because I am holy". 1Peter1:16

7 What are we doing with the Grace of God?

First of all let us be deeply thankful because the punishment we all deserve, will not come to pass. This has been rolled off on Jesus Christ, the Son of God. If we go on believing in Him as our Saviour and our Mediator, we will see Him in his glory, when the time has come.

In the mean time we go on living as saved sinners, who have to prove we deserve our new title. This new title is: CHILD OF GOD. We have been raised to the divine peerage and may be you know the Dutch expression: Nobility obligates! One man who understood God's grace the best was the preacher / poet John Newton. After his conversion he wrote the well known:

Amazing Grace

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
to fear,
That sav'd a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found
appear,
Was blind, but now I see.

Thro' many dangers, toils and snares,
me,
I have already come;
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
snow,
And mortal life shall cease;

'Twas grace that taught my heart
And grace my fears reliev'd;
How precious did that grace
The hour I first believ'd!

The Lord has promis'd good to
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.

The earth shall soon dissolve like
The sun forbear to shine;

I shall possess, within the veil,
below,
A life of joy and peace.

But God, who call'd me here
Will be forever mine.

The song Amazing Grace he composed in 1779 as English minister in London. It became a famous and well known song. Christine Schaub, an American lady, wrote in 2006 "The Longing Season", the life story of John Newton. It is translated in Dutch, the name is "Verloren Zoon". There also is a film now with the name "Amazing Grace", about the abolition of slavery. John Newton was a slave trader before he became a Christian and afterwards started to study theology and became a minister. The leading figure in the film, Wilberforce, was saved through the preaching of John Newton and devoted himself intensively to the abolition of slavery.

Foundation: Workgroup "Back to the Bible"

Mailaddress: Populierenstraat 51, 8266 BK Kampen, The Netherlands, tel.038-3328234

e-mail: byblos@solcon.nl

website : www.backtothebible.nl

local board: president – pastor Rien van de Kraats
secretary/treasurer A.A. Doorn