God’s Grace In The Old Testament

I have known many Christians who believed the Old Testament does not have much emphasis on God’s grace and associated mercy. Also I have known others who qualify this by suggesting God was only gracious and merciful to people in those Old Testament times prior to the Law being given through Moses. How wrong both groups are! From beginning to end, the Old Testament is packed with references to God’s grace and associated mercy.

The attitude the Old Covenant had no or little emphasis on God’s grace is similar to an ancient heresy taught by Marcion the Gnostic in the 100’s A.D. Marcion called the God of the Old Testament Law and Prophets “a worker of evils, delighting in wars, inconsistent in judgement and self-contradictory”. 1 Marcion also argued, “Jesus came from the Father who is above the God that made the world” and Christ destroyed “the Prophets and the Law and all the works of that God who made the world.” 2

No true Christians today believe in two Gods – one of the Old Testament and one of the New. But sadly, many talk as though the God of the Old Testament is a God of judgement, vengeance, laws, rules, duties, little love and lacking in grace, while the God of the New is one of total love and grace and no judgement or commands. Such attitudes are almost as heretical and unbiblical as Marcion the Gnostic’s.

God’s grace prior to the Mosaic Covenant

God’s grace is also seen immediately after the Fall of Adam and Eve. God knew what they had done, but He still came to talk to them about what had happened (see Genesis 3:8-11). In God’s perfect holiness and righteousness, He could have immediately executed the physical aspect of the death penalty they both deserved because of their sin. He had warned them they would suffer the penalty of death if they disobeyed Him about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (see Genesis 2:16-17). This penalty of death comprised spiritual and physical death.

From the moment they sinned, Adam and Eve died in a spiritual sense in their relationship to God. But God allowed Adam to live another nine hundred and thirty years before the physical aspect of his deserved penalty of death came upon him (see Genesis 5:5). Eve lived for many years after her fall. So God was gracious to them.

Also, God was very gracious to them by not immediately throwing them into hell the moment they sinned. He could have easily done this according to the demands of His own perfectly right and holy nature. God did not abandon Adam and Eve despite the terrible wickedness of what they had done. In Genesis 3:15, He immediately graciously promised a solution through one of Eve’s descendants.

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2 Ibid.
God’s grace in Job’s time

Read Job 33:12-30 to see Elihu taught that God saved people in Job’s time by undeserved grace and not by perfect obedience to God’s laws. In Job 40:7-9, God criticized the previous words of Job’s other three friends, but did not dispute what Elihu said. If Job lived prior to when the Mosaic Covenant was given, this shows how God manifested His marvellous gracious character from the time of the Fall onwards. If, however, the events of Job occurred during the Mosaic Covenant period, it shows how God operated by grace during that period.

Job 32:1-2 indicates Elihu did not like the fact Job justified himself or declared he was righteous on the basis of his own character and actions: “So these three men ceased answering Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes. Then the wrath of Elihu, the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, was aroused against Job; his wrath was aroused because he justified himself rather than God.”

Previously in Job Chapter 31, Job had listed all of the many good things he had done. He had not lust in his own eyes after women to whom he was not married. He avoided falsehood (verse 5), deceit (verse 5), dishonest scales (verse 6), adultery (verse 9), treating his servants, the poor, widows and the fatherless wickedly (verses 13, 16 to 21), worshipping gold, wealth or any pagan idol (verses 24-28), rejoicing when his enemies suffered great tragedies (verses 29-30), treating travellers badly (verses 31-32) and being a people-pleaser (verse 34). Verse 33 shows Job also aimed to not hide his sins. Job wrongly imagined these things made him righteous in God’s eyes.

God’s magnificent grace manifested through the Abrahamic Covenant

In 2 Kings 13:23, we see how God’s covenant with Abraham and his descendants was based totally on unmerited undeserved grace: “But the Lord was gracious to them, had compassion on them, and regarded them, because of His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not yet destroy them or cast them from His presence.” This verse shows how the grace offered through the Abrahamic Covenant overlapped the period covered by the Mosaic Covenant.

An associated Hebrew word

The Hebrew adjective “hannun” which means “gracious” is used of God’s character in Exodus 22:27, 34:6, Nehemiah 9:17, 9:31, Psalm 86:15, 103:8, 111:4, 116:5, 145:8 and Jonah 4:2. When speaking of “hannun”, Wilson said it is “used only of God, to express his free and tender affection to those who have no merit or deserving, on whom God bestows freely the tokens of his love and pity, pardons their sins, and mercifully effects their deliverance from punishment, affliction…”

Exodus 34:6-7 states: “And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin…”’

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3 Harris, Archer and Waltke, page 302.
4 Wilson, pages 198-199.
shows God revealed this wonderful feature of His character just after He had given Moses the Ten Commandments a second time. This shows even the Mosaic Covenant contained elements of God’s glorious grace.

**God’s undeserved grace mentioned in Psalms**

In Psalms 86:15, 103:8, 111:4, 116:5 and 145:8, we see some of the Psalm-writers had a glorious revelation of how gracious God is to people who do not merit or deserve it. These specific Psalm writers spoke of God’s glorious grace as applying even to people living then under the Mosaic Covenant. In Psalm 86:15-16, David said: “But You, O Lord, are a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in mercy and truth. Oh, turn to me, and have mercy on me! Give Your strength to Your servant, and save the son of Your maidservant.” David said the above words in the context of him having trusting faith in God (see verse 2), God being willing to forgive his sins (verse 5) and David recognising his enormous need of God’s mercy, guidance and strength (verses 3, 11 and 16).

In Psalm 103:8-13, David declared: “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy. He will not always strive with us, nor will he keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear Him.” In verse 10, David says God did not treat him and others living then as their sins deserved. Here David reveals again God was not inflicting upon them the terrible punishments they should have suffered because of their disobediences to the Law of Moses.

**Nehemiah’s wonderful revelation**

In Nehemiah 9:1-37, we find another example of a person living under the Old Covenant who had a deep revelation of God’s grace. Read this whole passage. Here are verses 16 to 19: “But they and our fathers acted proudly, hardened their necks, and did not heed Your commandments. They refused to obey, and they were not mindful of Your wonders that You did among them. But they hardened their necks, and in their rebellion they appointed a leader to return to their bondage. But You are God, ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, and did not forsake them. Even when they made a molded calf for themselves, and said, ‘This is your god that brought you up out of Egypt,’ and worked great provocations, yet in Your manifold mercies You did not forsake them in the wilderness…”

According to Deuteronomy 28:15-68 which expresses the punishments due to anyone not perfectly obeying the Law of Moses, God could have destroyed the Israelite nation much earlier. Nehemiah’s later words in Nehemiah 9:33 reveal God was totally just in any punishment He gave such people: “However You are just in all that has befallen us; for You have dealt faithfully, but we have done wickedly.” But Nehemiah 9:13-21 instead shows how remarkably gracious God was to these unbelieving sinful people.

Also in verses 27 to 28 and 30 to 31, Nehemiah states how gracious and merciful God was to later generations of sinful Israelites: “Therefore You delivered them into the hand of
their enemies, who oppressed them; and in the time of their trouble, when they cried to You, You heard from heaven; and according to Your abundant mercies You gave them deliverers who saved them from the hand of their enemies. But after they had rest, they again did evil before You. Therefore You left them in the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them; yet when they returned and cried out to You, You heard from heaven; and many times You delivered them according to Your mercies...Yet for many years You had patience with them, and testified against them by Your Spirit in Your prophets. Yet they would not listen; therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. Nevertheless in Your great mercy You did not utterly consume them nor forsake them; for You are God, gracious and merciful.”

The message of undeserved grace and mercy in Hosea

The Book of Hosea is a marvellous revelation of how gracious God was to the ten northern tribes of Israel during the Mosaic Covenant period. This book disproves the common idea God acted only in judgement and deserved condemnation and not in unmerited grace and mercy during the time of the Mosaic Covenant. God uses the marriage of the prophet Hosea as a graphic illustration of how He treated the people of Israel and how they had treated Him in return. In Hosea 6:7 and 8:1, God reveals He had made a covenant with these people. Throughout the Book of Hosea, God compares this covenant to a marriage covenant.

In Hosea 11:1, God emphasises how deeply He loved the people of Israel. Note in Hosea 2:8, God says He gave the Israelites so many good things. All of this was done through God’s grace because none of the Israelites deserved or merited such treatment. Hosea 11:4 says: “I drew them with gentle cords, with bands of love, and I was to them as those who take the yoke from their neck. I stooped and fed them.”

In response to God’s love and grace, the Israelites abandoned Him, their spiritual husband, as Hosea 13:6 indicates. The people of Israel turned to the Baal religion which involved drunken orgies, male and female temple prostitutes, idol worship and other types of wickedness. They also worshipped the golden calf idols King Jeroboam had set up at Bethel and Dan, and practiced human sacrifice (see Hosea 13:1-2).

The committing of adultery against God by the Israelites manifested itself also in the way they treated each other. Hosea 4:1-2 records: “Hear the word of the Lord, you children of Israel, for the Lord brings a charge against the inhabitants of the land: ‘There is no truth or mercy or knowledge of God in the land. By swearing and lying, killing and stealing and committing adultery, they break all restraint, with bloodshed after bloodshed.’” See also Hosea 7:1-4.

The Israelites had no interest in seeking God’s will even though they hypocritically claimed to know Him. Hosea 8:1-2 shows this: “…He shall come like an eagle against the house of the Lord, because they have transgressed My covenant and rebelled against My law. Israel will cry to Me, ‘My God, we know You!’”

These people continued to offer sin offerings to God, foolishly imagining their participation in the ceremonial aspects of the Law of Moses would result in them receiving God’s grace and forgiveness even though they were refusing to turn from their deliberate known disobediences to His will about crucial matters. Hosea 8:11-13 reveals this: “Because Ephraim has made many altars for sin, they have become for him altars for sinning. I have written for
him the great things of My law, but they were considered a strange thing. For the sacrifices of My offerings they sacrifice flesh and eat it, but the Lord does not accept them. Now He will remember their iniquity and punish their sins…”

They imagined God’s grace is something that can be continually enjoyed without any need for abandoning their sins. They turned God’s grace into a repulsive form of disgrace. As Hosea 11:5 reveals, they refused to turn from their sins to God.

Hosea married a prostitute in pure undeserved grace

Hosea 1:2-3:5 records God led Hosea to marry a prostitute and to treat her continually in undeserved grace and love. By this God wanted to graphically depict a number of wonderful truths. He desired to show:

- He loves people even when they commit spiritual adultery against Him.
- He wants to be “spiritually married” to people despite their previous wickedness and rejection of Him. This is an expression of His wonderful grace.
- He is willing to forgive the sins of His loved ones over and over again.
- Continued failure to abandon our sins results in a ruining of our relationship with God. By not turning from any sin we become aware of in our lives, we are treating God’s unmerited grace as cheap or of little value.

Spiritual adultery

In Matthew 12:39, 16:4, Mark 8:38 and James 4:4, God reveals that His people can commit spiritual adultery against Him. The Book of Hosea uses the sexual adulteries of Hosea’s wife as an illustration of what spiritual adultery against God involves. Despite Hosea’s total faithfulness to his wife, she sold herself to other men. Somehow she ended up being owned by another man even though she was Hosea’s wife. Despite the fact she treated Hosea so badly, God commanded him to continue to love her just like God had continued to love the spiritually adulterous Israelites.

So in pure loving grace, Hosea purchased his wife back from another man. This is symbolic of how even though God owns all humans in one sense, He had to purchase them back from their bondage to sin and to His sentence of eternal condemnation.

Hosea’s wife had no merit of her own that made her deserving of Hosea’s love and grace. But despite this, Hosea still bought her back and was willing to accept her into a renewed relationship involving love, faithfulness and the forsaking of evil. Hosea 3:1-3 relates to all this: “Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go again, love a woman who is loved by a lover and is committing adultery, just like the love of the Lord for the children of Israel, who look to other gods and love the raisin cakes of the pagans.’ So I bought her for myself for fifteen shekels of silver, and one and one-half homers of barley. And I said to her, ‘You shall stay with me
The people of Nineveh

The Book of Jonah is a classic illustration of God’s eternally gracious and merciful character expressing itself even to people who were not under the Abrahamic, Mosaic and New Covenants. Jonah 1:1-2 records God sent the prophet Jonah to preach to the people of Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian nation. The Assyrians had become exceptionally wicked and evil. For example, they used to torture captured enemy soldiers by slowly cutting off parts of their bodies one by one – their noses, ears, eyes, hands and so on and by then impaling them on sharp objects dug into the ground. They did this in full view of the people on the walls of the cities which they were besieging. Sometimes they also skinned their victims alive.

But Jonah 3:5 and 10 wonderfully reveals how the Assyrians turned from sin to God, as a result of Jonah’s preaching: “So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them… Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.” Notice verse 5 says the Assyrians believed God after Jonah’s preaching. Their new living faith expressed itself in sincerely turning from sin as Jonah 3:8 and 10 indicate. In the original Hebrew, the words “turn” and “turned” in verses 8 and 10 are “shub” – the Old Testament word for conversion.

In Jonah 4:2, Jonah spoke about God’s grace, mercy and lovingkindness towards sinful people such as the Ninevites: “…for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm.”

In Jonah 4:10-11, God expressed His deep concern for the sinful people of Nineveh. Jonah 4:1-11 shows Jonah was more keen than God to see the wicked Assyrians punished. Jonah was exceedingly displeased and angry when God was merciful to them.

Note the Ninevites were not under the Mosaic Covenant, but God still held them accountable for their sins. In Jonah 1:2, God said “…their wickedness has come up before me.” Even though the Ninevites were not under the gracious Abrahamic Covenant, God was still very gracious and merciful towards them on the basis of His eternally gracious, loving and merciful character and Jesus’ preplanned later death.

5 Returning to God through His grace

The Book of Hosea gives much marvellous teaching about how people living in disgrace and sin can return to God through undeserved grace (see Hosea 5:15-6:3 and 14:1-2).

The emphasis this book places on God’s love, lovingkindness, grace and mercy can be seen in its usage of the following words:

- The Hebrew word “ahabah” meaning “love” is used in Hosea 3:1 and 11:4 and the word “ahab” meaning “to love” is found in Hosea 14:4, all in relation to God’s marvellous love for His people.
- The Hebrew word “hesed” meaning “lovingkindness, kindness, grace or mercy” is used in Hosea 2:19 in reference to God’s attitudes to His people.
- “Racham”, the Hebrew word meaning “mercy, compassion or tender love” is used in Hosea 1:7, 2:4, 2:19 and 2:23 (twice) in relation to God’s feelings and attitudes towards His people.
Old Testament Hebrew words for “grace”

There are a number of Hebrew words used in the Old Testament which relate to God’s grace. These are “hanan”, “hen”, “hannun” and “hesed”. The noun “hen” and the adjective “hannun” are derived from the verb “hanan”. An adjective is a describing word and a verb is an action word. The word “hesed” will be described in more detail later in Chapter “God’s mercy, longsuffering, patience and sympathy”.


Brown, Driver and Briggs say the associated Hebrew word “hanan” means “show favour, be gracious”. 8 Vine also says of “hanan”: “The word occurs around 80 times in the Hebrew Old Testament... God especially is the source of undeserved ‘favor’ (Genesis 33:11) and He is asked repeatedly for such ‘gracious’ acts as only He can do (Numbers 6:25; Genesis 43:29)...In many ways, ‘hanan’ combines the meaning of the Greek ‘charis’ (with the general classical Greek sense of ‘charm’ or ‘graciousness’) and the New Testament sense of ‘undeserved favor’ or ‘mercy’”. 9 “Hanun” is used in verses like Genesis 33:5, 33:11, 43:29, Exodus 33:19, Numbers 6:25, 1 Kings 13:23, Job 33:24, Psalm 77:9, 119:29, Isaiah 30:18 and Amos 5:15.

Numbers 6:25 shows the priestly blessing which was a part of the ceremonial aspects of the Law of Moses was centred on God being gracious towards His people. God commanded the High Priest to say: “The Lord make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you.” It is also used in Psalm 119:29 when the Psalmist shows God would give His Law to people under the Mosaic Covenant on the basis of undeserved grace: “…grant me Your law graciously.”
In Isaiah 30:18, we see another example during the Old Covenant period of God desiring to act in unmerited grace and associated mercy towards His people: “Therefore the Lord will wait, that He may be gracious to you; and therefore He will be exalted, that He may have mercy on you…”

Bible Study Questions

1. What was Marcion the Gnostic’s attitude to the Old Testament?
2. In what ways was God’s grace manifested immediately after Adam and Eve fell into sin?
3. In Job 33:12-30, what did Elihu teach about salvation by God?
4. In Job 31:1-32:2, did Job say he was justified by God’s grace or by good works?
5. What does 2 Kings 13:23 reveal about the operation of God’s grace through the Abrahamic Covenant?
7. What do Nehemiah 9:16-19, 27-28, 30-31 and 33 teach about God’s grace towards sinful unbelieving Israelites?

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6 Harris, Archer and Waltke, page 302.
7 Brown, Driver and Briggs, page 336.
8 Ibid, page 335.
9 Vine, pages 100-101.
8. What does the Book of Hosea reveal about God’s grace, mercy and love?
9. What verse shows that God held the pagan people of Nineveh accountable for their wickedness?
10. What were the responses of the people of Nineveh to the prophet Jonah’s preaching?
11. Who had the most gracious attitudes to the people of Nineveh – God or Jonah?