

*Grace, a Free Ride to Heaven?*  
Appendix ix

## Grace As a Prism

### JOSEPH AND NEHEMIAH

In the hands of ancient rulers was the power of life and death. They legislated and they judged at their pleasure. While Joseph was a servant in the prison in Egypt, a butler of the pharaoh had offended the king and was put in with Joseph (Genesis 40). Joseph interpreted his dream as his being restored to his position as chief butler and cupbearer.

There was another cupbearer in history in Persia, Nehemiah. He was a Jew (Nehemiah 1; 2). He was in anguish over the state of Judah and Jerusalem. He was before King Artaxerxes and he was visibly sad about the matter. He had never been sad in the presence of the king before. So now he was afraid.

I don't know if something like this had previously upset the pharaoh with his butler or not. The Bible does not say. But it was certain that neither the pharaoh nor the Persian king had to explain their offense to anyone. Nehemiah went before the king prepared. He had mourned and fasted for days before the God of Heaven because of Jerusalem's devastation. He confessed his and Israel's sins to God and prayed for mercy and favor for him when he went before the king.

*"And the king said to me (Nehemiah), Why is your face sad, seeing that you are not ill? this is nothing but sorrow of heart. Then I was full of fear" (Nehemiah 2:2).* Nehemiah had reason to fear the Persian king. Even Esther, although queen, knew that she was in danger of her life when she approached the Persian king (*Book of Esther*).

Nehemiah begged the king for his pleasure and his favor. *"And I said to the king, 'If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it.'" (2:5).*



His prayer to God was answered. He had not offended the king. The king was indeed pleased with him. The king granted his request. *"So it pleased the king to send me" (2:6).* The king gave him his needs to rescue the city of Jerusalem from ruins.

This event illustrates the power of prayer in soliciting favor and mercy (from both God and man); it shows the similarity between "**pleasing a king**" and "finding favor in his sight."

Nehemiah had prayed, "And I said: 'I pray, LORD God of heaven, O great and awesome God, You who keep Your covenant and mercy [Hebrew: *chesed*<sup>H2617</sup>] with those who love You and observe Your commandments'" (Nehemiah 1:5).

The first word "mercy" in verse 5 is the Hebrew *chesed*. As was pointed out in chapter 4, the Old Testament LXX translators chose in two places to translate *chesed* by the Greek *charis*; i.e., English, *grace*. In other words, the Septuagint uses "grace" here. "[*chesed, mercy*] approaches the NT concept of grace."

.catholicculture.org/culture/library/most/getwork.cfm?worknum=201 Nehemiah described two conditions for God's grace: (1) you have to love God and (2) you have to observe God's commandments. Since God knows all things and is not fooled by anyone, then His grace is only given to those that deserve it: namely, obedient believers.

**prism:** "often used figuratively to describe a way of looking at or thinking about something that causes you to see or understand it in a different way" (Merriam-Webster).

The ancient use of God's "grace" (i.e., favor) is like that prism: it has three sides that conveys one of three aspects. It depends on the perspective. God can be pleased (grace in the eyes) like the king was with Nehemiah. The king was not offended by Nehemiah's sadness. He gave permission and supplied Nehemiah's needs to go to Jerusalem. This is a second aspect: granting the pleasure of the recipient (grace as action or as an object). A third aspect of grace would be when the city's walls were built and the people would give the glory and thanks back to God. This is called "grace" when thanksgiving is offered back to God. This is a word that truly, "It depends on how you look it." But it does not ever mean "unmerited" unless you look through the Protestant Reformation "glasses."