

Yes, There Is Grace in the OT

Chosen by Grace Frankton – 6/14/15

Scripture: Genesis 12.1-3 God blesses Abram

Proposition: Because of grace, God chose to clean up what we messed up.

Today we begin a series I have titled [SLIDE] “Yes, There Is Grace in the OT.” Many times I talk to people I hear them say something to the effect that God changed somewhere between Malachi, the last book of the OT, and Matthew, the first book of the NT. They say the God of the OT was a mean and angry God who was primarily interested in his people following the rules and punishing those who didn’t. On the other hand, the God of the NT was a God of grace and love, primarily interested in saving people so they would live with him forever. While I can understand these folks’ thoughts, I disagree with them. The God of the OT is just as loving and grace-filled as the God of the NT. For the next few weeks, I’m going to show you the God of grace in the OT.

Ever been faced with cleaning up a colossal mess? I think all of us have come to the conclusion at one time or another that when it comes to cleaning up a colossal mess, you just have to pick a spot and get started. Otherwise, it’s just too overwhelming. It’s impossible for us to imagine how God must have felt when he looked at the mess that sin had made of creation. Everything had been corrupted. Nothing remained untainted by sin. Genesis tells us what God saw just a few generations after Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden. God looked at the heart of humanity and saw that: [SLIDE] *everything they thought or imagined was consistently and totally evil.* [6.5] Soon afterward, God flooded the world destroying all those who refused to believe in him. Only one small band of believers, Noah and his family, did God save from the flood.

One would assume that a fresh start would solve the problem created by sin, especially when you start with someone hand chosen by God because of his devoutness. But like a virus, sin had infected humanity. The infection just kept spreading further and further, and within a few generations, the earth teemed with rebellious men and women, just as it did in the time of Noah. **The sin God hates and the humanity God loves are so intertwined that to destroy one is to destroy the other. Yet sparing humanity would mean the epidemic of sin would continue.** So God had a mess on his hands - a mess of epic proportions. Yet, God chose to extend grace to a graceless world. God chose to wade in hip deep and clean up the mess sin created. The ultimate solution was a savior who would redeem the world without destroying God’s people. But how could he start the process of redeeming the world in a world where sin tainted everything. God only had one choice: he started with a sinner. And he chose the sinner Abram.

God determined to begin a new nation of people – his chosen people – through a man with no influence, no children, and ultimately no homeland because God told Abram to pack up and leave his country and follow where God would lead him. And then, for no other reason than he just wanted to, God made Abram a three-fold promise: [SLIDE] *I will make you into a great nation.* [SLIDE] *I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others.* [SLIDE] *I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt.* [2-3] He didn’t ask Abram for anything in return. He simply asked Abram to receive these promises.

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Abram decided to believe in God and in God's promises. Despite any physical evidence, He bought in hook, line, and sinker. And in response to Abram's faith, God declared him righteous. At that very moment, God established an important precedent: **[SLIDE] a right standing with God comes through faith that God will keep his promises.** That 'right standing' phrase is another way to say righteousness.

Though declared righteous by God, Abram was not perfect. Three examples. 1) In order to have heirs, Abram fathered a child through his wife's servant, Hagar. That was not what God had intended. As you might expect, a rift developed between Abram's wife, Sarai, and Hagar which resulted in Hagar and the child being thrown out of camp. 2) Later, God came to Abram and Sarai and promised them a son – at the ages of 99 and 89 respectively. Sarai laughed. That was not what God had intended, but God still gave Abram and Sarai a son, Isaac, and new names: Abraham and Sarah. 3) Soon afterward, Abraham, in order to protect Sarah, made up a lie that she was his sister so that the local king wouldn't take Sarah for himself. That was not what God had intended. Despite Abraham trying to fast-track an heir and pass off his wife as his sister, God did not renege on his promise.

Despite Abraham's failures, God's plan progressed. He was building a nation one person at a time. Abraham finally had a legitimate heir. No doubt, Abraham and Sarah savored every moment with their son. He had become the literal embodiment of God's promise to Abraham and to all of humanity. Through him God would multiply his grace. Through Isaac, all the nations in the world would be blessed. God was on the move. Granted he was moving a bit slowly for Abraham. But at least he and Sarah had gotten a son in the process. At least for a while. Once again God spoke to Abraham: **[SLIDE] Take your son, your only son - yes, Isaac, whom you love so much - and go to the land of Moriah. [SLIDE] Go and sacrifice him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, which I will show you.** [22.2] I know: Where's the grace? Hang with me.

Now child sacrifice was not uncommon in those days, but sacrificing your only son certainly was. Especially a son promised to you by God, especially one born when you were 100 years old. This didn't make any sense. Yet, Genesis tells us that Abraham didn't hesitate to obey. He rose early in the morning to obey God's ominous instructions. The cool air of the morning must have stood in sharp contrast to the tempest brewing in Abraham's heart. Doubts, fears, sorrow, confusion, and anger must have swirled like a sandstorm as he led his only son into the wilderness to die. The journey took Abraham and Isaac and two servants into the mountains of southern Canaan. It would take them three days to reach three destination. Three days for Abraham to change his mind about obeying. Three days to plead with God to change his mind about sacrificing. We can only guess as to the meaning Abraham would have attached to this dreaded deed he was being asked to do. Was this punishment for his previous faithlessness? Was Isaac paying for his father's disobedience? Had God changed his mind about his promise? Yet, God had made him a promise, so Abraham decided to trust.

As they neared the destination, Abraham ordered the two servants to stay while he and Isaac went on to sacrifice. Abraham could see the confusion in Isaac's face. Isaac and Abraham had wood, a knife, and a torch, but no animal to sacrifice. Isaac questioned his dad about that. There's no way to imagine the range of emotions that must have swept through Abraham at that moment. Hoping God might change his mind, Abraham responded: **[SLIDE] God will provide a sheep for the burnt offering, my son.** [8] Abraham had no idea how true those words would prove to be, not

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only in his immediate context but in the context of God's grand plan for the redemption of the world. God would indeed provide a lamb.

Abraham gathered stones, constructed an altar, and arranged the wood on the surface. Then he bound his son with cords, picked him up, and laid him on the wood. The terror in Isaac's young eyes must have been more than Abraham could bear. He pulled the knife from its sheath to end his son's life, just as he would a sacrificial lamb. But before the blade touched the boy's skin, God intervened. From everywhere and nowhere, a voice called: *Abraham, Abraham*. [11] *Here I am replied Abraham*. [11] The angel continued: *Don't lay a hand on the boy...for now I know that you truly fear God. You have not withheld from me even your son, your only son*. [12] No doubt Abraham's hands were trembling as he cut the cords binding his son. As Isaac's feet touched the ground, a commotion in the undergrowth caught their attention. Just a few feet away, a ram struggled to untangle its horns from a thicket. God had provided. That's grace.

Abraham died at the age of 175. By that time, Isaac, the first born son of the covenant, had fathered two sons of his own. But Abraham's name had not become great. The families of the earth had not been blessed through him. He had not taken full possession of the land he was promised. But in time, through his descendants, all of that would come to pass. Not because of anything extraordinary on Abraham's part, but because God made a promise – a promise Abraham believed. And with that, the clean-up had begun. The mess sin had created was beginning to be addressed. God's plan of redemption was unfolding. And the common thread throughout the story was **[SLIDE] grace**. By grace, God chose Abraham. By grace, God declared him righteous. By grace God provided for and protected Abraham and his family, even when they did things God didn't intend. By grace, God blessed Abraham and Sarah with a son. By grace, God provided a sheep at a pivotal moment. And by grace, God would see this story through to completion.

The importance of God's interaction with Abraham cannot be overemphasized. In Abraham, God established the ground rule for all mankind: **[SLIDE] a right standing with God comes through faith that God will keep his promises**. God gave Abraham the gift of right relationship with him hundreds of years before God gave the nation of Israel the Ten Commandments. His message could not have been any clearer: the solution to sin was not rule keeping. If it had been, the cleanup process would have begun with a list of rules. Instead, God initiated the mess cleaning process with a relationship. He asked an undeserving man to trust him. And when that man did, God gave him what he needed most and deserved the least – friendship with God. That's amazing. That's grace.

What's even more amazing is that the offer of friendship with God made to Abraham would eventually be extended to the entire world – including you and me. This offer would be made on the same terms as it was to Abraham: **[SLIDE] “trust me.”** But in a world where sin reigns, the simplicity of this offer is easily lost. This is understandable. Men and women in every culture know they fall short of God's standards. Our consciences make that unmistakably clear. And common sense argues that if bad behavior puts us at odds with God, then good behavior should fix things. Our natural inclination is to do something in order to regain God's acceptance and approval. So throughout the history of civilization, people have devised every imaginable system and scheme to please their god or gods. But when the one true God initiated his relationship with humankind, it didn't begin with a command to obey; it began with an invitation: “trust me.”

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The only way to clean up a giant mess is to pick a spot and begin. God began with an ordinary man. He offered that man what everybody needs most: peace with God. In making that offer, God offered hope to the human race. By embracing the faith of Abraham, humankind could be reconciled to God. The separation sin had created could be bridged after all, but not through any scheme devised by humans – only by the grace of God. With Abraham, the story of reconciliation began. It's a story of forgiveness and redemption – a story that would continue for thousands of years. A story that would eventually become your story and my story.