

Can You Be Sure Where You Will Spend Eternity? – Part 2

Why Is Grace So Amazing?

(Transcript of an interview. Edited for publication.)

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Dr. John Ankerberg: We're talking about the topic, "How you can be sure you will spend eternity with God." Is there anything more important than that? You want to know for sure. Now, some people think you can't know. The Bible says you can know, and we're going to tell you why and how you can know for sure. In fact, our topic today is, "*Why Is Grace So Amazing?*"

We all know Ephesians 2:8, "For by grace are ye saved through faith, that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works lest any man should boast." But I don't think we really understand the depth of those words. My friend, Dr. Erwin Lutzer, pastor of Moody Memorial Church, has written a fabulous book on this that we're going through together. Our goal is to share with you these truths of God's Word so that you can hear the music, that you can hear the joy that comes when you understand what grace really is.

Erwin, I think the best way to get into this topic of why grace is so amazing is, let's talk about the man that wrote the song.

Dr. Erwin Lutzer: Everybody knows the song, *Amazing Grace*. What they might not know is the context in which it was written. First of all, John Newton was a notorious sinner. As a matter of fact, he was willing to give people a prize if they could think of some way, some sin, that he had not as yet committed. So here he is. It's 1748, and he's on a ship called the Greyhound. And a tremendous storm comes up. I mean, they were being battered, and it's almost certain they're going to go under. Newton says to the captain, "If God does not have mercy on us, we're going to go under." And the captain is shook, because here's this hardened, swearing, hard-drinking, slave-driving person saying, "If God doesn't have mercy on us, then what?" So, all of the men were trying to man the pumps to keep the vessel afloat.

Newton had a Bible his mother had given him, and even on the ship he read these words. Now, just think of the context. This is actually from the book of Proverbs, but he's reading this, and he reads, "If you had responded to my rebuke, I would have poured out my heart to you and made my thoughts known to you. But because you have rejected me when I called, and no one gave heed when I stretched out my hand, since you ignored all my advice and would not accept my

rebuke, I in turn will laugh at your disaster; I will mock when calamity overtakes you – when calamity overtakes you like a storm, when disaster sweeps over you like a whirlwind” [Prov. 1:23-27]. So the guy’s scared to death.

Eventually, as we might guess, the storm subsided and the sailors were spared. But, Newton began to read the Bible. I would like to read his words exactly as I quote them in my book. He said, “I needed someone to stand between me and a holy God who must punish my sins and blasphemies. I needed an Almighty Savior who would step in and take away my sins. I saw that Christ took my punishment so that I might be pardoned.” Little wonder he wrote, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.”

But even so, there are many people who do not really understand how amazing grace is. I remember in Chicago there was a news commentator who was quoted in the newspaper as saying this: “Some day I’ll do something about my spiritual life and my walk with God, if I get serious about it.”

Now, he said, in fact, “I am not in a state of grace, but I can do something about it if I get serious about it.” Well, the simple fact is that shows that man still did not understand the nature of grace. Because there’s nothing we can do about our condition, no matter how serious we get about it. As long as we are still thinking that we can do something about it, we still do not understand grace, which is God’s unmerited favor toward us.

Ankerberg: There are a lot of people that say, “You know, grace is necessary” and they’ve got a grace program going. But the grace program is, part of it is God’s grace and part of it is what they do. They haven’t got a clue either.

Lutzer: No, they don’t.

Ankerberg: Tell them why, because they would object to that.

Lutzer: In the minds of many people, grace helps me. Well, the simple fact is, we don’t need **help**; we need a **resurrection**. In Ephesians 2, the Apostle Paul says that before we come to Christ, we are dead in our trespasses and sins.

Now, imagine yourself walking through a cemetery saying, “Well, I’d really like these people who are buried in the cemetery to live. But you know, I have to give them a little bit of help.” No. They don’t need help. They need a tremendous miracle from the hand of God. They’re beyond the need for help. And that’s the way we are without Christ. In fact, the Apostle Paul says it very clearly, “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and your sins in which you used to live, when you followed the ways of the world and the ruler of the kingdom of the air” [Eph. 2:1-2]. He says, in effect, we are really deceived by Satan. We don’t know it, but we are. In fact, he goes on to say we are depraved because we’re walking according to our own lusts. And this is our condition.

So the question is, how do we help people in a state like that? Now, mind you, just because they are dead in trespasses and sins doesn’t mean that they can’t go skiing in Colorado. That doesn’t mean that they can’t go grocery shopping or go to a symphony, or enjoy life. They can do all of that. One thing they cannot do, though, is give themselves life. That has to be from God.

Ankerberg: See, there are all kinds of versions of grace. There's grace that God gives, plus the Church sacraments. There's grace plus certain works that people have said that they've got to do that will get them there. And they are convinced, either by Church authority, or by their own little religious group. Or apart from that, there are some people that say, "I'm going to give up church but I'm just going to be good; and to the extent that I'm good, that I can try, I'm going to be very sincere about this. I know not everybody's perfect, but the part that I don't do, that's where God's grace comes in. But He expects me to try; and because I try, I'm going to make it."

Lutzer: I want you to know that people who believe any of the variations that you have given really do not understand either their desperate need; nor do they have a biblical understanding of grace.

Just a quick comment regarding the Sacraments. We know that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper and baptism and some people believe that grace is communicated through these means. But the Bible is very clear, ultimately, that our walk with God is in God's hands and not the hands of a man or even in the hands of a priest. God works directly in the human heart. These are symbols that Jesus Christ instituted and they are not the means of salvation by which you become better and better and, hopefully, at some point you'll be good enough to enter into Heaven.

And as for the folks who think, "Well, I do my part and God does His," you know, John, one day I was in a restaurant and a woman recognized the man with whom I was having lunch, and she came over. He was a religious leader. I won't tell you his name, though I think you would know him. And I asked her, "Now, if you were to die today and God were to say to you, 'Why should I let you into Heaven?', what would you say?" And she said, "Oh, my husband and I made \$1,200 in a bake sale and we gave that to charity."

So I said, "Well, what if God's standards were higher than that. What would you say then?"

"Well, I've been a good person." And on and on she went.

And then the man that I was with told a story. He said that someone came to the doors of Heaven and Peter said, "Why should I let you in?"

And the man said, "I have been baptized."

And Peter said, "Oh, you know, that's 20 points."

And he said, "I've lived a good life."

"Well, that's 30 points. Now you're up to 50."

Then the person said, "Well, I went to church regularly."

"Well, that's another 20 points. So you're up to 70 points."

And the guy says, "Up to 70 points? That's all that I have?"

And Peter said, "Oh, you're so fortunate. You're only up to 70 points, but the grace of God is 30 points, so now you can enter into Heaven."

And I pointed out to that person and to the lady that was standing there that any

such understanding of grace is to undermine totally everything that the New Testament teaches about grace.

Ankerberg: I think that you're right on the target. So the people would say, "You know, Erwin, I'm starting to understand that you've got a different definition of grace than I'm holding. And I don't even know what yours is."

Now, you're the pastor of Moody Memorial Church and I'm just going to throw this one to you now. What is your definition – which you are saying is in the Bible – what is this definition of grace that has not even been discussed yet? You're saying all these others are wrong, so what is grace as you define it?"

Lutzer: Let me just turn to the Bible here. We're in Ephesians chapter 2. Paul says, "We are dead in trespasses and sins" and then he says, "We were by nature the objects of wrath [verse 4], **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 our transgressions – it is by grace that you have been saved."

The point that I'm making is this. Grace is God's unmerited favor. But it's **not** His unmerited favor that just **helps** us to be better people or **adds** to what we have already done; grace is **entirely** God's work when it comes to salvation. When Jesus was standing at the tomb of Lazarus He didn't say, "Well, now, Lazarus, you do part of this and I'll do part of it. If you wiggle your hand, I'll do the rest." Jesus had to do it all. And the Bible says that salvation, from beginning to end, is God's.

But I can understand someone who says, "Yes, but at least I have to believe." And that's true; but even that belief is God-given. So if there's someone who wants to believe, that's wonderful. And we should pray that they would. But they have to understand that it is all of God. Don't we contribute anything? Yes, we do. We contribute our sin. But when we come to the table, we bring nothing except our great need. Grace means I don't come just to be better, I come for a miracle. Grace means I don't come simply because I think that I can do with a little bit of help. I need to be rescued. And that's why grace is so incredibly amazing.

Ankerberg: All right, you are saying that grace is a gift that God prepares and makes available to us. But, Erwin, it cost God a lot to provide this gift. You have a great story that hits a lot of different angles on this. Tell us about grace via this story.

Lutzer: Well, there was a missionary who made friends with a Hindu and the purpose of the friendship was, of course, because we respect one another, but also the missionary was trying to explain to the Hindu that salvation has to be a free gift.

Maybe I should just pause there and emphasize why it has to be a free gift. It's something to which we can make no contribution. And Jesus Christ paid it all.

Now, the Hindu was not buying this because, in his mind, there had to be some works connected with it. But before the missionary left on a trip, the Hindu gave him one of the most beautiful pearls that anyone could ever possibly see. And the Hindu said, "This pearl was captured in the water by my son who drowned in the process." And the missionary, who was so grateful, said, "Thank you very, very much. I'd like to pay you for this."

And the Hindu, of course, was offended. “What do you mean, pay?! Is there any price that you could possibly put upon this pearl that cost me the death of my son?”

And then the Hindu began to understand. That’s why we can never pay God for what Jesus did for us on the cross. How can we even begin to pay for the love of God and the grace of God where Jesus would become a sacrifice for us and become our sin-bearer? How can we possibly pay God back? That’s why throughout all of eternity we’re going to be debtors to God. And that’s why I think Heaven is going to be so filled with praises: we are going to see more beautifully than we can even imagine here on earth the fact that we were saved by God’s grace and entirely by God’s grace.

Ankerberg: Some people, though, listen to that and they say, “Listen, it’s still a fact that I’m better than my neighbor. Okay? Doesn’t that count for something? I mean, I should be able to get in just on my record.”

Lutzer: First of all, let me say that I’m glad that the person says that he’s better than his neighbor, but unfortunately, we’re not in a position to be able to judge ourselves. Most people revise themselves upwards. But here’s the point. Let’s go back to Ephesians 2. We are “**dead** in trespasses and sins” without Christ.

Now, we may have two corpses – maybe this person has been dead for 20 years and this person has only been dead for three days. Does it really matter? If they’re going to live, both of them need the very same miracle.

And we may be speaking to someone who has sinned greatly. You know, years ago John Wayne Gacy killed, I think, something like 18 young boys in Chicago and then hid the bodies under his home. You know, when you saw him on television, you would expect him to look like some evil person. I mean, I remember seeing him and I was expecting horns or demons coming out of him. I was shocked by how ordinary he looked.

The simple fact is that we’re all members of the same race. We may not do what he did, thankfully, but the simple fact is, we’re all sinners. And we can’t say to ourselves, “Well, he needed God’s forgiveness but I don’t.” Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said it very well. He said wouldn’t it be wonderful if you had good people in the world and bad people in the world, and we put all the good people on one side, and all the bad people on the other. But, he said, the line does not go between the good people and the bad people. The line really does not run there. He says that “the line between good and evil runs through every single human heart.”

You and I know how often it can be said that we are shocked at even what a good person can sometimes do.

Ankerberg: Right along this line, Erwin, we’re talking to people that think they’re too good to need this grace. On the other hand, we’ve got to remember there are a whole lot of people that feel they’re really bad. They have messed up their life. I want to talk about how grace is powerful enough to change a person and you’ve got a great illustration in your book about a young couple who came to you.”

Lutzer: Well, let me illustrate this, first of all, by saying there are two categories of people who find it difficult to accept grace. The first are those who have sinned

greatly, usually moral sins – prostitutes, drug dealers, etc. They think to themselves, “I’ve messed up so bad, God is so mad at me, I can’t accept grace.”

The other people who find it difficult to accept grace are the “goody-two-shoes,” the religious type. I mean, don’t they volunteer to do social work? Haven’t they given some money to charity? Don’t they pay all their bills? They don’t have a criminal record. Why do they need grace?

The simple fact is, both categories of people desperately **need** grace and both can **accept** grace. This is why I think, by the way, that Jesus said that the prostitutes will go into the kingdom of Heaven even sooner than the religious types of His day; because they saw no need for God’s matchless grace (Matt. 21:32). Let’s hand it to the drug dealers and the prostitutes. At least they know that if they are going to be saved, it will be by grace.

One day I was in a church and a young couple came forward and I was counseling them. And this is their story. She had come to know Christ as Savior. But they had belonged to a wife-swapping club and as she brought her husband to church, I don’t think he wanted to be there. I think she probably dragged him there. I think he wanted to be there about as much as a counterfeit coin enjoys being on an offering plate! But there he was. His wife had dragged him to church and now he came forward after the meeting. He said, “I believe in a wife-swapping club. Or at least,” he says, “I’m attending and we’re part of that.” But I knew that his wife had come to know Christ recently. So I said to him, “Are you willing to accept Christ as your Savior?” And I’ll never forget. He said, “If you think that I’m going to stop doing what I’m doing,” he said, “I can’t. Because,” he said, “There’s no way I can get out of this.” You know, the addiction is too deep basically is what he was saying. And I said to him, “Are you willing to acknowledge that you are a sinner and that you need to accept Christ as Savior and that you need to be received by God’s grace if you’re going to be accepted by God?”

And he said, “Yes.” And so I did something that I was very hesitant to do. I gambled on grace. I said, “Why don’t you accept Christ as Savior. As long as you realize, number one, that you’re a sinner. You cannot contribute to your salvation. You’re throwing yourself helplessly on God’s mercy and accept Christ as your sinner and then let’s worry about your wife-swapping club later.”

He accepted Christ that night. And I wondered to myself if his life ever changed. A couple of weeks later he made an appointment to see me and I wondered, “What are we going to talk about?” You know, the only thing on his agenda was what Bible college to attend because he wanted to go into the ministry.

Now, here are two powerful lessons about grace. First of all, that grace is communicated to those who are in desperate need no matter of their lifestyle. Grace is available to them. But there’s a second lesson. Once we’ve received God’s grace, we are never quite the same again. God gives us a new nature with new desires, new aspirations, so that for this man, he could not go back to his former lifestyle. God had given him a whole new set of inner priorities. That is grace, and that’s why it is so amazing.

Ankerberg: Jesus talked about two men who both believed in grace.

Lutzer: Oh, John! This is such a powerful story found in the book of Luke [18:10ff]. Both of them believed in grace. Now, here's a man who goes into the temple and says, "I thank thee, God, that I am not like other men who are adulterers, extortioners, and so forth." And he says, "I fast twice a week. I'm a good person." He thanked God for that. He believed in grace. He believed that he was able to do these good works in the power of God's gift.

Then there was another man, the publican, who never even had the nerve to look God in the eye. He never raised his head to Heaven, the Bible said. But he smote himself and he said, "God be merciful to me, the sinner!" And Jesus said this second man went home justified and the other did not.

Ankerberg: That's so powerful because you have two men who believed in grace but one had the wrong belief in the grace and he did not get justified.

Lutzer: One believed that grace was wonderful to help you to do better. The other believed in a grace that was much greater than that, the grace to be able to save somebody from the ground up, somebody who has nothing to depend upon. And today, reading this, there's somebody just like that, I believe, who honestly believes "I have nothing to contribute. I've messed it up so bad, there's nowhere that I can go. I've ruined other people's lives." I've received letters from people in prison who tell me awful stories of what they've done, and they think to themselves, "There's no hope for me." And I want to tell them that there is hope **for them** because grace is very amazing. In fact, there may be more hope for them than the religious person who's listening, who's a churchgoer who thinks he's doing pretty well, thank you, and grace comes along to give them a hand. But the other person knows, grace just doesn't give me a hand, it gives me a tremendous miracle.