

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON
BY GRACE
ALONE

HOW THE GRACE OF GOD AMAZES ME



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By Grace Alone: How the Grace of God Amazes Me

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To
Murdo and Alison
Maclean

Once colleagues, always friends
With gratitude and affection

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FOREWORD

I met Sinclair Ferguson in July 2009 in Geneva, Switzerland, as a number of church leaders came together to celebrate the five-hundredth anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, one of the renowned European Reformers and a preacher of divine grace. When Sinclair asked me to write the foreword for this book, I did not know what a surprise the grace of God had in store for me.

One midmorning on a Wednesday in September of this year, I went to visit a home in a suburb of Kampala City, Uganda. This is not an ordinary home, but a home that brings in orphans and needy children from the streets and offers the love of Jesus to them. We were met by about thirty smiling children whose faces were happy, healthy, and confident. Then they began to tell me their stories. One little girl had been picked up by the police when she was only three weeks old, abandoned and rejected. Another had been found out in the cold without food, shelter, or clothing. The stories continued on and on.

The children told us their stories in a song composed by the director of this ministry. This song was sad yet joyful, pessimistic yet with a note of victory. As I listened, the words and the melody undressed my dignified posture. I melted in my heart.

One of the children, a thirteen-year-old girl named Ana (not her real name), caught my attention. The Holy Spirit highlighted her face as I watched her singing. She looked beautiful, yet there was a trace of sadness in her face. She had lost both parents at an early age and had struggled alone in the streets of Kampala before arriving at this home of transition.

I knew this young girl would haunt me for the rest of my life if I did

not respond to her. Two weeks after this encounter, Ana became part of my family.

In his book, Sinclair reveals the amazing surprises of God that we call “grace.” He shows us how God stoops low to reach a longing lost soul, a soul that has walked a path of loneliness and darkness, a soul that, like Ana, would never consider that a change was possible. God comes because He watches with great love and moves with unspeakable tenderness. His desire is to rescue the broken and the bleeding, the lost and the lonely.

Sinclair provides a glimpse of this grace to the inquisitive mind and hungry soul. I commend his book to the one who is longing to know the truth of God searching for us. Your soul will be nourished and your faith strengthened.

—*The Most Rev. Henry Luke Orombi*
Archbishop, (Anglican) Church of Uganda
Kampala, Uganda
October 2009

PREFACE

The inspiration behind these pages is the remarkable hymn written by an African pastor, Emmanuel T. Sibomana. He was born around 1915 and lived near Musema, a Baptist mission in central Burundi. He became a Christian in his late teens or his early twenties, and later became a Baptist pastor. Then, in 1946, he published a hymn titled “*Umbuntu Bg Imana*.” Pastor Sibomana’s hymn was translated by an English missionary in Rwanda, Rosemary Guillebaud, as “O How the Grace of God Amazes Me.”

The hymn captures the rich contours and multisided character of the grace of God. Its easily sung tune, *Grace of God*, has often brought its words to my mind unprompted. Reflecting on the themes of its verses led me eventually to work through the biblical material that lies behind them. This book is the result.

Although different in format—the chapters are fewer but longer—*By Grace Alone* is a companion volume to *In Christ Alone: Living the Gospel-Centered Life* (Reformation Trust, 2007). These are among the great watchwords of biblical teaching and capture two great emphases in historical evangelical theology.

But why yet another book on the grace of God? Because, as Pastor Sibomana’s hymn reminds us, “the grace of God amazes me.” We can never reflect too much on God’s grace.

That theme is by no means unique to this particular hymn. The converted slave-trader John Newton’s most famous hymn, of course, opens with the words, “Amazing grace!— how sweet the sound—that saved a wretch like me!”¹ The great English hymn writers Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley

also wrote on this theme. Watts reflected on “Love so amazing, so divine.”² Wesley, who seems to have written virtually a hymn a day in his spare time, taught the church to sing the words: “Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my God, should’st die for me?”³ Much later, Charles H. Gabriel confessed, “I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene.”⁴

Still, why a book on “How the grace of God *amazes* me”? For one reason: not all Christians find it so amazing.

Being amazed by God’s grace is a sign of spiritual vitality. It is a litmus test of how firm and real is our grasp of the Christian gospel and how close is our walk with Jesus Christ. The growing Christian finds that the grace of God astonishes and amazes.

Yet we frequently take the grace of God for granted. We think: “*Of course* God is gracious.” Or: “*Of course* we deserve His grace. After all, are we not His people?” We may never say these things. But when we think like this, the grace of God ceases to be amazing. Sadly, it also ceases to be grace.

A chief reason for the weakness of the Christian church in the West, for the poverty of our witness and any lack of vitality in our worship, probably lies here: we sing about “amazing grace” and speak of “amazing grace,” but far too often it has ceased to amaze us. Sadly, we might more truthfully sing of “accustomed grace.” We have lost the joy and energy that are experienced when grace seems truly amazing.

With the help of Pastor Sibomana’s hymn, these pages reflect on God’s grace from seven angles. Tasting the power of the grace of God can refresh the inner sanctuaries of our being, and banish the spiritual lethargy and indifference that take God’s goodness and love for granted. After all, if we are not amazed by God’s grace, can we really be living in it? By its very nature, God’s grace astonishes those who taste it and amazes those who receive it.

I am thankful for those who have encouraged me to prepare these studies for publication.

Eve Huffman, my secretary at First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, has again given her characteristically efficient and willing help in this task. I am also deeply grateful to our elders and deacons, and to our congregation, for

PREFACE

the encouragement they give their team of pastors to keep going in the work of the ministry.

Greg Bailey has once again served me as editor, friend, and literary Barnabas, and I want to express to him my real sense of appreciation for his ongoing help.

By Grace Alone celebrates the gospel by means of a hymn of the church in Africa. I am especially grateful, therefore, to Henry Orombi, archbishop of the Church of Uganda, for contributing the foreword. When Reformation Trust suggested the possibility of an African Christian doing this, Archbishop Orombi's name came immediately to mind. He is a kindred spirit to all men and women of grace, as I discovered one memorable Sunday when we shared the privilege of preaching in John Calvin's pulpit in the Cathedral Church of St. Peter in Geneva, Switzerland. In Calvin's day, the message of gospel grace spread throughout the Northern Hemisphere and to the West; today, it spreads like a flood throughout the Southern Hemisphere and to the East. Now North and South, East and West can rejoice together in the way grace reigns in many hearts among the nations. Truly "how the grace of God amazes me!"

My wife, Dorothy, and, with her, our whole family continue to provide a world of love and devotion that surrounds and supports me in ministry. Again, I want to express my own love and thanks for the sacrifices they have made over many years, and my gratitude for God's grace in their lives and families.

Grace is not a "thing." It is not a substance that can be measured or a commodity to be distributed. It is "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 13:14). In essence, it is Jesus Himself. For that reason alone, there surely could be no better companion volume to *In Christ Alone* than *By Grace Alone*.

—Sinclair B. Ferguson

The First Presbyterian Church
Columbia, South Carolina
September 2009

“O How the Grace of God Amazes Me”

*O how the grace of God
Amazes me!
It loosed me from my bonds
And set me free!
What made it happen so?
His own will, this much I know,
Set me, as now I show,
At liberty.*

*My God has chosen me,
Though one of nought,
To sit beside my King
In heaven's court.
Hear what my Lord has done
O, the love that made him run
To meet his erring son!
This has God wrought.*

*Not for my righteousness,
For I have none,
But for his mercy's sake,
Jesus, God's Son,
Suffered on Calvary's tree—
Crucified with thieves was he—
Great was his grace to me,
His wayward one.*

*And when I think of how,
At Calvary,
He bore sin's penalty
Instead of me,
Amazed, I wonder why
He, the sinless One, should die
For one so vile as I;
My Saviour he!*

*Now all my heart's desire
Is to abide
In him, my Saviour dear,
In him to hide.
My shield and buckler he,
Covering and protecting me;
From Satan's darts I'll be
Safe at his side.*

*Lord Jesus, hear my prayer,
Your grace impart;
When evil thoughts arise
Through Satan's art,
O, drive them all away
And do you, from day to day,
Keep me beneath your sway,
King of my heart.*

*Come now, the whole of me,
Eyes, ears, and voice.
Join me, creation all,
With joyful noise:
Praise him who broke the chain
Holding me in sin's domain
And set me free again!
Sing and rejoice!*

—EMMANUEL T. SIBOMANA

1

*O how the grace of God
Amazes me!
It loosed me from my bonds
And set me free!
What made it happen so?
His own will, this much I know,
Set me, as now I show,
At liberty.*

Chapter One

MY CHAINS FELL OFF

Grace “loosed me from my bonds and set me free!”
These simple words express the experience of the typical Christian, in every place, age, and language.

The grace of God in Jesus Christ brings freedom. To experience this grace is liberation. Our chains, shackles, burdens—describe them how we will—are broken. We are delivered from a guilty conscience. We come to trust in Christ and are immediately released. Then we progressively enjoy that freedom. We are no longer in bondage. Instead, we are free men and women in Jesus Christ.

E. T. Sibomana begins his hymn “O How the Grace of God Amazes Me” at the point of personal experience.

Of course, our experience is not actually where the grace of God itself begins. It goes back much farther than our individual experience of it. But this hymn begins with our experience because this is where we take our first conscious steps into the sea of grace. Then we discover that it is in fact a boundless ocean that seems to have no bottom. As we sink into it, we begin to realize that its origins lie in God Himself in eternity.

This is the grace that “loosed me from my bonds.”

*His own will, this much I know,
Set me, as now I show,
At liberty.*

Charles Wesley earlier expressed the same thought. If you know anything about the Wesley brothers, John and Charles, you know that before they came to faith in Jesus Christ, they lived outwardly impeccable lives. Charles was a clergyman in the Church of England. No chains were visible. He had no apparent addictions. In his student days at the University of Oxford, he was marked by rigorous moral rectitude and energetic service. Few imagined they could match his holiness. One of his favorite books was titled *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*.⁵ That summed him up.

Yet as God worked in Wesley's life, he realized he was in spiritual bondage, "fast bound in sin and nature's night,"⁶ as he would later write. But when he was brought to faith in Jesus Christ, this was the song he wanted to sing again and again on the anniversary of his conversion:

*My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth and followed thee.⁷*

Such freedom is not limited to a select group of famous Christians. The gospel promises the same to everyone who trusts in Christ.

Freedom from bondage is a central theme in the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. He told the Jews of His day that only the gospel could release them: "The truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). But what truth? He explained: "If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36).

Here are two basic lessons.

LESSON ONE—BONDAGE

Jesus taught that we are all by nature in spiritual bondage. He had to be cruel to be kind.

The Jews to whom Jesus spoke—much like us—believed that they were

certainly not in bondage to anything. But their response to Jesus' words revealed the deep spiritual bondage in which they were held. His words riled and angered them.

“Who do you think you are, saying that we need to be set free? How dare you! We are Abraham’s children, his freeborn descendents.” They claimed spiritual freedom as their birthright, but they were in spiritual bondage.

“Most assuredly, I say to you,” Jesus said, “whoever commits sins is a slave of sin” (John 8:34).

Does this really need to be underlined? Jesus thought it did, and perhaps someone reading these pages may need a little help to understand what Jesus was saying here:

- We do not become sinners by committing specific acts.
- We commit specific acts of sin because we are sinners.

In short, my problem is not the isolated actions that I see as *aberrations* from what I really am. I am deceiving myself if I think that way. These actions are not *aberrations* but *revelations* of what is in my heart. They show that I commit sin because I am in bondage to it.

Paul develops this theme in Ephesians 2. Both the apostle and his readers (v. 3) were by nature bound in sin: “dead in trespasses and sins” (v. 1). When they heard the name of God and of His grace in Jesus Christ, their hearts remained cold. Like dead men and women, they were always flowing with the stream, following “the course of this world” (v. 2).

By nature, we usually deny that we are in spiritual bondage. We go out of our way to show our freedom by being different. But we tend, in one way or another, to become clones. That is a manifestation of our bondage. According to Ray Davies’ satirical lyrics in The Kinks’ hit song,

*This pleasure-seeking individual always looks his best
‘Cause he’s a dedicated follower of fashion.*⁸

Of course, there is a darker side to this in the sinister influence of “the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience” (v. 2). We will say much more about him later.

As Jesus hinted, this sinfulness affects every dimension of our lives:

- Our minds. We do not think clearly. We may be well educated and have high IQs. But that is no guarantee that we think clearly about spiritual things.

- Our desires. When we are on our own and at our most honest, we recognize that we are not masters of our desires. We try to master them. We have a moral consciousness that says, “You must get these things under control.” But inwardly we are out of control. There is a world within us over which we have no mastery.

- Our wills. They are in bondage to sin. “Oh yes,” we say, “this message about being right with God—I will come to it another day. That is my decision and I can make it whenever I want.”

The truth, however, is that we cannot think clearly about or desire Christ by our own unaided decision. Why not? We cannot respond to the good news of the gospel until we want Christ, and we cannot want Christ simply by a decision we can take at any moment we choose. We cannot say to our will, “Will, will to belong to the Lord!” It is beyond our powers to do that. No one can will the will to will what it will not will! Only God’s grace can set us free to come to trust in Him.

*What made it happen so?
His own will, this much I know,
Set me, as now I show,
At liberty.*

Here, then, is our greatest need. Lesson one: We are in bondage to sinful hearts.

David’s Understanding of Sin

King David made this discovery months after his sin with Bathsheba. He had broken God’s law. He had coveted, he had committed adultery, he had stolen the wife of one of the best men he knew, and he had plotted the man’s death (see 2 Sam. 11–12).

When the reality of his spiritual bondage came home to David, he realized it went back to the very beginning of his life: “I was sinful . . . from the time my mother conceived me” (Ps. 51:5, NIV).

When we are first convicted of sin, we resolve to do better. But as soon as we have scraped away one layer of sin (thinking, “It was only a superficial failure on my part”), we discover another layer underneath. Until David traced his sin right back to the beginning of his life, he was living in a state of spiritual denial. But when he realized the truth about himself, he admitted that the rot had set in from the start, even when he was in his mother’s womb. Then he cried out to God, “Cleanse me” (Ps. 51:7, NIV), or, “Scrub me clean.”

There were times in my childhood when I got so dirty that my mother would scrub me clean with a loofah. How often I felt the power of her arm as she scrubbed the dirt out of my skin. While I was relatively content with a superficial wash, she was determined to get out all the dirt, even if it killed her—or *me*.

David’s language—“cleanse me . . . wash me”—is an appeal for that kind of vigorous and rigorous cleansing. His sin was deep dyed. There were layers of deceptiveness, sin, and bondage in his heart. Only God could cleanse and free him.

This is what Jesus was talking about. His contemporaries knew their Bibles. They were in constant attendance at religious services. But they were still bound by sin and could not free their lives from its dominion. They were slaves to sin, not sons of God. So Jesus said to them, “Your fundamental problem is that you do not know God as your Father.”

How could Jesus be so sure? “Because,” He said, “if you really knew the Father, your attitude to His Son would be completely different. It would be one of love and of admiration. You would trust Me” (see John 8:42–47).

They talked about God, but their attitude to God’s Son revealed that they were not members of His family. They were hostile to Him. They plotted “religiously” to get rid of Him. They had no place for Him in their lives because they had no room for His Father.

Deserving Nothing

Religious people are always profoundly disturbed when they discover that they are not, and never have been, true Christians. Does all of their religion count for nothing? Those hours in church, hours spent doing good things, hours involved in religious activity—do they not count for something in the presence of God? Do they not enable me to say: “Look at what I have done. Don’t I deserve heaven?”

Sadly, thinking that I deserve heaven is a sure sign I have no understanding of the gospel.

Jesus unmasked the terrible truth about His contemporaries. They resisted His teaching and refused to receive His Word because they were sinners—and slaves to sin.

Some years ago, the British media reported that a Presbyterian denomination had pulled fifty thousand printed copies of an edition of its monthly magazine. The report indicated that the author of an article had referred to a prominent member of the British royal family as a “miserable sinner.”

Intriguingly, the member of the royal family, as a member of the Church of England, must have regularly used the words of the Anglican prayer book’s “Prayer of General Confession,” which includes a request for the forgiveness of the sins of “miserable offenders.” Why, then, were the magazines pulled? The official comment: “We don’t want to give the impression that the doctrines of the Christian faith cause people emotional trauma.”

But sometimes the doctrines of the Christian faith do exactly that—and necessarily so.

Or should we say instead: “How cruel Jesus was to these poor Jews! Fancy Jesus speaking to them in this way!?”

Jesus *did* say, “You are miserable sinners.” He unmasked sinners and drove His point home: “You have no room for my word” (John 8:37, NIV). They had heard, but resisted it. Later, He described the result: “Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say” (John 8:43, NIV).

Jesus had already patiently explained this to Nicodemus: “Unless God’s Spirit opens your eyes, you cannot see the kingdom of God. Unless God sets you free from the bondage of sin, you will never enter the kingdom of God”

(see John 3:3, 5). “The truth is,” Jesus said later, “you do not hear what I am saying because you are not really the children of God” (see John 8:41, 44). They were, to use Paul’s language, spiritually “dead” (Eph. 2:1).

Some time ago, while relaxing on vacation on a wonderful summer day in the Scottish Highlands, I sat outside enjoying a morning coffee. A few feet away I saw a beautiful little red robin. I admired its feathers, its lovely red breast, its sharp and clean beak, its simple beauty. I found myself instinctively talking to it. But there was no response, no movement. Everything was intact, but little robin red-breast was dead. The most skilled veterinarian in the world could do absolutely nothing for him.

So are we, spiritually. Despite appearances, in my natural state I am dead toward God. There is no spiritual life in me.

Only when I see this will I begin to see why God’s grace is surprising and amazing. For it is to spiritually dead people that the grace of God comes to give life and release.

This is the first truth I need to acknowledge. I am in spiritual bondage. That bondage may have many manifestations. They may differ from individual to individual. But the bondage itself is at root one and the same.

On that basis, and against that background, Jesus taught lesson number two.

LESSON TWO—FREEDOM

There is good news.

On the one hand, Jesus underlined the bondage in which we are held by nature. On the other hand, He spoke about the freedom into which He brings sinners by grace: “If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:36).

How could the Son set them free? Because of who He was. He was the Son who has been sent into the world by the Father. He knew the Father’s plan. He had the most intimate relationship with the Father. He had heard everything the Father had said, and He came with this message of good news: “The Father has sent Me in order to set you free” (see John 8:28).

How, then, does Christ set us free?

John had answered that question earlier, in the most famous verse in his Gospel. This God, this Father, so loved the world, this world in its sinfulness and bondage, that He sent His only Son into it. He had only one Son, but He sent Him to die on a cross in order to save everyone who believes in Him (John 3:16).

The Son would be “lifted up”—lifted up on a cross, exposed in public shame, hanging between heaven and earth, under the judgment of God against our sins—so that those who believed in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 12:32; 3:16).

Jesus Christ is able to set us free because He has dealt with the sin that enslaves us.

We can never atone for our own sin. We can never break its power. We can never come to God and say, “God, surely what I have done is enough to compensate for my sins.” Nothing we can do can possibly compensate. But God sent His own Son—think of it, *His own Son*—who stood in for us, in our place. He lived a perfect life. Since He had no sins of His own to atone for, He was qualified to make a sacrifice for our sins. No sacrifice we could make could ever be adequate to atone for sin. But He was able and willing to do it. Because of that, we can be set free from guilt and from the bondage it creates.

Christ also sets us free in another way: through the truth about God—and about ourselves—that He reveals. If we believe in Him, we will come to know the truth, and the truth will set us free (John 8:32). That is His promise.

I have met some exceptionally intelligent people who cannot understand the Christian gospel. They hear its message as if it were a lecture on morality. Yet the gospel is not difficult to understand. The problem lies within us—in our spiritual blindness. If there is resistance in the heart to *loving* God, there will be resistance in the mind to *knowing* God—and therefore to listening to and seeking God. Only the truth can set us free.

Later on in John’s Gospel, Jesus spoke about sending the Holy Spirit to His disciples. He would be like a great spotlight shining into their minds,

illuminating them so that they could begin to see and understand Jesus and what He had done. The Spirit would remove spiritual deception, transform the spiritually dead, and glorify Christ.

So Jesus is able to set us free because of who He is and because of what He shows us.

As a result, we now may dare to call God “Father.”

This is the most obvious difference between a “religious” person and a Christian. A religious person is likely to address God—especially in a crisis—as “O God,” not as “O Father.” There is a simple reason for this. Unless you know God as your Father, you never cry out to Him in your need as “Abba, Father” (Rom. 8:15–16).

Many Bondages, One Remedy

How does all of this apply to us?

Our sinful hearts share a common bondage, although its forms may differ. Some people have bondages that bring them down to the gutter. But there are also “respectable” bondages. The appearances may seem polar opposites. But in each the heart is equally captive, a prisoner, a slave.

What is it that you cannot master, but masters you? What sin has captured your heart and hardened it toward God? The chains that bind you may seem very different from those that bind your neighbors, your colleagues, or your friends. But they are just as real.

God has many different ways to bring us to discover that we are enslaved and spiritually dead sinners. But He offers us only one remedy for the slavery, only one Savior: the same Jesus who stood before His contemporaries—and now stands before us—to say:

“Whoever commits sin is the slave of sin. But the truth will set you free. And because I am the Son of God and the Savior, I can set you free.

“I am the One who has been working in your life recently.

“I am the One who has prompted you to ask questions you long ignored and to remember sins you once trivialized.

“I am the One who has led you to ask why a Christian you know has something you lack.

“All this has brought you to seek Me. You have now come to the verge of trusting in Me as the Savior who will set you free and give you a new life.

”You are beginning to see why grace is so wonderfully amazing.

“Trust Me now.”

Charles Wesley wrote:

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night.⁹*

Is that you? You may have tried everything to find freedom and satisfaction, but you are still “fast bound in sin and nature’s night.” Perhaps nobody knows it except you. You need a work of God’s power and grace in your life.

*Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light.
My chains fell off, my heart was free
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.¹⁰*

Discovering the grace of God in Jesus Christ can happen almost before you notice it. After all, He was seeking you before you ever sought Him or sensed that He was near. All you knew was that you had a deep sense of need. He drew you in, and you said to Him: “Be mine. Be my Savior!” He said to you: “I am. Be Mine, My child.”

*O how the grace of God
Amazes me!
It loosed me from my bonds
And set me free!*

MY CHAINS FELL OFF

*What made it happen so?
His own will, this much I know,
Set me, as now I show,
At liberty.*

Freedom, at last!
Yes, grace is amazing.