

# REVIEWS

## Eating the Tree of Life

"The Tree of Life in Revelation 2:7," by Daniel K. K. Wong. *Bibliotheca Sacra*. 155 (April-June 1998): 211-226.

**D**aniel K. K. Wong, President and Professor of Biblical Studies at Truth Theological Seminary in Alhambra, California, has written a scholarly, rigorously researched, and generally balanced article on the tree of life as seen in Revelation 2:7. The article examines several aspects of what is referred to as the "blessing" of the tree of life, including the textual background and nature of the blessing and the intended recipients of the blessing. In addressing these points, the article concludes that the tree is a literal, physical tree in a literal, physical eternal city (the New Jerusalem) and that it depicts and teaches various truths about the nature of God's relationship to man in eternity (226). Additionally, it states that the leaves of the tree will minister to and serve the saints of God and that the specific reference to the tree of life in Revelation 2:7 is a promise to "all" of God's redeemed (226).

### Textual Background and Nature of the Blessing of the Tree of Life

In order to address these points, especially the first, the article cites extra-biblical, what it calls "intertestamental," texts found in the Jewish apocryphal and pseud-epigraphical works (212). To a certain extent, the impression is given that the author holds these texts to have significant standing in biblical interpretation. This is disconcerting to those who hold the recognized biblical canon to be the sole arbiter of truth in biblical inquiry. Even so, the manifest reverence found in the article for its subject is worthy of note. The tree of life is a striking feature of the New Jerusalem, the great and strong sign that consummates the Bible, and any serious examination into its intrinsic nature is helpful.

In speaking of the nature of the blessing, the article discusses

whether or not the tree of life in Revelation 2:7 is literal (physical) and what it represents in the spiritual realm. In defending the supposition that the tree of life is literal, the article asserts that because "the most reasonable evidence" indicates that the New Jerusalem is literal, including its materials and dimensions, the tree of life must be as well (213). Numerous expositors who concur with this position are cited in support. "Reasonable evidence" aside, however, the most suitable method to interpret the Bible should be to use the Bible itself. The book of Revelation clearly indicates that it is a book of signs (1:1), which should suggest that the tree of life also is a sign, a symbol with spiritual significance. For example, Revelation 21:9-10 clearly shows that the New Jerusalem is "the bride, the wife of the Lamb." It is not reasonable to expect that the Lord Jesus, the Lamb of God, will marry a physical city. Rather, the city is a sign of the ultimate consummation of the church, the bride of Christ. This interpretative principle in Revelation is vital in understanding the deeper significance of what the article calls the "bright sign" of the tree of life (219).

In discussing the nature of the blessing, the article considers the use of the Greek word *xulon* for *tree* in 2:7 (signifying the wood of the cross, hence, the cross itself—Acts 10:39; 13:29; Gal. 3:13; 1 Pet. 2:24). This is in contrast to *dendron*, the word commonly used for *tree* in the New Testament. This usage is puzzling to many expositors. How can the cross, a symbol of the death of Christ, be implied in the tree of life, a sign of eternal life? The article points out that a strict translation of this word gives the

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tree of life the meaning of "the cross of life" but then asserts that this "would not make good sense," because it "puts the cross" in the paradise of God (216). A small body of textual evidence in the Septuagint and early Greek literature is cited in support of this position, and the article concludes that John probably meant to give a meaning of "living wood," discarding the possibility of a reference to the cross (217). This interpretation forces a square theological peg (*xulon*) into a round interpretive hole (living wood). It should be

pointed out that the usage of extra-biblical literature is limited in its usefulness in scriptural inquiry, especially when they are at odds with recognized patterns of lexical usage in the New Testament. Simply put, the New Testament use of *xulon*, when it is related to a tree, always points to the cross—there is no exception. The interpretation seems designed more to provide an avenue of avoidance to placing the cross in the Paradise of God rather than viable biblical exegesis.

**T**he article de-emphasizes the use of this word and, as a theological counterpoise, advances what it calls “the immortality or eternal life” interpretation (217). In this view, the tree of life is seen as a symbol teaching the privilege of believers to possess eternal life (217), i.e., perpetual life. It posits this as a “preferable” interpretation of Revelation 2:7 (218), and it concludes that any reference to the tree of life, even when the Greek word seemingly denotes the suffering of the cross, primarily looks back to chapter two of Genesis (222-223). The article eventually also hints that Revelation 2:7 “looks forward to Revelation 22:2”; however, it is never explained how this is accomplished (223).

The article, in a further development of the nature of the blessing, points out that God’s original intention was for man to eat of the tree of life. It then suggests that this blessing is merely “joy, fruitful works, hope, fulfilled desires, wise words,” especially as they relate to the tree of life in the book of Proverbs (219). According to Scripture the experience of eating the tree of life involves much more than this. John 1:4 says of the Lord Jesus that “in Him was life,” and John 15 indicates clearly that He is the vine tree. These verses should lead one to conclude that Christ is the tree of life. Partaking of this tree, therefore, cannot be the mere attainment of perpetual life. It is to partake of the divine, uncreated life of God, which is not only everlasting with respect to time but also eternal and divine in nature (2 Pet. 1:4). It is Christ, as the embodiment of all the riches of God to us (Col. 2:9) for our enjoyment (Gen. 2:9; 3:22, 24; Rev. 22:2, 14, 19). This organic view, when joined to the underlying thought of the cross found in *xulon*, opens an intrinsic understanding of the tree of life in Revelation 2:7, especially when the fundamental significance of the tree of life—Christ as the embodiment of all the riches of God to man—is connected to the redemptive work of Jesus, the Lamb of God. The tree of life signifies the crucified (the tree as a piece of wood, 1 Pet. 2:24) and resurrected (implied in the life of God, John 11:25) Christ, who today is in the church and in the future will be consummated in the New Jerusalem.

In further discussing the nature of the tree of life, the article also considers Revelation 22:2, where the leaves of the tree are for “the healing of the nations.” Here an assumption is made that the “nations” are the believers who

inhabit the New Jerusalem and that the healing leaves of the tree are for them (220). A question is then asked: Why is healing necessary in eternity? Admitting that this is a “puzzling” question, it suggests that the leaves symbolize a memorial to past healing in Christ’s redemptive work (220). This understanding of the significance of the healing of the leaves uncovers a misperception about the identity of the “nations” outside the New Jerusalem as well as Christ’s relationship to them as the tree of life in eternity. Revelation 21:24 shows that these “nations” are outside the city. They “walk by its light” and will “bring their glory into it.” This shows clearly that they are of a different category from the regenerated believers. Who then are they?

**A**t the end of this age, when Christ returns, He will judge the peoples left on the earth at His throne of glory. Some will be condemned; these “goats” will be cursed and will perish in the lake of fire. The approved ones, the “sheep,” will be blessed and will inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world (Matt. 25:31-46). Unlike believers, these “sheep” are not regenerated and do not have the capacity to partake of Christ as the tree of life. They have only been restored to the original state of man as God created him. Those who are not deceived by Satan at the end of the millennium and consumed by fire from heaven (Rev. 20:7-9) will be transferred to the new earth to be the nations who will live and walk by the light of the New Jerusalem. In the new heaven and new earth the tree of life has two functions—to inwardly supply the regenerated believers and to facilitate the outward healing of the nations. Leaves in the Bible signify medicine (Ezek. 47:12); they are also a symbol of man’s deeds (Gen. 3:7). The restored nations are healed by the leaves of the tree of life, taking the deeds of Christ as their outward guide and regulation, that they may live the proper human life forever.

### **The Intended Recipients of the Tree of Life in Revelation 2:7**

The article also addresses the issue of who are the intended recipients of the promise of the tree of life in Revelation 2:7. In the seven epistles to the churches of Revelation 2 and 3, a call is issued for some to overcome, and in each church a reward is promised to those who do. The reward to the overcomer in Ephesus is to “eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God.” The article points out that some expositors believe that only “the victorious Christian” (221) will have the right to partake of the tree of life in eternity and that it will be a blessing “in distinction to [or apart from] salvation” (221). In response to this point, the article sheds its dispassionate academic mantle and argues strongly and at length that there cannot be a special group of believers in eternity eating of the tree of life (222). It asserts that the tree of life in Genesis 2 was the common portion of all mankind and that the way to it

was barred only because of sin. Since salvation has overcome sin, it argues that the way has been reopened for everyone who believes, and thus everyone who partakes of salvation is an overcomer (222). Twelve lines of reasoning are forwarded in defense of this position, all variations of this same theme.

**C**ertainly, eating of the tree of life is not a blessing apart from salvation. However, in the overabundance of justification, a note of “too much” protest can be heard. Indeed, no amount of theological discourse can relieve one of the responsibility to be faithful to the simple context of these verses, namely, that if every believer is an overcomer, why is there a specific call for them in Revelation 2 and 3? And even more, why is there a reward to those who answer the call?

The promise to the overcomer in Ephesus must be understood in the full context of the second and third chapters of Revelation. The seven epistles in these chapters are a record of the actual situation existing in seven churches in Asia Minor at John’s time. Given the prophetic nature of this book of signs, the seven churches are also signs concerning the state of the church in this age. Here the intrinsic history of the church is set forth in fifty-one extraordinary verses, summing up in a profound and concise manner the totality of the condition of the church which believers must overcome. Ephesus signifies the initial stage of church history. In this era there was much that pleased the Lord; however, a progressing degradation caused them to leave their first love for dead knowledge (2:4). The way to the tree of life had been reopened by Christ’s redemptive death, but the believers in Ephesus left it in their experience. Because of this, the Lord promised a reward to those who overcame this degrading condition: to eat of Himself as the tree of life in the Paradise of God. This reward applied to believers in the church in Ephesus, a city in Asia Minor, at the time this letter was written, and to those who lived in the Ephesian era of church history. Ultimately, it is given to any believer, at any time or in any place, who would be recovered from dead knowledge to enjoy Christ as his or her first love.

In His economy our wise Father has also prepared the next age, the age of the kingdom, as a reward and incentive to those who overcome the degradation of the church in this age. The enjoyment of Christ as the tree of life in the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and new earth will be the common portion of

all of God’s redeemed people. However, the particular enjoyment of the tree of life in the coming millennial kingdom will be a reward to the overcoming believers. All of the Lord’s promises concerning reward and all of His predictions concerning loss at the end of the epistles refer to His dealing with the believers in the coming millennial kingdom. These promises have nothing to do with eternal destiny—eternal salvation or eternal perdition—but with the kingdom reward. Thus, the tree of life, the common portion of the believers in eternity, will be a reward to the overcomers in the millennial kingdom.

**A**ccording to the article, the tree of life and the New Jerusalem are literal, physical signs. They are not. The tree of life is a spiritual symbol in a city that symbolizes God in all of His rich attributes as life to man. The article suggests that the innate denotation of the cross in Revelation 2:7 should be discarded and an understanding of merely “living wood” should be adopted. It should not. The incarnation, human living, and redemptive death of the Lord Jesus, along with the eternal, uncreated life of God, are encountered and assimilated in this remarkable verse. The article maintains that the leaves of the tree are probably a memorial to past healing and are for believers. They are not. The leaves heal the nations, unregenerate peoples who reside outside the city in eternity. Finally, the article asserts that the tree of life is our common portion and, therefore, cannot be a reward to a special group of believers. It is, however, both. It is a reward to those who have overcome the degradation of the church by returning to their first love, and it is also the common portion of every real believer in eternity, following the completion of Christ’s millennial reign.

If the tree of life is viewed only as an object, even one conveying great spiritual significance, the intrinsic aspects of its application to the believers in this age are lost, and serious Bible students are left only with awkward and unavoidable theological entanglements. Conversely, if it is seen as the very life of God as spiritual food to His seeking believers, its every aspect is profoundly uplifted and ultimately can be apprehended. This understanding, linked with the kingdom reward, provides a strong incentive to the believer to overcome the degradation which results when one loses Christ as his first love. Eating and enjoying Christ in this age is the basis for receiving a reward in the next.

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*by Chuck Hogan*

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## A Moving but Myopic View of Grace

*What's So Amazing about Grace?*, by Philip Yancey.  
Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997.

**I**n *What's So Amazing about Grace?* (hereafter *Amazing Grace*), Philip Yancey, editor-at-large for *Christianity Today* and a popular author of six Gold Medallion Award-winning books, seeks to awaken Christian compassion for a world thirsting for grace. With an elegant style and engaging tone, the book weaves a poignant account of how grace can transform lives shattered by “a world without grace” (27).

In presenting this dire need for grace, the book also critiques a pervasive legalistic strain in contemporary Christianity which alienates sinners from God who yearns to lavishly bestow His grace. Although it provides an eloquent portrayal of the power of grace and an incisive exposé of a sanctimonious vein in today's Christianity, the book is decidedly shortsighted in its definition of grace. This ultimately leaves the reader without any practical means of experiencing grace and only a provincial view of the goal of grace. It is unfortunate that Yancey's moving call for experiencing grace is based upon a judicial characterization of grace, which limits a presentation of the full scope of grace. Had the book's understanding of grace been expanded to embrace the full scope of the New Testament revelation of grace, its potential to motivate Christians to experience and dispense grace would have been significantly greater.

### The Amazing Grace of *Amazing Grace*

At the outset *Amazing Grace* declares that rather than explicating grace theologically, it will “convey” it anecdotally (15). In an attempt to “convey” grace, the book unfolds how grace is manifested in the world by offering a vast array of stories based on biblical parables, theological and philosophical aphorisms, classical novels, popular films, and horrific national and international events that illustrate the brutality of a world without grace. Early in the book, for example, Karen Blixen's story, “Babette's Feast,” is presented as “a parable of grace” (23). In brief, the story tells of Babette, a poor French woman who “landed among the graceless” ascetic Lutherans of nineteenth-century Denmark (23), performs dreary house chores for twelve years, and then spends every franc of ten thousand she wins in a lottery to provide a sumptuous feast for them.

According to the book, this feast allegorizes grace as “a gift that costs everything for the giver and nothing for the recipient” and sets the tone for the book's presentation of grace (23). The book proceeds to depict a world that “starves for grace” (36), in which guilt-ridden souls cry out for clemency and forgiveness, and an unbroken cycle of

vengeance and retaliation among families, tribes, races, and nations is perpetuated.

Against such a dark backdrop of a “world without grace” (27), the book presents radiant portraits of grace: a father who interrupts his wayward daughter's apology and prepares a banquet for her; Gordon Wilson who forgives and prays for the IRA bombers who killed his daughter; and Martin Luther King who “countered violence with nonviolence, and hatred with love,” disarming evil in “die-hard racists” (121). The book then unmasks the hypocrisy of legalistic Christians who only judge and condemn and adjures Christian readers to love those whom the general public views with disapprobation and disdain, such as homosexuals, unwed mothers, and lawbreakers—albeit without condoning their sins. The book concludes that the primary mission of Christians should not be to carry out political reforms, but to dispense grace.

*Amazing Grace* rightly exposes a pharisaical tendency, rampant among Christians, that estranges sinners in the world from the God of grace in the church. From the first page, Yancey indicates that he was motivated to pen this book after hearing of a homeless and drug-addicted prostitute who, when asked to consider going to a church for help, cried, “Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse” (11). Yancey says, “Women much like this prostitute fled toward Jesus, not away from him. The worse a person felt about herself, the more likely she saw Jesus as a refuge. Has the church lost that gift?” (11).

**A**ccording to the book, evangelical Christians, who fear the ever-increasing decadence of society's moral fiber, have resorted to extreme legalism to uphold ethical standards, imposing excessively stringent rules upon others. The book argues that such Christians are reminiscent of the Pharisees in Jesus' days who focused on the external adherence of legalistic codes and “neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness” (183). For instance, South African churches proscribed chewing gum and praying with one's hands in his pockets yet “vigorously defended the racist doctrine of apartheid” (183). In exposing hypocrisy in Christians, the author does not except himself; he confesses that he too was once “a pitiful racist, a hypocrite who cloaked [himself] in gospel while living anti-gospel” until he encountered God's love at his “worst” to be saved by amazing grace (132). Thus, this book admirably serves as a candid “self-criticism” of the self-righteousness of contemporary Christianity (210).

Second, the book presents a deeper understanding of what it means to be a Christian. What perturbs the author is that to a vast majority of people, an “evangelical Christian” is associated with mostly “political descriptions: of strident

pro-life activists, or gay-rights opponents, or proposals for censoring the Internet” (29). According to the book, a Christian’s cardinal duty is neither to abide by a mere legalistic code of ethics nor to reform the political world by establishing a moral society. The author believes that “the Christian’s main contribution” is “dispensing God’s grace” (219), and he yearns “for the church to become a nourishing culture of that grace” (37).

If the world despises a notorious sinner, the church will love her. If the world cuts off aid to the poor and the suffering, the church will offer food and healing. If the world oppresses, the church will raise up the oppressed. If the world shames a social outcast, the church will proclaim God’s reconciling love. If the world seeks profit and self-fulfillment, the church seeks sacrifice and service. If the world demands retribution, the church dispenses grace. If the world splinters into factions, the church joins together in unity. If the world destroys its enemies, the church loves them. (238)

Moreover, the book aims to foster in Christians a greater dependence on God, quoting Thomas Merton’s aphorism: “We cannot find Him unless we know we need Him” (248). To underscore our need for reliance on God, the author cites C. S. Lewis: “Grace substitutes a full, childlike and delighted acceptance of our Need, a joy in total dependence” (248-249). Only by humbly accepting our imperfections, weakness, and mortality, contends the book, can we “receive grace” and “grow close to God” (249).

Third, perhaps the greatest strength of *Amazing Grace* is the author’s deep solicitude for the painfully apparent lack of grace both in the world and the church. The book is the author’s attempt to remedy the errors of current Christianity “in a spirit of meekness” (Gal. 6:1). The author’s earnestness, compassion, and self-deprecating honesty, pervasive throughout the book, bear witness that this book was borne out of his mournful outlook on the world and prayerful consideration before God.

### **The Amazing Grace of the New Testament**

Although *Amazing Grace* possesses commendable points, its presentation of grace comes short of the New Testament revelation of grace in three aspects. First, the book’s definition of grace as unmerited favor given by God is superficial

in the light of the New Testament revelation of grace as the Triune God Himself being dispensed into and enjoyed by the believers. According to the author’s experience, grace is likened to an aesthetic sensation gained from playing classical music, a sense of pleasure awakened by the spectacular scenes of nature, and an “unbearable lightness” that one feels when he falls in love (36-37). The book characterizes grace as “God’s love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached” (41). The closest that the book comes in offering a definition of grace is the following:

I am ready, though, to attempt something like a definition of grace in relation to God. *Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more*—no amount of spiritual calisthenics and renunciations, no amount of knowledge gained from seminaries and divinity schools, no amount of crusading on behalf of righteous causes. *And grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less*—no amount of racism or pride or pornography or adultery or even murder. Grace means that God already loves us as much as an infinite God can possibly love.... Grace means there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and nothing I can do to make God love me less. It means that I, even I who deserve the opposite, am invited to take my place at the table in God’s family. (62)

Overall, the book indicates that, as allegorized by Babette’s feast, grace is primarily unmerited favor or blessings that our generous God lavishes gratis upon undeserving recipients.

### *Defining Grace*

While the author is certainly within his right not to define grace theologically, having a clear biblical definition of a term as significant as grace is important for our subjective experience of Christ. As Yancey says, *grace* “may be the most important word in the Bible” (14) that “contains the essence of the gospel as a drop of water can contain the image of the sun” (13). Hence, defining grace is tantamount to identifying the intrinsic essence of the Bible. Since grace stands at the heart of knowing the Triune God, a daily experience of grace depends in part upon a lucid understanding of the word. Consequently, we should examine the book’s understanding of grace in the light of the New Testament revelation. As Thomas F. Torrance points out, the Greek word *charis*—from

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which *grace* is derived—"in its original and fundamental sense is applied to what awakens pleasure or secures joy" (1). There is no denying that as undeserving sinners we receive grace as a free gift from God, apart from our merit.

According to the Scriptures, however, grace in its most profound meaning is God in Christ being dispensed into the believers as their enjoyment. The New Testament speaks of the grace of God (1 Cor. 15:10; 2 Cor. 1:12; 8:1; 9:14)—or the God of all grace (1 Pet. 5:10), the grace of Christ (2 Cor. 8:9; 12:9; 13:14), and the Spirit of grace (Heb. 10:29). That all three of the Divine Trinity are in apposition with grace makes it clear that grace is more than just an action or an attribute of God, but rather, is intrinsically identified with the very being of the Triune God. William Manson concurs with this view: "For St. Paul [grace] means the whole self-giving of God to men in Jesus Christ" (39). Fred L. Fisher also echoes this definition of grace:

What did Paul mean by grace? First, it meant God acting in accordance with his own character and being. Grace did not mean a quality or attitude of God; it meant God himself. Paul never rises to John's statement: "God is love" (1 John 4:8), but he would have agreed with it. It was God "who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us" that made sinners alive in Christ (Eph. 2:4). The same thought is restated in the words: "by grace you have been saved" (Eph. 2:8). Paul equates the action of God with the action of love and grace. (86)

The New Testament personifies grace and unveils that grace is Christ Himself, the embodiment of the Triune God, experienced by us to be our everything. John 1:17 says that whereas "the law was given through Moses; grace and reality came through Jesus Christ." Since the law as a set of legalistic codes is inanimate, John says that it was given. Yet with respect to grace, he personifies it by declaring that grace *came* through Jesus Christ. Verse 14 confirms that the coming of Christ, the Word becoming flesh, was the advent of grace. Hence, grace is Christ, the incarnate God, visiting mankind to be their enjoyment. In Romans 5:21 Paul also personifies grace, declaring that "just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness unto eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

According to the context of the chapter, just as sin, the antithesis of grace, personifies Satan with his evil nature (vv. 12, 21), grace personifies the indwelling Christ who abolishes the tyranny of sin and death in the believers and overcomes their self and flesh, thus enthroning them to reign in life (v. 17). Titus 2:11-12 unfolds that "the grace of God, bringing salvation to all men, has appeared, training us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly and righteously and godly in the present age."

Again, grace is personified as Christ, God manifested in the flesh (1 Tim. 3:16), who not only brings salvation and appears to mankind, but also trains us to rule over our flesh and to live a life that expresses God and His righteousness. No amount of unmerited favor but only the living Christ Himself in us can enable us to live such a life.

Most significantly, in 1 Corinthians 15, a chapter that reveals the resurrected Christ as the life-giving Spirit, Paul proclaims that "by the grace of God I am what I am; and His grace unto me did not turn out to be in vain, but, on the contrary, I labored more abundantly than all of them, yet not I but the grace of God which is with me" (v. 10). Here Paul not only personifies grace as One who labored for his ministry but also attributes who he was as a person—that is, his very identity as a new man in Christ—to what the grace of God had wrought in his being.

When we compare Paul's confession in 1 Corinthians 15:10, "not I but the grace of God which is with me," with his words in Galatians 2:20, "No longer I...but ...Christ who lives in me," we have a clear revelation that the grace of God is nothing less than Christ as the life-giving Spirit living in us to labor abundantly for us and even to become our very person and intrinsic constitution. Indeed, grace is much more than merely a sense of delight and joy, benevolence shown to the inferior, or unmerited favor bestowed by God as a gift; it is a wonderful person, Christ as a visitor (John 1:17), ruler (Rom. 5:21), trainer (Titus 2:11-12), and laborer (1 Cor. 15:10) indwelling us. Hence, the grace which amazes is the living Christ Himself imparted into us and doing what we could never accomplish in our self and becoming what we could never be in our natural life. Agreeing with this view, Torrance offers a following confirming testimony with trenchant insight:

In the New Testament *charis* (χάρις) becomes a *terminus technicus*. While other meanings are still current, there is a special Christian sense of the word coined under the impact of Revelation to convey something quite unique. No doubt existing ideas are caught up within the word, such as kindness, gift, etc., but *charis* is such a new word (in fact a καινή κτίσις) that it cannot be interpreted in terms of antecedent roots or ideas. Rather is it to be understood in the light of a singular event which completely alters the life of man in basis and outlook: the Incarnation. God has personally intervened in human history in such a way that the ground of man's approach to God, and of all his relations with God, is not to be found in man's fulfillment of the divine command, but in a final act of self-commitment on the part of God in which He has given Himself to man through sheer love and in such a fashion that it cuts clean across all questions of human merit and demerit. All this has been objectively actualised in Jesus Christ, so that

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Christ Himself is the objective ground and content of *charis* in every instance of its special Christian use. (20-21)

Thus in its special New Testament sense *charis* refers to the being and action of God as revealed and actualised in Jesus Christ, for He is in His person and work the self-giving of God to men. Later theology thought of *charis* as a divine attribute, but it would be truer to the New Testament to speak of it less abstractly as the divine love in redemptive action. Grace is in fact identical with Jesus Christ in person and word and deed. Here the Greek word *charis* seems to pass from the aspect of disposition or goodwill which bestows blessing to the action itself and to the actual gift, but in the New Testament neither the action nor the gift is separable from the person of the giver, God in Christ. (21)

It is this identification of the grace of God in word and action with His own person and action that is so highly significant, for that became normative to all New Testament doctrine. (26)

The great characteristic of the Pauline *charis* is its intimate attachment to the person of Christ Jesus, and as operating only within the personal encounter of Christ with men through the word of the Gospel....And grace is a gift in the sense that Christ is a gift, in His personal self-giving. (32)

The only two passages worth noting here come in Hebrews and the Epistle of James which correlate *charis* with the Spirit. That may not be very significant in the New Testament itself where the Spirit is associated so closely with the person of Christ, as in St. Paul's epistles, and is indeed very often interchangeable with Christ. (33-34)

### *Experiencing Grace*

*Amazing Grace's* presentation of grace leads to the second shortcoming of the book: its inability to present a practical way to experience, realize, and know grace. The book says that grace "comes from outside" (32), and it indicates that a Christian upon discovering himself as a helpless sinner turns to God for grace as "outside help" (248). Yet the New Testament consistently reveals that grace, the resurrected Christ as the life-giving Spirit, is within our human spirit. It is no coincidence that Paul concludes several of his Epistles

with reference to the grace of the Lord being with our spirit (Gal. 6:18; Phil. 4:23; Philem. 25). Such a benediction was not a formality but a reminder to the addressees that Christ as grace is intimately associated with the human spirit. Paul also concludes his written ministry with a benediction: "The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you" (2 Tim. 4:22). This verse not only identifies the indwelling Christ with grace, but also underscores that we can appropriate, enjoy, and know Christ as grace by living, walking, and having our being in and according to our human spirit.

**W**ithout contacting Christ as grace in our human spirit, the compassion, benevolence, and kindness we typically convey to others even at the cost of ourselves is not necessarily an aroma of divine grace. Any altruism and philanthropy that is not sourced in the indwelling Christ in our human spirit may initially appeal to human sentimentality but ultimately will not satisfy man's deep hunger for grace. Such acts might seem admirable in human eyes, but they have no place in God's economy in which Christ is all and in all (Col. 3:10-11). Eventually, even Babbette's feast came to an end. Man's profound thirst for grace can be quenched only by Christ Himself as the life-giving Spirit flowing out of our spirit into other human beings as rivers of grace (John 7:37-39). If *Amazing Grace* highlighted the importance of the human spirit as the repository of grace, it would render a greater help in ushering its readers into the enjoyment and distribution of grace.

### *The Goal of Grace*

The book's understanding of grace inexorably leads to the third shortcoming: a provincial view of the goal of grace. The tenor of this book indicates that the goal of grace is to alleviate the pangs of people's guilty conscience and to reconcile offended parties predominantly through forgiveness. For instance, Yancey says that "forgiveness lies at the core" of the gospel (104), and that "forgiveness alone can halt the cycle of blame and pain, breaking the chain of ungrace" (88) and even loosening "the stranglehold of guilt in the perpetrator" (91). In this regard, the book depicts the Benedictines' service of forgiveness as an exemplar of the potential influence forgiveness can wield in society:

What greater gift could Christians give to the world than the forming of a culture

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Without contacting Christ as grace in our human spirit, the compassion, benevolence, and kindness we convey to others is not necessarily an aroma of divine grace. Anything that is not sourced in the indwelling Christ in our human spirit may initially appeal to human sentimentality but ultimately will not satisfy man's deep hunger for grace.

that upholds grace and forgiveness? The Benedictines, for example, have a moving service of forgiveness and reconciliation. After giving instruction from the Bible, the leaders ask each one attending to identify issues that require forgiveness. Worshippers then submerge their hands in a large crystal bowl of water, “holding” the grievance in their cupped hands. As they pray for the grace to forgive, gradually their hands open to symbolically “release” the grievance. “Enacting a ceremony like this with one’s body,” says Bruce Demarest, a participant, “possesses more transforming power than merely uttering the words, ‘I forgive.’” What impact might it have if blacks and whites in South Africa—or in the United States of America—plunged their hands repeatedly into a common bowl of forgiveness? (125)

Since only forgiveness can resolve vendettas that exist among persons, tribes, races, and nations, *Amazing Grace* stresses that “the gospel of grace begins and ends with forgiveness” (81).

**I**n sharp contrast, the Scriptures reveal that the gospel of grace is initiated with the formation of God’s eternal purpose and consummated with the fulfillment of His eternal purpose. Second Timothy 1:9 shows an intimate connection between His purpose and grace, saying that God “saved us and called us...according to His own purpose and grace, which was given to us in Christ Jesus before the times of the ages.” In eternity past—even before sin infiltrated the human race—grace was given to the believers as a provision to carry out His purpose; hence, the commencement of grace is synchronous with the forging of God’s eternal purpose.

Ephesians 1—3 shows that grace accomplishes God’s eternal purpose to gain a corporate man who expresses God’s image and exercises His dominion (Gen. 1:26-27). Ephesians 2:3-10 unfolds that we, who were once children of wrath, are saved by grace to be made alive, raised up, and seated in the heavenlies together with the resurrected and ascended Christ so that we will become God’s masterpiece, an eternal public display of “the surpassing riches of His grace” to the whole universe, expressing the Triune God in His infinite wisdom and divine design. Ephesians 3:2-11 unveils that Paul was given “the stewardship of the grace of God” to dispense the “unsearchable riches of Christ” into the Gentiles so that the church as the Body of Christ would exhibit all that Christ is, making known the multifarious wisdom of the Triune God for the accomplishment of “the eternal purpose which He made in Christ.” Ephesians 1:7-10 reveals that God caused “the riches of His grace” to abound to us with a goal in view, “unto the economy of the fullness of the times, to head up all things in Christ.” This means that God establishes His eternal administration by dispensing Himself as grace into the believers initially to

head them up in His Body (vv. 22-23) and ultimately restoring divine order and harmony in the universe.

As the topstone of God’s organic building (Zech. 4:7), grace ultimately satisfies God’s desire for His image and dominion by consummating the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22:21), in which the Triune God is manifested in the glorified corporate humanity to the fullest extent (21:11), and the Triune God on the throne and His believers as His co-kings are reigning forever and ever (22:5). Grace does not merely apply forensic justification to wretched sinners and pluck them out of the lake of fire for absolution of their compunction. What is so amazing about grace is that grace can and will transform incurably wicked sinners (Jer. 17:9) into God’s masterpiece, His corporate expression and representation, for the fulfillment of His eternal purpose.

### Conclusion

With genuine concern and piercing sympathy, *Amazing Grace* aims to convince Christian readers of their dire need to show grace to fellow-sinners in abject conditions. Its plea for forgiveness, love, and kindness certainly resonates within the Christian audience. Despite its noble intentions, primarily because the author seems trapped in an unconscious acceptance of a forensic construct of grace as being merely unmerited favor, the book presents only a myopic view of grace which severely limits the believers’ understanding, experience, and receiving of grace.

**Y**ancey cannot be unduly faulted for this provincial view of grace; the fault lies with an overwrought strain of Christian theology that stresses only a judicial redemption which grants the remission of sins but neglects the organic aspect of salvation which also imparts God as grace into believers. *Amazing Grace* succeeds in eliciting a human longing for grace but fails to reveal the divine economy of grace, which is the self-giving of God in Christ as the unique gift to His believers.

by David Yoon

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