

Obligations of Grace

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And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,
 and we have seen his glory,
 glory as of the only Son from the Father,
 full of grace and truth. . . .
 For from his fullness we have all received,
 grace upon grace.
 For the law was given through Moses;
 grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

(John 1:14, 16, 17 ESV¹)

I. Introduction

Perhaps no New Testament text other than John 1:14, 16, 17 sets before us so clearly the question, how does Old Testament law relate to New Testament grace? I, among many Bible readers, have seen in v. 17 an almost absolute, black-and-white contrast between law and grace. For years I have read (and quoted) it as “the law was given through Moses, *but* grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” Such a reading, however, adds a contrastive “but” that does not appear in the Greek. The esv translation rightly joins the two sentences of v. 17 with a semi-colon, without inserting “but” (usually *alla* in Greek). To be fair, “but” does not have to appear in a Greek or English sentence in order to express strong contrast. Consider, for example, this famous couplet from American President John F. Kennedy’s First Inaugural Address. No single word expresses contrast, but the couplet does as a whole:

Ask not what your country can do for you —

¹ When it quotes the Bible, this chapter quotes the English Standard Version, unless it identifies another source: *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Bibles, 2001). [For the publisher’s editors: Crossway allows use of “up to and inclusive of one thousand (1,000) verses without express written permission of the publisher. . . .” This notice of copyright must appear on the copyright page: “Scripture quotations marked ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.” I have copied this notice from the copyright page of *The ESV Study Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2008 by Crossway Bibles.*]

Ask what you can do for your country.

The lack of “but” in the Greek of v. 17 prompted me to ask further, What kind of contrast does v. 17 express, or do law and grace-and-truth here relate in another way? This chapter aims to show that this text, as well as the New Testament as a whole, does contrast law with “grace and truth”; however, the contrast is usually neither absolute nor in opposition, by which “law” absolutely opposes “grace and truth.” Instead, we will see, Old Testament law itself is God’s gift of grace, but God’s gift of Jesus Christ gives so much more grace (and truth) that the similarity of the law and of Jesus as grace gifts pales in comparison to the superior quality and quantity of grace God gives through Jesus. The contrast is therefore one of comparison, less to more, rather than of opposition. Further, we will see that equivalent in the Old Testament of the pair “grace and truth” in v. 17 describes the covenant-making and -keeping God, showing that God related to his people of the ancient covenants with grace. This rooting in the Old Testament adds dimensions of meaning to “grace and truth” we would not discern were we to ignore its Old Testament soil.

After first examining this text further, this chapter will then show how grace permeates the Old Testament even as it abounds more so in the New Testament and how grace in both Testaments obligates recipients of God’s grace to certain responses to grace. It does so by making these additional main points:

2. Grace abounds in the Old Testament but more so in the New;
3. Grace obligates believers in the period of each Testament to respond in faith that expresses itself in obedience;
4. These obligations of grace in no way undermine or oppose grace but express gratitude for grace, a response taught by Scripture and also fully expected within the patronage system of the Greco-Roman culture that is home to the New Testament.

II. *“Steadfast Love” Is “Grace”:*

Old Testament Roots of John 1.14–17

This compact text describes the Word who became flesh with terms we know are important because they are repeated: “glory” occurs twice (14); “full” changes to “fullness” (14, 16); “grace” occurs four times (14, 16, 17); two occurrences of “grace” occur within the repeated phrase “grace and truth” (14, 17). The previous vv. of this prologue to the Gospel take the biography of “the Word” back to “in the beginning,” which echoes the same phrase in Genesis 1.1. That echo, along with reference to the law and Moses and to no one seeing God, signals that this prologue carries forward Old Testament understandings. While some experts on John’s writings in the last century sought to understand the Gospel as expressing a fundamentally Greek, non-Hebraic, outlook, today most agree that the Gospel’s world of thought is fundamentally Jewish, or Hebraic.² It, at the same time, portrays Jesus the Word of God signaling his glory in a Hellenistic world that for first-century Jews expressed three strong cultural streams: Jewish, Greek, and Roman. In some instances, such as Pilate’s asking “what is truth?” (18.38), a word such as “truth” may communicate a non-Jewish understanding. The dramatic context cues us: Jesus, the divine Word become flesh, whose glory is “full of grace and truth,” is questioned by a ruler of the earthly superpower as it—and its understanding of truth—rejects him. But overall, the echoing of the Old Testament in the opening of the Gospel exemplifies its carrying forward Old Testament ideas in a Hellenistic context.

The phrase “full of grace and truth”³ is an important example, both of this Gospel’s Old Testament roots and of this point: grace does not manifest itself only with Jesus or begin with him but flows through God’s covenants with his ancient people long before “the Word became flesh.” Bible scholars find that

² Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 1 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003), 416–19.

³ *pléres cháritos kai aletheías*

“full of grace and truth” corresponds to the Old Testament phrase “abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,” which appears, among several places, in Exodus 34.6: “The LORD passed before him [Moses] and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love [*hesed*] and faithfulness [*’emeth*]. . . .”⁴ Biblical scholar Lester J. Kuyper’s analysis of the occurrences of *hesed* in the Old Testament shows its central meaning to be that of loyalty and faithfulness, sometimes of protection and deliverance,⁵ whether expressed within a family or among two or more persons associated in other ways.⁶ But such covenant or family loyalty and faithfulness “is not an outburst of unlooked-for mercy, nor an arbitrary demonstration of favor,”⁷ thus differing from the popular definition of grace as “wholly unmerited favor.” Kuyper’s analysis of *’emeth* likewise yields a definition other than popular notions of truth as “that which is real, not false; or that which corresponds to reality.” A survey of Old Testament occurrences shows instead that core notions of *’emeth* (whose root, *’aman*, yields our “amen”) are “faith, confidence, and stability.”⁸ Judges Moses appoints are to have *’emeth*—be dependable (Ex 18.21); Hannaniah is appointed governor because he is dependable (Neh 7.2); and Israel is “to serve the Lord in *’emeth*, that is, faithfulness” (Josh 24.14; 1 Sam 12.24).

The overlap in meaning between *hesed* and *’emeth* suggests that when they occur as a pair, they occur in the figure of speech called hendiadys (lit. “one through two”), by which “the second term intends to confirm and enrich the first.”⁹ Thus the two may denote “reliable loyalty to an existing bond,” a meaning

⁴ See any recent, good commentary on the Gospel of John. See this *hesed-’emeth* pair also in Gen 24.49; 47.29; Josh 2.14; Hosea 4.1; Prov 20.28.

⁵ This section of the chapter relies on Lester J. Kuyper, “Grace and Truth: In the Old Testament and in the Gospel of John,” in *The Scripture Unbroken* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978) 157–186.

⁶ Such as Lot toward the heavenly guests at Sodom (Gen 19.19); the spies toward Rahab (Josh 2.12, 14); David and Jonathan in their covenant and David, in honoring that covenant, toward other descendants of Saul (1 Sam 20.8, 14, 15; 2 Sam 9.1, 3, 7). One of the most significant of Old Testament words, *hesed* resists being translated into only one English word. Bible translations use a few, such as “mercy,” “kindness,” “lovingkindness,” and, as here, “steadfast love.”

⁷ Kuyper, 161

⁸ Kuyper, 162

⁹ Kuyper, 163

that fits God's faithfulness to the covenant he makes with Israel and to the reciprocal faithfulness God expects of her, topics to which this chapter turns shortly.

Yet the result of examining this phrase does not seem to correspond closely to our popular notion of grace. Is there no closer correspondence between Old Testament expressions and our cherished Christian understanding of grace as wholly unmerited favor? There is, in the Hebrew word *ḥen* that appears in the widely-remembered verse "Noah found grace [*ḥen*] in the eyes of the Lord" (Gen 6.8), as well as in some seventy other places. It expresses generous, unearned favor given by a superior to an inferior and is used of both human and divine interactions.¹⁰ Thus Shechem seeks *ḥen* from Jacob and Dinah's brothers in his bid to marry her (Gen 34.11); and Jacob the father seeks *ḥen* from his son Joseph (who in Egypt is socially superior to his father) with the request that Joseph bury him in Canaan (Gen 47.29).¹¹ But Jacob also asks Joseph "to perform *ḥesed* and *'emeth*, . . . the faithful loyalty [expected] . . . within the Hebrew family." Kuyper continues:

In this touching scene . . . *ḥen* is a gracious, unmerited favor . . . a superior bestows on an inferior; *ḥesed* is also an act of goodness, but one that can be expected since it takes place within . . . a covenant of intimate fellowship. . . . [T]hrough *ḥesed* the covenant is maintained and the relationship . . . manifests vitality.

The meaning of these three words for human relationships (including covenants) is similar for God's covenant relationship with Israel. Citing Deuteronomy 7.7–9, Kuyper notes that God's motive for choosing Israel—not because they were the most populous "but . . . because the LORD loves you"—while

¹⁰ "Grace, Gracious," in *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words*, Stephen D. Renn, ed. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2005) 447.

¹¹ Kuyper, 164

not using the word *ḥen* nevertheless expresses “in the language of Paul, . . . *charis*, grace.”¹² Moreover, beyond God’s gracious choosing of Israel, “The wonder of God’s favor . . . is that . . . ‘the LORD your God is . . . the faithful [the verbal root of *‘emeth*] God who keeps covenant and *ḥesed* with those who love him and keep his commandments” (Deut 7.9). Furthermore, the *ḥesed* and *‘emeth* God expresses toward Israel he also expects from them in obedience to the law that is part of the covenant. Israel’s disobedience prompts God’s lawsuit, delivered through eighth-century BC Hosea (4.1–2):

Hear the word of the LORD, O children of Israel,
 for the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land.
 There is no faithfulness [*‘emeth*] or steadfast love [*ḥesed*],
 and no knowledge of God in the land;
 there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery;
 they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.

To these examples of Old Testament occurrences of *ḥen*, *ḥesed*, and *‘emeth*, we could add many more. They demonstrate God’s wholly gracious choosing of Israel and entering a covenant with them [corresponding to *ḥen*] and then his covenant-sustaining “steadfast love and faithfulness” even and especially when they rebelled—by refusing to reciprocate his *ḥesed* and *‘emeth*, for which they received his discipline and then again experienced his *ḥesed* and *‘emeth* in restoration.¹³

This understanding lies behind and should shape our understanding of John’s description of the Incarnate Word’s being “full of grace and truth.” But before defining these key terms, we should ask, If

¹² Kuyper, 168

¹³ To be brief, this section simplifies the complexities of the meanings of *ḥesed* in the Old Testament and the ongoing scholarly debate Kuyper could not draw from with his 1978 publication. The basic notion of *ḥesed* offered here seems to express contemporary scholarly consensus, with variations.

this analysis is correct, why does “steadfast love and faithfulness” of the Old Testament appear in John 1.14 as “grace and truth”? The answer lies in a combination of the way the meanings of words change over time and the twists and turns of translation. For *hesed*, in exilic and later biblical writings, “*hesed* seems to have become more and more associated with mercy, *rahām*. . . .”¹⁴ By being removed from their land, the Judeans had experienced the final covenant judgment, and they sought forgiveness on the basis of God’s covenant faithfulness more than his assistance. The Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX, completed by the late second century BC) follows this shift and translates *hesed* most often with the word for mercy, or pity, *eleos*, although later Greek chose *charis*, which we find in John 1.14. Other translations and versions, as well as dictionaries, stayed with the senses of “pity, compassion, or tenderness.” Only in the last century did biblical scholars recover the ancient Hebrew sense of relational, or covenant, loyalty. Thus we have in John 1.14 the later Greek translation of *hesed* by *charis*, along with the recent recovery of the most frequent sense of *hesed* in biblical Hebrew. Similarly, the LXX translated *’emeth* (and closely related *’emunah*) most often as “truth,” *aletheía*, much less often as “faith,” *pistis*. The Latin Vulgate and other translations followed the LXX until the last century. Contemporary biblical scholarship has likewise recovered the ancient Hebrew sense of *’emeth*, such that occurrences of *aletheía* in John’s Gospel and throughout the New Testament need to be examined to determine which may express the abstraction of thought typical of a Greek notion of truth and which instead carry forward Hebrew notions of *’emeth*, such as “faithfulness,” “steadfastness,” and “faith,” and which may combine Greek and Hebrew notions.¹⁵

¹⁴ Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible*. Harvard Semitic Monographs 17 (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press for The Harvard Semitic Museum, 1978) 238.

¹⁵ Kuyper 165–167. George R. Beasley-Murray, among other interpreters, suggests such a combination of Hebrew and Greek concepts in John’s uses of “truth,” *aletheía*. *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 36 (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 1987) 14.

This analysis results in a proposed meaning for the phrase “full of grace and truth” within our opening text. Kuyper observes first that this phrase attests to the deity of Jesus because it describes him with the same phrase—in its Greek equivalent—of the Old Testament description of God in Exodus 34.6, the God “abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”¹⁶ Second, the comparative contrast in John 1.17 is now clearer:

[t]he God full of grace and truth revealed through the law had now fully come in Jesus Christ, who was indeed full of grace and truth. . . . Even as in the Old Testament God’s covenantal faithfulness was bestowed to Israel time upon time, so also within the first generation of Christian believers God’s faithful redemptive grace in Christ came time upon time.¹⁷

Specifically for the purpose of this chapter, this analysis points to *continuity* between God’s covenantal steadfast love and faithfulness expressed through Moses and the law, on the one hand, and much more abundantly through the Word made flesh, on the other. Recognizing that the Prologue carries forward covenant language as it describes Jesus as the gift of God’s steadfast love and faithfulness and that such a covenant obliges recipients to respond, what response does this Gospel elicit? It calls for two: first, belief that Jesus is all the Gospel portrays him to be, condensed to believing “that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” (20.27–31). Second, it calls for obedience, an obedience that begins with believing (3.36; 6.29) and that issues from believing: abiding in him and his word and keeping his word, his commandments (8.31, 52; 13.34; 14.15, 22; 15.4–14).¹⁸ With such calls, this Gospel expresses

¹⁶ Kuyper, 177

¹⁷ Kuyper, 176

¹⁸ As this chapter explores the meanings of the pairs *hesed*—*’emeth* and *charis*—*aletheia*, other important phrases and words such as the following in this Gospel merit (and have received) scholarly exploration of their meanings in connect with the Old Testament and intertestamental Judaism and the Greco-Roman world of John’s time: “truth,” “glory,” “believe,” “keep my word,” “abide in me,” “keep my commandments,” etc. The analysis

obligations for believers who receive God's covenant "full of grace [steadfast love] and truth [faithfulness]" through the Word and Son of God.¹⁹ These are obligations of grace that continue from God's covenant with ancient Israel to his renewed covenant through Jesus Christ with all who truly believe.

This text exemplifies how New Testament grace obligates its recipients to respond to the gift that grace is in specific ways that in no way undermine the character of grace as gift. Before considering other New Testament texts that identify obligations of grace using other words and in order to strengthen the claim that grace unites the two Testaments, this chapter expands its discussion of how God acts with grace in the Old Testament by considering Creation and Covenants as expressions of grace.

III. More of Grace in the Old Testament: Creation & Covenants

Creation

Before God expresses his choice of a people in history, his act of creation is itself gracious. Truly free, God submits to no being or force outside himself to express his glory by creating all that is. Biblical texts emphasize Creation's expressing God's glory (Pss 8, 19), which includes Christ himself as the end (goal, or *telos*) of creation (John 1.3; Col 1.16; Rev 4.11), but Scripture and Christian theology have emphasized

summarized in this chapter should convince readers not to assume that the ordinary present-day meaning one attaches to these words is sufficient for the meaning of them that is likely in John's late first-century world.

¹⁹ "Grace" occurs nowhere else in this Gospel after the Prologue, while "truth" occurs often. Kuyper thinks that from the hendiadys of grace and truth, "truth" in this Gospel continues to carry the covenantal sense of "grace" (*hesed*) in many of its occurrences (176, with n12, 185–86). See the commentaries for this and other opinions.

grace in redemption more than in (pre-Fall) Creation, which is understandable.²⁰ But we must affirm that Creation is itself a divine act of grace, even if we discern this truth by reflecting theologically, including reflecting on our common human experience, more than by biblical exegesis. Who can doubt that God's free decision to create humanity in the divine image and for male-female companionship (in especially marriage, which the apostle Paul calls a profound mystery that refers to Christ and the church; Eph 5.32) is anything but an act of grace?²¹ Psalm 8 praises God's "name in all the earth" in ways that acknowledge his generosity in giving humanity such a lofty place in Creation:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
what is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?
Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.
You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,

²⁰ As recently as a generation ago, T. Robert Ingram protested the silence of theologians about grace in creation: "Are we . . . to conclude that grace was not the source of all the spiritual blessings bestowed upon Adam in Paradise before the Fall when he was not a sinner?" And, "When 'God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good,' (Gen. 1, 31) was it not of grace that it was good? to say nothing of the fact that it existed at all? Was there some merit in the things God had made that made them good, apart from his grace? Was it not the unmerited love of God which gave existence to all things?" "The Grace of Creation," *Westminster Theological Journal* 37, no. 2 (1975), 207 (206–217).

²¹ Gen 1.26–29; 2.18–25.

whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

O LORD, our Lord,

how majestic is your name in all the earth!

vv 3–9

What should one call God's creating the world he repeatedly calls good and then fashioning the garden as humanity's satisfying home if not generous grace?²² Psalm 65 details some of God's creational generosity:

You visit the earth and water it;

you greatly enrich it;

the river of God is full of water;

you provide their grain,

for so you have prepared it.

You water its furrows abundantly,

settling its ridges,

softening it with showers,

and blessing its growth.

You crown the year with your bounty;

your wagon tracks overflow with abundance.

The pastures of the wilderness overflow,

the hills gird themselves with joy,

the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,

the valleys deck themselves with grain,

²² Gen 1.10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31; 2.8.

they shout and sing together for joy.

vv 9–13

Were God not our Heavenly Father but our Heavenly Cost-Cutter instead, we might have a minimalist creation: one or only a few kinds of plants and animals and foods. They might all be a monochrome grey, and there would be no heart-stopping sunsets, sweet lilacs, cooling lakes with toasty beaches, nor feasts of fruit, fish, and fowl, but only gray gruel, gasoline for living engines, without flavor. Instead, our common experience testifies to creation's ever-surprising beauty that shouts even through its details, as Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–89) voices in "Pied Beauty":

GLORY be to God for dappled things—
 For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
 For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
 Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
 Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;
 And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
 Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
 With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
 He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
 Praise him.

Patriarchal Covenants

From the paradise of Genesis 1–2 through the ever-widening spiral of sin and its abuse of creation through the rest of the Primeval Prologue, Genesis 3–11, God meets sin with judgment and a note of grace. God judges the evil of Noah's time with the Flood, "But Noah found favor [*hen*] in the eyes of the LORD" (6.8). That favor saves Noah, his family, and the stock of animals that together would resume God's creation project after the Flood; and God repeats in Genesis 8.21–9.17 his blessing from Genesis 1 with variations, including the establishing of a covenant that promises never to destroy all life by a flood (9.11). God covenants with Noah after acknowledging that, despite the flood, "the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth" (8.21). But this sad recognition does not diminish God's will for

creation to flourish: “Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease.”

This covenant impinges on all people, not just to Hebrews and (later) Jews; and it obligates all people to its terms (9.1–7). With his covenant with Noah, God fulfills the simplest popular description of grace: not only not getting what we deserve (which is mercy) but getting so much more and better than we deserve.

Does the judgement of Babel (Gen 11) follow the pattern of the Prologue with a corresponding grace?

With Babel, we recognize the world as we know it today. Sin again (see Gen 6.1–7) infects creation but this time with the sophistication of a culture “using all its resources to establish a city that is the antithesis of what God intended when he created the world.”²³ God confuses the proud tower builders and disperses them “over the face of the earth” (11.9). But they receive no promise of a future redeemer or clothing for their shame, as do Adam and Eve (Gen 3.15, 21); nor a protective mark, as does Cain (4.15); nor a covenant for the flourishing of post-Flood life, as do Noah and all his descendants (8.21–9.17). At the end of what scholars call the Primeval Prologue (or History; Gen 1–11), does God show no grace along with the judgment of Babel?

He does, in Genesis 12, with a new chapter in the history of salvation. God advances his plan to redeem humanity throughout the period of the Old Testament with great grace, through important covenants.

This simple acrostic makes three of them memorable:

God comes to the AID of his people, through lasting covenants with . . .

Abraham,

²³ Note: Genesis “11.1–9 The Tower of Babel,” *The ESV Study Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Bibles, 2008).

Israel, and

David.²⁴

As we consider these most important of Old Testament covenants that, like tributaries, flow into the great river of God's covenant through Jesus Christ, it is important to define the word: Old Testament scholars define "covenant" as "a means of establishing a relationship (not naturally existing) which is sanctioned by an oath sworn in a ceremony of ratification."²⁵ God's covenant with Abraham, in Genesis 12, resumes, or restarts, his redemption of humanity and of all of creation by focusing on one man and his family, Abram of Mesopotamia, an eighth-generation descendant of Adam's son Seth (11.10–26). Grace abounds here: first, in God's choosing, or election, of Abram, who is, at this time, a typical Mesopotamian pagan idolater. Grace then extends through God's calling Abram to move "to the land that I will show you" (12.1), through giving the covenant itself, which includes the gifts of land, a great name, and being the source of a great nation and of blessing to all families of the earth (12.2–3).

Later God restates and enlarges the covenant: in chapter 15 God confirms his promise to give Abram a son, and God alone passes through the sacrificed covenant animals, emphasizing that he alone will perform this covenant. A believing Abram (15.6) becomes forever the exemplar of God-pleasing faith. In chapter 17, God repeats the covenant (with some variation), adds circumcision as the essential sign of covenant keeping, and announces that Isaac will be born to him (renamed Abraham) and Sarah (formerly Sarai) and will inherit the same covenant. In chapter 22, Abraham passes God's test by offering Isaac on the altar, and God reaffirms the covenant. God adds here, for the first time, that he is

²⁴ Jeremiah's New (or Renewed) Covenant (Jer 31.31–34) deserves the great attention Christians give it, but the AID covenants also influence the events and writings of the New Testament: Jesus Christ fulfills the AID covenants.

²⁵ William Sanford LaSor, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederic Wm. Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 73.

blessing Abraham with almost infinite offspring through whom he will bless all nations “because you have obeyed my voice” (18). God gives great grace, along with one obligation: obedience.

Covenant with Israel (at Sinai)

The central event of salvation in the Old Testament is the Exodus. Seen within the Book of Exodus, the Exodus consists of several events, including God’s entering into a new covenant with the descendants of Abraham he has miraculously rescued from Egypt. In what is surely a Mount Everest of Old Testament revelation, at Mount Sinai God gives Moses these words for the people of Israel:

You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’

Exodus 19:4–6

Then, in what is surely among the most awe-filled events of the Old Testament, God manifests himself at the foot of Mount Sinai:

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. . . . Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly.

Exodus 19:16–18

Grace alone (through God's keeping his covenant with Abraham: Exo 2.24; 6.4, 5) accounts for God's rescuing this people and choosing them to be his "treasured possession" and "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Lest they would think otherwise, Deuteronomy 7.6–9 reminds them:

[Y]ou are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

While this covenant arises from God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants, the Israelites recognize the Sinai Covenant as distinct:

The LORD our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. Not with our fathers did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. . . . He said: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

Deuteronomy 5:2–6

In this supremely sober moment, God gives the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 as part of this covenant, the first expression of the Law of Moses, which is complete in its 613 commandments. "Law" and "commandments" denote directives to be obeyed. In the Books of Exodus and Deuteronomy, one cannot detect any tension or contradiction between God's gracious choosing and covenant love, on the one hand, and his expecting Israel to obey (which they did sometimes), on the other. Obedience was not the prerequisite for God's gracious deliverance from Egypt nor, by itself, for God's continuing *hesed*, or covenant love. God rescues the children of Israel on the strength of his oath to their fathers, and he

makes clear in multiple passages and genres of the Old Testament that the covenant stays alive not because of Israel's exemplary obedience but because of his *hesed* and *'emeth* to the covenant.²⁶ The Hebrews suffering in Egypt do very little compared to God's amazing actions: they accept Moses as God's spokesman enough to obey his directions, including all the preparations for leaving Egypt quickly, which includes applying the blood of the sacrificial lambs to the doorposts and lintels (Exo 12.7–13). Such obedience in no way causes the Exodus, and disobedience would, presumably, deny those who disobey rescue through the Exodus. Disobedience would show that those who disobey do not believe Moses to be God's spokesman: unbelief would be the problem more important than disobedience.

God gives the Sinai Covenant and its law three months after he has saved them from Egypt (Exo 19.1). The Law was not an instrument by which God saved them, so what was its purpose? Many Christians see Old Testament law as burdensome, oppressive, opposed to grace and freedom. Yet the only defect the New Testament finds with the Law is serious: it cannot empower people to keep it; but that objection does not object to law itself, as the apostle Paul explains:

God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Romans 8:3–4

While the Law cannot empower people to satisfy it, the Law nevertheless expresses God's "righteous requirement," a divine revelation that, by itself, is valuable. Discussion of the grace of the Law—it is

²⁶ A few examples (not all include those words) include Exo 32.7–14; 1 Sam 12.19–22; Psa 106; Isa 40.1–2; 43.22–25; 48.9–11; Ezek 20.40–44.

both grace-full *and* condemning—resumes shortly, but this survey of Old Testament covenants expressing grace continues.

Covenant with David

While the Sinai Covenant binds the people of Israel as a whole and reveals to them the way they are to live as God’s “treasured possession,” God enters a covenant with king David and his house to govern his people perpetually (2 Sam 7.8–17; Ps 89.3 uses the word “covenant” referring to this event). God’s choosing of David after rejecting king Saul expresses grace, as does the covenant’s provision for any Davidic ruler who “commits iniquity”: “I will discipline him with the rod of men, . . . but my steadfast love [*hesed*] will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul. . . . And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam 7.14–15).²⁷ God’s guarantee of this covenant trumps even the iniquity of a Davidic ruler. Obedience matters, is required, is important, but disobedience does not end such a covenant with the LORD. Such covenant faithfulness of God expresses divine grace.

Back to the Law

Grace accounts for all these covenants and for God’s keeping them whenever their recipients—whether Abraham, the children of Israel, or the house of David—fail to keep them. Of these, only the Sinai Covenant included developed law, the Law of Moses. Some New Testament passages speak of the Law in ways that cause many Christians to regard it—and often the Old Testament as a whole—quite negatively. Before this chapter discusses New Testament references to the Law and grace, it first considers how the Law is far from an opponent of grace but an expression of grace instead.

²⁷ Christians understand this covenant to be important from David’s time onward, with oracles that demonstrate its value from later prophets, such as Isaiah (chs. 9, 11), and its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, God’s perfect king and descendant of David (Matt 1.1; Luke 1.32).

Old Testament scholars have identified the Sinai Covenant as an example of the ancient Near Eastern international suzerain-vassal treaty. Such a treaty identifies the suzerain (overlord), rehearses his kind deeds to the vassal, which justify the vassal's gratitude and future loyalty, and then stipulates the vassal's response.²⁸ Scholars LaSor et al relate this treaty to the Sinai Covenant and the divine grace it expresses:²⁹

[T]he suzerain-vassal treaty form was adapted to serve the theological needs of this special relationship. Thus the Ten Commandments were never intended to institute a system of legal observances by which one could earn God's acceptance. Rather they are the stipulations of a covenant relationship anchored in grace. The prologue to the covenant³⁰ looks back to God's gracious deliverance and so forms a kerygma [kur-IG-muh], a proclamation of good news. Redemption has already been accomplished.

LaSor et al describe the Ten Commandments as "legal policy." Once Israel has accepted the covenant, such policy is then developed into law, which is exemplified in the "Book of the Covenant" of Exodus 20.23—23.33, in which "most of the stipulations of 20.1–7 are repeated . . . as specific laws."³¹

The Sinai Covenant also shares with the suzerainty treaty curses and blessings "invoked upon the vassal for breaking or keeping the covenant." For Israel, these fill Deuteronomy 28: blessings in 28.1–14, curses in 28.15–68. These express the gravity of covenant keeping and rather than contradict grace add to our understanding of what divine grace is and is not: it is wholly undeserved favor from God; it is not for

²⁸ The treaty also provided for the preservation of the treaty text and its public reading periodically and listed curses and blessings called upon the vassal's breaking or keeping of the treaty. These features and more are discussed in LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, 73–75.

²⁹ LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, 75.

³⁰ "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exo 20.2).

³¹ LaSor et al, 75

Christians today and never has been or will be a divine license for the sins of unbelief and disobedience. LaSor et al comment regarding especially Exodus 19.5 (see above, page XXX): “The covenant stipulations are not only the Lord’s will for a redeemed people; they are threats of his wrath should the people fail to keep them. Under the Mosaic covenant, Israel lived in the tension between these two affirmations.”³² Israel’s serious, serial covenant breaking, despite many prophets’ warnings and calls to repentance, led to the “ultimate curse of the exile.” And yet God shows his grace even further: he punished but did not abandon this habitually rebellious people, as prophecies express, some with special significance for the coming of Christ, such as Isaiah 40.1–5 [publisher: please set as verse, as follows]:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,

and cry to her

that her warfare is ended,

that her iniquity is pardoned,

that she has received from the LORD’s hand

double for all her sins.

A voice cries:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;

make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up,

and every mountain and hill be made low;

the uneven ground shall become level,

³² LaSor et al, 75

and the rough places a plain.

And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

Moses’ Law did not only regulate matters of worship (sacrifices and offerings, the priesthood, feasts, instructions for the tabernacle, applied later to the temple), but it also covered all of life, with moral law, social law, food law, purity law, and law for a future monarchy. “Law” simply does not correspond fully or accurately to this body of materials. The Hebrew word *Torah* serves our understanding much better. Not only does Torah refer to the traditional Five Books of Moses, but it also means more and other than “law”: “In Hebrew usage, *tora* means ‘instruction, discipline’ (in the sense of disciplining as well as chastening). Thus the word is used of the instruction given by a father or mother (Prov. 1:8; 3:1).”³³ “Law,” expressed in the Old Testament also with “statutes,” “judgments,” “commandments,” and “precepts,” is Torah, but Torah is also broader, including all manner of instruction that, with statutory law, aims for the flourishing of life, for *shalom*. This understanding of Torah and its law accounts for the joy ancient Hebrews had for receiving God’s law as part of his special covenant with them, as the psalmist expresses in the longest psalm in the Bible, 119, which “celebrates the gift of God’s Torah, or covenant instruction, as the perfect guide for life.”³⁴ These verses from Psalm 119 express the gratitude of devout Hebrews for God’s Law, or Torah, and contain nothing suggesting they found God’s Torah burdensome:

³³William Sanford LaSor, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederic Wm. Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, 1st ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1982), 150.

³⁴Note: Psalm 119, *ESV Study Bible*.

Blessed are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the LORD! (v 1)

Let your steadfast love [*hesed*] come to me, O LORD,
your salvation according to your promise;
then shall I have an answer for him who taunts me,
for I trust in your word.

And take not the word of truth utterly out of my mouth,
for my hope is in your rules.

I will keep your law [*tora*] continually,
forever and ever,
and I shall walk in a wide place,
for I have sought your precepts.

I will also speak of your testimonies before kings
and shall not be put to shame,
for I find my delight in your commandments, which I love.

I will lift up my hands toward your commandments, which I love,
and I will meditate on your statutes. (vv 41–48)

* * *

Oh how I love your law!
It is my meditation all the day.
Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,
for it is ever with me.
I have more understanding than all my teachers,

for your testimonies are my meditation.

I understand more than the aged,

for I keep your precepts.

I hold back my feet from every evil way,

in order to keep your word.

I do not turn aside from your rules,

for you have taught me.

How sweet are your words to my taste,

sweeter than honey to my mouth!

Through your precepts I get understanding;

therefore I hate every false way.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. (vv 97–105)

To this passage many more could be added, but another way to receive Torah as a nourishing gift and not as a slavish burden is to recognize how God expresses his grace toward needy humans through many of the statutes of Moses' Law. In his chapter titled "The Holy Scriptures," Don Brandeis, a Jew who became a Christian evangelist, praises these qualities of God's Law:³⁵

The statutes and laws which God gave recognized the dignity of men and regarded human life as sacred. These laws were designed to protect and aid the poor and underprivileged.

1. What other book ever had laws requiring that the wages of the workman should be paid, not quarterly, monthly, or weekly, but before sunset every night? (See Deuteronomy 24:15.)

³⁵ *The Gospel in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1962), 119–120.

2. What other book ever forbade the taking of a pledge from a widow for her indebtedness, or required a pawned garment to be returned to a poor man at night? (See Deuteronomy 24:12, 13.)
3. What other book ever had a law allowing the poor or the traveler to eat and fill their hands with fruit from any vineyard or orchard through which they passed, only forbidding their taking any vessels or bags with them to carry fruit away? (See Deuteronomy 23:24, 25.)
4. What other book had a law forbidding men to curse the deaf, or put a stumblingblock in the path of the blind? (See Leviticus 19:14.)
5. What other book had a law which gave every man an inheritance of land, and so secured it that even the king on his throne could not take it from him? . . . If he himself were compelled to part with his land, he could not sell it outright, but could redeem it at any time when able; and, if not, at the end of the jubilee period his children could go and claim their ancient inheritance. (See Leviticus 25:23, 25, 10, 13; also I Kings 21:1–3.)
6. What other book had a law forbidding the husbandman to reap the corners of the fields, or gather the gleanings of his harvest or the fallen grapes of his vineyard, but commanding him to leave them for the poor and the stranger? (See Leviticus 19:9, 10.)
7. What other book had a law which forbade the muzzling of the ox as he was treading out the corn, or which protected the birds upon their nests, and commanded men to show kindness to beasts in distress, even though they belonged to their enemies? (See Deuteronomy 25:4; 22:6, 7; Exodus 23:4, 5.)
8. What other book had a law which required men to love their neighbors as themselves, forbade them to cherish grudges against them, and prohibited malice, tale-bearing, revenge? (See Leviticus 19:16, 18.)

The studied opinion of Old Testament scholars closes this chapter's argument that God's grace abounds in the Old Testament, especially as expressed through his redemptive covenants with Abraham, Israel, and David, including the Law of Moses. LaSor et al write under the heading "Law and Grace" that, while many think only under the New Covenant are people saved by grace alone through faith,

Careful study of the Torah as well as the rest of the Old Testament shows that man (in the generic sense) is never saved by his own efforts—but only by the grace of God. Man deserves condemnation and death for his sin; God is graciously willing to accept man on the basis of his faith and to provide the means by which he is redeemed. . . . Paul so understood the basic covenant with Abraham, and declared that it was not annulled by the law given to Moses (Gal. 3:6–18). [Note 19 includes “. . . [S]alvation by works of the law is nowhere taught in the Old Testament. So the Old Testament was understood by Jesus and the apostles, including Paul—all of whom were Jews.”]³⁶

³⁶ The rest of this section (LaSor et al, 1982: 159–60) follows: “The author of Hebrews, discussing the Old Testament cultic acts, stated it succinctly: ‘For it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sin’ (10:4).

“Likewise, many Jews understood salvation to be by God's sovereign grace.

‘Rabbi Jochanan said: “Hence you may learn that man has no claim upon God; for Moses, the greatest of the prophets, came before God only with an appeal for grace.”’ (*Deut. Rab. wa’ethanan* 2:1)

‘It was not for their works that the Israelites were delivered from Egypt, or for their fathers’ works, and not by their works that the Red Sea was cloven in sunder, but to make God a name. . . . So Moses told the Israelites, “Not through your works were you redeemed, but so that you might praise God, and declare His renown among the nations.”’ (*Midr. Ps. 44:1*)

“Many Jewish prayers express dependence upon God for salvation:

‘Sovereign of all worlds! Not in reliance upon our righteous deeds do we lay our supplications before thee, but by reason of thine abundant mercies. . . . Our Father, our King, though we be void of righteousness and virtuous deeds, remember unto us the covenant with our fathers, and our daily testimony to thy Eternal Unity.’ (Rabbinic passages can be found in C.G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (New York: 1974), ch. 3. . . . The reference to ‘our daily testimony’ is to the Shema (Deut. 6:4f.), recited daily by religious Jews.)

“No magical concept of sacrifice is taught in the Old Testament. Man deserved to die for his sin, and in offering a sacrifice cast himself on the mercy of Yahweh. The sacrifice was a substitute for himself, and the blood of the

Obligations of the Law, the Sinai Covenant stipulations for showing loyalty to God, cohere with grace and neither undermine it nor lead necessarily to the non-biblical view of “salvation by works of the Law.”³⁷ They are obligations of and for the divine grace that saved patriarchs and the children of Israel no less than God’s greatest grace—the God-Man Jesus Christ—saves all who believe in him.

IV. Obligations of Grace in the New Testament

The burden of this chapter is, first, to demonstrate that God’s grace abounds in the Old Testament, even in the Law of Moses, and that the obligations such Old Testament grace imposes on these ancient believers is itself gracious. Second, it aims to demonstrate that God’s much more abounding grace through Christ likewise obliges believers to respond to divine grace with faith that issues in obedience (Rom 1.5; 16.26). Believers who acknowledge these truths will not defend abuses of grace that minimize or deny obligations of grace and twist grace into a license to sin.

This chapter proceeds by presuming that readers know that God’s grace through Christ saturates the New Testament, and it therefore develops only the topic of the obligations that inhere in grace, building on this marvelous proclamation: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph 2:8–9).³⁸

sacrifice covered his sin. The Israelite knew, as the prophets pointed out, that it was not the sacrifice that availed, but the covenant mercy of Yahweh (see Mic. 6:6–8; Isa. 1:11–20; Hos. 6:6).”

³⁷ See two other studies support this argument: Earnest F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law: A Study in Puritan Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1965) and Daniel P. Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible: Unfolding God's Plan for Humanity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2000). In his “Appendix: The Nature of the Mosaic Law,” Fuller exegetes three Pauline texts crucial to John Calvin’s view of the Law to support his thesis “that, contrary to Calvin, the law and gospel are a continuum rather than a contrast” (459).

³⁸ “[T]here is a sense in which the entire NT and much early Christian writing is about the grace of God in Christ and its outworking in the believer. This is so whether or not the Greek work *charis* is employed in a particular passage.” A. Casarella, “Grace,” in Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, eds. *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 433.

One gets some sense of what grace calls for from its recipients simply from noting the high number of commands, directions, exhortations, and the like that are distributed throughout the New Testament. Following the quotation of Revelation 22.14, “Blessed are they that do his commandments,” one reckoning counts some 1,050 commands in the New Testament for believers to obey. After eliminating duplicates, it classifies these under some 800 headings, such as, for example, “Four things to flee from: 1. Fornication (1 Cor. 6:18) 2. Idolatry (1 Cor. 10:14) 3. Hurtful lusts (1 Tim. 6:9-11) 4. Youthful lusts (2 Tim. 2:22).”³⁹ On the face of this evidence, one should rightly conclude that specific acts constitute proper responses to the gift of grace and in no way oppose grace. But examining a few texts in their contexts helps us understand obligations produced by grace.

Obligation in the Inaugural Address of King Jesus

We begin with Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount (5–7), which functions like Jesus’ presidential Inaugural Address, unfolding the philosophy and policy of his administration of the kingdom of the heavens.⁴⁰ Read as a sermon to the followers of Jesus within his ministry of making the kingdom of heaven accessible to all, its aim is, in the late Dallas Willard’s words, practical: “to help people come to hopeful and realistic terms with their lives here on earth by clarifying, in concrete terms, the nature of the kingdom into which they are now invited by Jesus’ call.”⁴¹ Within the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus delivers the Sermon after touring Galilee and Syria, teaching, “preaching the gospel of the kingdom and

³⁹ “New Testament Commands,” http://www.puritan-books.com/books/pdf/new_testament_commands.pdf. Accessed 2 October 2016.

⁴⁰ With the late Dallas Willard, I find it sad, even tragic, that the Sermon has suffered conflicting interpretations that cause it to exist in the minds of many as unlivable idealism or a blinding revelation of God’s perfection that drives one to despair outside Christ’s imputed righteousness, while others find it irrelevant to Christian living today, awaiting a yet-future millennial kingdom. The *ESV Study Bible* counters, “these teachings, rightly understood, form a challenging but practical ethic that Jesus expects his followers to live by in the present age,” Note: Matthew “5:1–7:29 *The Authoritative Message of the Messiah: Kingdom Life for His Disciples*.” I find Willard’s *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* the best exposition of the Sermon (from both Matthew and Luke): (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1998), 45, 105–106, 132–133.

⁴¹ Willard, 133.

healing every disease and every affliction among the people,” including “those oppressed by demons” (Matt 4.23–25). The kingdom is present, with its gracious, miraculous power, and its presence is the immediate backdrop for the Sermon. Willard, following nineteenth-century Jewish-Christian biblical scholar Alfred Edersheim, interprets the Sermon’s opening Beatitudes as attention-getting pronouncements of grace: “Blessed are the spiritual zeroes—the spiritually bankrupt, deprived and deficient, the spiritual beggars, those without a wisp of ‘religion’—when the kingdom of the heavens comes upon them” (5.2–11).⁴² After describing his disciples’ vocation as God-glorifying salt and light (in the form of a directive), Jesus asserts his authority as the one who fulfills the Law and the Prophets and who, by interpreting them properly, defines the exceeding righteousness required to enter this kingdom (5.12–20).⁴³ The Sermon then portrays this righteousness, the “kingdom heart of goodness,” which is “the kind of love that is in God.” It uses a series of antitheses—“You have heard it said” vs. “But I say to you”—to exemplify concretely the righteous behavior that arises from such a heart of goodness (5:21–48). The Sermon then warns: first, against false securities (ch 6); then against judging others—“‘condemnation engineering’ as a plan for helping people” (7.1–12); and finally about failing to do what the Sermon requires (7.13–27).⁴⁴

⁴² Willard, 100, 102.

⁴³ The topic “Law and the New Testament” is an industry within biblical scholarship and beyond the ability of this chapter to discuss; however, a relatively recent study offers an excellent entry: Frank Thielman, *The Law and the New Testament: The Question of Continuity* (New York, N.Y.: Crossroad, 1999), and especially chapter seven, “The Law in the New Testament: A Comparison of Five Voices,” 168–184. For the Law in Paul, including the New Perspective on Paul, see Frank Thielman, “Law,” in Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 529–542; and more recently, Don Garlington, *In Defense of the New Perspective on Paul: Essays and Reviews* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2005) and Robert H. Gundry, *The Old Is Better: New Testament Essays in Support of Traditional Interpretations* (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

⁴⁴ Willard, 138.

However one interprets the Sermon for living righteously in the present time,⁴⁵ its literary context in the Gospel is the grace of the open access into the kingdom of heaven, its preacher is Grace Incarnate, and its promise is fullness of life in this kingdom governed by the *agape* love of the Father (5.43–48; 7.12). Its conclusion expresses obligations of grace: first, in the contrast between, on one hand, those who profess allegiance to Jesus, along with those who confess having performed great works of spiritual power, and, on the other hand, those who actually do “the will of my Father who is in heaven” (7.21–23); then second, in the contrast between the wise and the foolish builders, both of whom heard the words of Jesus, while only the wise hearer does them (7.24–27). This discourse of grace ends with a sober warning not merely to hear and assent to Jesus’ teachings but to do them. Grace obliges those who receive it to respond with belief that obeys.

Obligation in the Enduring Love Command

Later in this Gospel, an expert in Jewish law asks Jesus what is the greatest of the law’s commandments, and Jesus quotes from the most important Jewish confession, the *Shema* (Deut 6.4–9), its most important directive: to love the Lord God with all one’s heart, soul, and might (Deut 6.5; Matt 22.37–38). To that Jesus adds the command to love one’s neighbor as oneself (Matt 22.39), from Leviticus 19.18, 34, which he follows with an echo of Matthew 5.17, saying both the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (Matt 22.40). Theologian P. Andrew Sandlin observes that finding “at the very heart of the law . . . such a requirement of passionate affection for God and . . . our fellow man” contradicts the notion that law is graceless and shows instead that God’s law “is anchored in a covenant

⁴⁵ Dallas Willard expositis it superbly. Among many questions scholars of the Sermon debate, one is the extent to which Jesus abrogates the Law of Moses, if at all. This worthy consideration of scholarship concludes that “Jesus . . . abrogated some Mosaic Law—the food Laws and possibly the divorce provisions—but this is not the dominant motif in his teaching. Jesus does not so much oppose the Law as claim to transcend it. He is ‘Lord of the Sabbath’ and claims the right to determine God’s will without reference to the Law.” D. J. Moo, “Law,” in Joel Green and Scot McKnight, eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 454–456.

relation that entails a reciprocity of affection and allegiance (Exodus 19:1–8; 24:1–8)—and neither without the other.”⁴⁶

Other key New Testament texts identify love as the fulfillment of God’s law and urge believers to show such love. James 2 draws upon Leviticus 19.15 in prohibiting showing favoritism to the rich and then draws on verse 18 by approving treating such a person with the respect that expresses love of neighbor (Jas 2.2–4, 8–9, 12). To show such partiality is sin because it judges another “with evil thoughts,” an opposite of loving one’s neighbor (Jas 2.4, 8). Then the apostle Paul, the apostle of grace, draws on the same text from Leviticus twice, in Romans 13.8–10 and Galatians 5.13–14. In the latter, love defines how believers are to use their freedom in Christ: through love “act[ing] as a slave” to one another. Certainly the typical translation—“through love serve one another”—conveys adequate meaning, but Paul has emphasized freedom positively (3.22–25 4.3, 8–9, 24–31)⁴⁷ and slavery negatively (4.1–7, 21–31) throughout the letter. Therefore, the paradox of freedom through slavery to one another in (or as) love merits notice. Freedom flows from the grace of God through Christ, and believers experience it as they serve others in love. Such freedom, Galatians commentator Douglas J. Moo points out, “is emphatically not . . . autonomy, the ‘free to be and do whatever we want’ attitude, which governs much modern thinking.”⁴⁸ Those today who deny that grace imposes any obligations seem to define freedom in this unbiblical way and miss the greatest fruit of grace expressed through believers’ lives: “faith working through love” (Gal 5.6). Instead, Moo continues, “The freedom that Christ has won for us (Gal 5.1) and to which we have been called by God (v 13) is a freedom to be what God originally made us to be.”

⁴⁶ “The Grace of Law and the Obligation of the Gospel,” *Reformation & Revival Journal: A Quarterly for Church Renewal* 14 (2005:1), 37.

⁴⁷ Freedom from evil powers, sin, and the law, the last especially for Gentile believers.

⁴⁸ Moo, Douglas J. *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Galatians*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Publishing Group, 2013), 343.

New Testament scholar Victor Paul Furnish's influential *The Love Command in the New Testament* lists this finding first among his major findings: "The New Testament commendation of love is formulated in a *command* to love."⁴⁹ Furnish laments that much discourse about New Testament love neglects that love is a commandment and that "for most of the New Testament writers the love command is . . . the *decisive* and *central* commandment" not just of Old Testament law but of "the claim of God . . . in the person and work of Jesus Christ."⁵⁰ Because it is commanded, such love "arises not from within the natural affections . . . nor from within the natural attractiveness (lovability) of the one to be loved, but from a source *outside*," namely, from God. "To formulate the summons to love as a commandment is to recognize that love in the Christian sense is *not* something 'spontaneous,' but something which must be repeatedly called forth and repeatedly obeyed. . . . [T]he Christian life is no settled state but a *vocation*, a *being called*, a *being claimed*. . . . a duty."⁵¹

Many other New Testament texts could be presented in a sampling of its over 800 imperatives directed at recipients of the grace of God in Christ,⁵² but consideration of these few establishes the greatest commandment and the greatest of virtues (1 Cor 13.13) as the greatest obligation grace imposes on true believers; and believers experience it as a duty, one empowered and made into an element of true

⁴⁹ (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1972), 199.

⁵⁰ Furnish, 200.

⁵¹ Furnish, 201.

⁵² Sandlin, 39–48, finds three principal headings under which New Testament passages show the gospel is "not only a message to be believed, but also . . . an obligation to be obeyed," or, in the phrase this chapter features, obligations of (gospel) grace. First are texts that express the notion of "the obedience of faith" (Rom 1.5; 10.3; 16.26; also 2 Thess 1.8; Acts 17.30; Lesslie Newbiggin, "[B]elief and obedience . . . are but two sides of one response [*Proper Confidence* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 65]); second are texts calling for repentance (Matt 3.1, 6, 8; Mark 1.4, 14–15; Matt 9.9–13; 11.20–24; Luke 13.1–5; 14.25–33; 24.44–49; Acts 2.38; 3.19; 11.18; 17.30; 20.21; 2 Pet 3.9: "While repentance is a gift of God that humans cannot conjure under their own power . . . , it is a fully human act, and God requires it." [44–45]); third are texts that express "a kingly gospel": "[T]he gospel is the message of the king, not merely the Savior—or, more positively, it is the message of the Savior-king. He atoned for the sins of humanity, rose from the dead for their justification (Romans 4.23), and commands (the word is not too strong) them to repent of their sins and follow him. The gospel is not only a message to be believed, it is a command to be obeyed" (47).

freedom by their own experience of divine love (Rom 5.5), but a duty, an obligation of grace, nonetheless.

V. Obligations of Grace in the Greco-Roman World of the New Testament

Charis, grace, is not a uniquely Jewish or Christian religious word but was used widely in non-religious contexts in the world of the New Testament, especially in the social system called patronage.

Grace and Its Obligation in the Patronage System

New Testament scholar David de Silva explains: in the first-century Roman world, “*grace* was not primarily a religious . . . word. Rather, it was used to speak of reciprocity among human beings and between mortals and God” expressed through networks of personal and public social relationships scholars call the patronage system.⁵³ Within this system, “*grace*” carries three meanings: first, the generosity of the giver, or benefactor, who would give for no reason other than helping another; second, the gift itself, the tangible expression of the benefactor’s generosity; and third, the recipient’s gratitude, the most important response to the benefactor.⁵⁴ This chapter concludes by looking at the New Testament experience of grace in light of its uses in Greco-Roman patronage, further demonstrating that the secular—as well as the distinctively Christian—experience of grace carried with it definite obligations for the recipients.⁵⁵

⁵³ *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Kindle location 1576, in ch. 3, “Patronage & Reciprocity: The Social Context of Grace.” This section is indebted to this study, especially chs. 3 and 4, “Patronage and Grace in the New Testament.”

⁵⁴ de Silva, Kindle location 1584. All citations to de Silva are to the Kindle location. Hereon only the four-digit location numeral is given in citations.

⁵⁵ Patronage as a topic for understanding the New Testament may be unfamiliar to readers not familiar with recent methods of biblical study drawing on anthropology and sociology, often joined to traditional studies in the

Today Westerners may think of patronage as the loyal habit of buying from certain merchants for a long time. Or we may know of patrons who pay to build costly performing arts facilities, museums, even hospitals, or who set up non-profit foundations to support orchestras, schools, and various services for needy persons. But apart from these kinds of generosity, we in the West like to see day-to-day life operate largely on a system of individual merit: we get promoted at work not because of a favor from someone but because we earned it. At the same time, we nod at the truism that often “it’s not what you know but who you know” that secures some valuable consideration, whether in employment or elsewhere. But in much of the rest of the world, such favors to members of one’s social group are considered normal and just, while Westerners condemn them unjust nepotism. The world of the New Testament is more like the non-Western world: biblical scholars who have studied patronage in the New Testament’s Greco-Roman world report that it ran on such favors, gifts, and benefactions—grace working in society and government—as much as or more than we like to think our world runs on merit and marketplace competition.⁵⁶ Personal patronage helped persons in need receive help from others wealthier and more powerful socially;⁵⁷ and public patronage helped cities and regions outfit their

classics and in social history. This section presents some results of such study that help us understand the New Testament, without digging into the details of theories and methods that yield them. De Silva’s work is an excellent, readable entry to understanding the social world of the New Testament.

⁵⁶ The standard study of the evidence for this system from inscriptions is Frederick W. Danker, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis, Mo.: Clayton Pub. House, 1982).

⁵⁷ Patronage presumes that patron and client are unequal in social rank and wealth; the patronage system is the chief way such persons would bond (apart from other kinds of relationships, such as contractual or enslavement). Such inequity—to an extreme—characterized the New Testament world. Classics scholar Albert Bell Jr. explains that “the Romans had no thought of government intervention to redistribute the wealth. They contrived a system, however, whereby enough money trickled down from the top to keep the lower classes pacified. Each wealthy man was expected to act as patron/protector to as many lower-class people as he could reasonably support. . . . Even slaves in wealthy households are known to have had clients, who hoped that the slave would use his influence with his owner to secure favors for the client.” The system existed during the Roman Republic and continued, with variations, through imperial times, as “an informal welfare system.” *Exploring the New Testament World* (Nashville, Tenn.: Nelson, 1998), 191–92. The similar bond between two persons of the same social rank is friendship. Etiquette for giving and receiving gifts among friends differs from the same for patrons and clients, because a friend-recipient is usually able to reciprocate the gift of a friend with a gift of equal value, which is not usually possible for a client.

navies, build their monuments, even relieve their food shortages, thanks to the generosity of wealthy citizens and officials of the Roman empire, including the emperor. Those serving in civic positions of authority or honor were expected to be benefactors, or patrons, and give significant public gifts as part of their job, much like the board members of Western non-profit organizations today are routinely expected to donate large sums to the organizations they advise and to bring in other donations.⁵⁸

Some ancients described grace using an influential image, “the picture of three goddesses, the three ‘Graces,’ dancing hand in hand in a circle.”⁵⁹ The first-century moral philosopher Seneca asks, “Why do the sisters . . . dance in a ring which returns upon itself? For the reason that a benefit passing in its course from hand to hand nevertheless returns to the giver; *the beauty of the whole is destroyed if the course is anywhere broken*, and it has most beauty if it is continuous and maintains an uninterrupted succession.”⁶⁰ The image, with Seneca’s interpretation, portrays Grace as an ongoing economy in which each element is important and has its established etiquette; stopping the circulation of Grace or ignoring etiquette mars this economy and its beauty of benefitting all who participate. This chapter focuses on the third of the three elements: the reception of and response to a gift: “Only a gift required is a gift well and nobly received. To fail to return favor for favor is, in effect, to break off the dance and destroy the beauty of the gracious act.”⁶¹ The ancients taught that all honorable persons must respond to a gift properly:

⁵⁸ Luke-Acts gives us both a negative and a positive use of the key word for “benefactor” [*euegetēs*]: negatively, of Gentile rulers, “those in authority over them [who] are called benefactors” (Luk 22.25), positively, of Jesus, who “went about doing good” [from *euergeteō*] (Acts 10.38).

⁵⁹ de Silva, 1588.

⁶⁰ de Silva, 1600; quotation from *De Beneficiis*, 1.3.2–5; Loeb Classical Library, emphasis added by de Silva.

⁶¹ de Silva, 1607.

- Gratitude toward the patron (giver, or benefactor) constituted justice, defined as giving to another his or her due. Such gratitude to a human benefactor was superseded only by justice due the gods.⁶²
- Ingratitude “was . . . the worst of crimes, . . . compared to sacrilege against the gods. . . . and censured as an injury against the human race, since ingratitude discourages the very generosity that is so crucial to public life and to personal aid.”⁶³
- Ingratitude violated not written laws but “unwritten customs and universal practice” and marked the ingrate as disgraceful.⁶⁴
- “Neglecting to return a kindness. . . and, most horrendous of all, repaying favor with insult or injury—these were . . . action[s] to be avoided by an honorable person at *all* costs.”⁶⁵
- “[A] reputation for gratitude was the best credit line a person could have . . . , since patrons and benefactors . . . would seek out those who knew how to be grateful.”⁶⁶
- This economy of grace was paradoxical: “Just as the favor was freely bestowed, so the response must be free and uncoerced,” yet gratitude “is at the same time necessary and unavoidable for an honorable person.”⁶⁷

And what form should such gratitude take? Gratitude for public patronage aimed at recognizing the patron publicly, honoring and increasing his or her fame, often through “memorializing the gift and the honors conferred” in a public inscription or monument or, exceptionally, in a statue of the giver.⁶⁸

⁶² de Silva, 1666.

⁶³ de Silva, 1673.

⁶⁴ de Silva, 1680.

⁶⁵ de Silva, 1688.

⁶⁶ de Silva, 1695.

⁶⁷ de Silva, 1709.

⁶⁸ de Silva, 1716.

“Increasing the fame of the giver is part of the proper return for a benefit, and a gift that one is ashamed to acknowledge openly in the hearing of all, one has no business accepting in the first place.”⁶⁹ For personal patronage, the recipient expresses gratitude first through “loyalty to the giver . . . owning one’s association with the giver even when fortunes turn, and it becomes costly”—Seneca lists numerous perils as such costs to remain loyal.⁷⁰ Evidence shows, nonetheless, that when a benefactor got into trouble, “the patron’s entourage of clients would evaporate.”⁷¹ Second, while proper loyalty may allow one to be a recipient, or client, of more than one patron, a grateful client will never have as patrons any who are rivals or enemies of an existing patron.⁷² Finally, a client should give something in return to the patron, although the point of the patron’s giving should not be to profit from the client. Clients will not likely be able to give gifts of equal or greater monetary value, but they can serve their patrons in other ways. Seneca advises clients (in de Silva’s words) to “return the favor in the best possible moment . . . in which the opportunity will be real and not manufactured” and thus fulfill the ideal ultimate aim of patronage, the bonding of two people.⁷³

Obligations of the Grace of Patronage and of the Grace of God in Christ

How does the New Testament message of grace relate to this already-existing understanding and practice of grace in the first-century non-Jewish and non-Christian Greco-Roman world?⁷⁴ De Silva helps answer this question:

⁶⁹ de Silva, 1729.

⁷⁰ de Silva, 1736. Seneca’s perils compare with Paul’s lists of the hardships he endured while being loyal to Christ: 1 Cor 4.9–13; 2 Cor 6.4–10; 11.23–31.

⁷¹ de Silva, 1743, citing Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, “Patronage in Roman Society,” 82, in Wallace-Hadrill, ed., *Patronage in Ancient Society* (London: Routledge, 1989).

⁷² de Silva, 1756. See James 4.4; 1 John 2.15–16.

⁷³ de Silva, 1764, citing *De Beneficii* 6.41.1–2.

⁷⁴ De Silva highlights the functioning of the patronage system in Jesus’ healing of the centurion’s servant in Luke 7.2–10 [1829–52]. The centurion is a local benefactor, having paid for the building of the synagogue. Having heard that Jesus heals (making him a broker of the favor of God, the patron), for the healing of his servant, the

As Jews and Gentiles came to hear Paul or other missionaries celebrate the marvels of God's grace made available through Jesus, the sole mediator between God [the Patron] and humanity [the clients], they would have heard it in the context of so many inscriptions and other public declarations of the beneficence of great figures. For such converts, *God's grace (charis) would not have been of a different kind than the grace with which they were already familiar*; it would have been understood as different only in quality and degree. Moreover, *they would have known that the reception of gifts "given freely" laid the recipients under obligation to respond with grace* to match (insofar as possible), with the result that much exhortation in the New Testament falls within the scope of directing believers to a proper, "grateful response" to God's favor.⁷⁵

The first line emphasized in this excerpt expresses perhaps the most important claim in this chapter: especially with regard to the obligation grace imposes, earliest Christians' understanding and experience of the grace of God in Jesus Christ compared closely with, if it was not the same as, their existing cultural understanding of grace from everyday life outside of Judaism and infant Christianity. When they became Christians, they already knew of the favor and gifts of a patron, including the assistance of a mediator who could connect them to a willing patron; and they knew that receiving a grace (gift) obligated them to respond with grace (gratitude, loyalty, service).

centurion seeks access to Jesus, which he does not have as a Gentile outsider. Jewish elders, whom he has benefited, are glad to return his favor by "brokering access" to Jesus. The Jewish elders, now mediators for the centurion, ask for the favor of Jesus (healing) on behalf of the centurion, whom they testify to be virtuous (appropriate for them as recipients of the centurion's favor). Jesus gives the gift of healing. "A local [Gentile] benefactor shows astonishing humility in his dealings with a transient Jewish healer . . . and . . . exceptional trust in Jesus' ability to grant God's favors."

⁷⁵ de Silva, 1825–1831, emphasis mine. De Silva cites Frederick Danker (*Benefactor*, 28–29), who notes that the masses of persons in the world of the New Testament would not read elite literature but could not avoid exposure to the many public inscriptions that expressed gratitude to public benefactors and to a Caesar's public proclamation of relief from oppressive legislation — that is, to public expressions of gratitude required by patronage.

The whole of the biblical Story fits the pattern of the patronage system: God is the benefactor and patron who gives humanity existence and paradise (Gen 1—2). From the Fall forward, humanity fails to revere and serve God, instead returning ingratitude and insult to God's gifts, justly stirring up his wrath. But God persists in giving grace, entering covenants with Abraham, Israel, and David that aim, ultimately, to redeem humanity and creation. Israel's repeated failure elicits God's promise to enter a new covenant (Jer 31.31–34), which he fulfills in Jesus Christ, who embodies God's gracious steadfast covenant love. The gospel of Jesus and the kingdom of God declares "a new manifestation of God's favor" that fulfills "longstanding promises made to Israel, presenting God as a reliable benefactor who has 'kept faith' with his historic body of clients (Lk 1.54–55, 68–75; Acts 3.26; Rom 15.8)."⁷⁶ Jesus' death for others demonstrates "'God's righteousness' (his character and virtue, Rom 1:16–17; 3:25–26), showing that God's generosity exceeds all expectations . . . and . . . God needs nothing from the sinner . . . to act in accordance with his own generous character."⁷⁷ Moreover, God demonstrates his greater beneficence (grace) by extending his covenant through Christ beyond Jews to include also Gentiles, on whom he pours out Holy Spirit just as he had first on Jews (Acts 11.15–18; Gal 3.1–5; 3.28–4.7). De Silva rightly interprets:⁷⁸

The experience of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the believers was understood as a gift from God that signified adoption into God's family (Gal 4:5–6), the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham (Gal 3:14), the restoration of peace and favor with God (Rom 5:5), and a pledge of the future benefits God has prepared and will confer. . . . (2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Eph 1:13–14). The vibrant

⁷⁶ de Silva, 1899.

⁷⁷ de Silva, 1936

⁷⁸ de Silva, 1911.

and vital presence of the Spirit was thus an important assurance to the church of God's favor toward them.

God's grace through Christ functions similarly in some ways as grace did typically in the patronage system of the New Testament era; however, it differs in important ways. First, God's grace through Christ exceeds even the "high-water mark of generosity set by Seneca": namely, for patrons to consider "even giving to the ungrateful" if the patron has resources to spare.⁷⁹ In contrast, "God shows the supreme, fullest generosity (not just what God has to spare!) toward those who are God's enemies (not just ingrates, but those who have been actively hostile to God)," showing kindness even "to the ungrateful [*acharistous*] and the wicked" (Luke 6:35).⁸⁰ God's grace contrasts with grace of the patronage system also in this second way: whereas a patron would expect an offending client to initiate some kind of reconciliation, "God does not wait" for offenders to approach him humbly but instead "sets aside his anger in setting forth Jesus," giving enemies an opportunity to escape God's wrath and to receive his great favor instead. Jesus, as a broker or mediator of access to God's favor, "is God's gift to the world, hence an evidence of God's initiative" in reconciling with enemies.⁸¹ Such an action by a patron is opposite the typical, reverse action of clients who regret their offense (and are not necessarily even enemies) and seek out a broker to ease their reconciliation with the patron, whom they continue to need. God's supreme generosity, especially in the death of Jesus for humanity, shows "his own reputation and *aretē*" [virtue] (2 Pet 1:3), a phrase similar to many in honorary inscriptions that testify to patrons' generosity.⁸² Thirdly, the quality and extent of God's generosity, even to enemies, contrasts with the grace typically given by patrons. God not only offers through Jesus peace to rebels, but he also

⁷⁹ de Silva, 1911.

⁸⁰ de Silva, 1920

⁸¹ de Silva, 1928. See Rom 2.33–26; 5.8; 8.3–4; 2 Cor 5.18, 21; 1 Jn 4.10.

⁸² de Silva, 1936. See also Rom 1.16–17; 3.25–27, where "righteousness" [*dikaiousynē*] functions as a virtue, here synonymous with "goodness." Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 144–46.

“offers to any who will come (thus in the form of a public benefaction), without prior scrutiny of the character and reliability of the recipients, the assurance of welcome into God’s own extended household (thus into a relationship of personal patronage)—even to the point of adoption into God’s family . . . and . . . of sharing the inheritance of the Son (which is exceptional even in personal patronage).”⁸³ God thus offers to all his personal patronage, and earliest Christians proclaimed this offer in the good news of Jesus to persons of every social level.⁸⁴ The Stoic philosopher Epictetus suggests God is a better patron than Caesar, but God’s offer to be such even to his enemies far exceeds the grace of Greco-Roman patronage.⁸⁵ “Romans 8:32 is perhaps the most poignant assurance of ongoing favor: What assistance or favor would God withhold from us, after having given up his Son on our behalf even before we were reconciled?”⁸⁶

The patronage system by itself specifies how the grace God through Christ obligates recipients to respond, and the New Testament, along with Christian experience of two millennia, agrees. This study shows that grace in the non-Christian first-century world carried the obligation to respond appropriately, as expressed in the image of the Three Graces. The New Testament affirms and nowhere objects to this widespread cultural understanding. “God has acted generously, and Jesus has granted great and wonderful gifts. These were not earned, but grace is never earned in the ancient world. . . . Once favor has been shown and gifts conferred, however, the result must invariably be that the recipient will show gratitude, will answer grace with grace. The indicative [“you are holy”] and the

⁸³ de Silva, 1940.

⁸⁴ “Jesus elevates those with whom no worldly minded person would think it advantageous to ‘network,’ namely the weak, the little ones, as also his brokers, and thus brokers of the one who sent Jesus (Mt 18.5; Mk 9.37; Luke 9.46–48). Not only does this remedy the wrong view of our brokering role as disciples, but it points us ever against our cultural wisdom to network with the needy—the unconnected!—as the way to connect with Jesus.” de Silva, 2058–65.

⁸⁵ *Dissertationes* 4.1.91–98, cited by de Silva, 1940.

⁸⁶ de Silva, 1958.

imperative [“be holy”] of the New Testament are held together by this circle of grace.”⁸⁷ Recipients of God’s grace are obligated to respond in these ways:

1. *With thanksgiving.* Following the precedent of ancient Israel (see Ps 92.1–4; 95.1–2; 103; 138), Christians worshiped through much thanksgiving (Eph 5.4, 19–20; Col 3.15, 17; 4.2; 1 Thess 5.18). They thanked God “for all progress in the churches . . . (Rom 1.8; 1 Cor 1.4–7; Col 1.3–4; 1 Thess 3.9), for every deliverance from hardship or trouble (2 Cor 1.9–11), and for the work that God was accomplishing through him (2 Cor 2.14).”⁸⁸
2. *By increasing God’s honor.* Seneca directs clients to “bear witness” to patrons’ favor “not merely in the hearing of the giver, but everywhere.”⁸⁹ Jesus predicts the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on his disciples so they would witness to him throughout the world (Acts 1.8). Witnesses of God’s grace will “praise . . . the honor of his generosity (*charis*) with which he graced (*echaritōsen*) us in the Beloved” (Eph 1.1, 6, transl. de Silva); they will “proclaim the excellencies [*aretas*, lit. “virtues”] of him who called [them] out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet 2.10); and they will do good that causes observers to “give glory [*doxazō*, may translate also as “honor”] to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt 5.16), even when slandered as evildoers, so critics “may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation” (1 Pet 2.11–12).
3. *By showing loyalty.* Even for non-Christian clients, the patron-client relationship expected clients to remain loyal to patrons, even when their fortunes reversed and continuing loyalty was costly. God’s grace obliges Christians to remain loyal to Christ, even when persecuted or encountering hardships. First Peter expects such loyalty from its audience, who likely “have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that

⁸⁷ de Silva, 2114.

⁸⁸ de Silva, 2121.

⁸⁹ de Silva, 2128, quoting *De Beneficii* 2.22.1.

perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ,” whom they have not seen, yet love and believe in. (1 Pet 1.6–8; also Jas 1.12). Paul recounts the high cost of his loyalty to Christ in lists of hardships (1 Cor 4.9–13; 2 Cor 6.3–10; 11.21–12.10) and other losses he has endured: “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. . . . For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish” (Phil 3.6–8). And why? “. . . because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him” (vv 8–9). Paul willingly lost all the perks of his high position in Judaism in exchange for “the inexpressible gift” (2 Cor 9.15) that Christ is.

Loyalty also entails not “courting God’s enemies as potential patrons as well.”⁹⁰ James rebukes such disloyalty, using sharp language that reminds one of prophetic rebuke of Israel’s disloyalty to the LORD: “You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (Jas 4.4). Both patronage and friendship obligated participants to loyalty. And loyalty entails trust: For 1 Peter’s audience, such trust looked to deliverance to come at Christ’s Second Coming (1 Pet 1.5, 13), while for Paul, he tried to focus the faith of Gentile Galatian believers on Jesus alone—and Jesus plus various Jewish religious practices, such as circumcision— as their mediator to God’s favor.⁹¹ “Jesus’ own stability—the fact that he is the same” “yesterday, today, and tomorrow” merits stable trust.⁹²

4. *By acts of service.* Clients would usually not be able to reciprocate with a gift of the same monetary value, but they could return grace for grace through acts of service that would benefit

⁹⁰ de Silva, 2160.

⁹¹ de Silva, 2167. The gift (grace!) of the Holy Spirit was proof enough of God’s favor, and they had already received him before starting to observe parts of the Jewish Law. (Gal 3.1–5)

⁹² de Silva, 2174, and Heb 13.7–8.

their patrons. Similarly, for Christians “good works, acts of obedience and the pursuit of virtue are held together inseparably from [in the sense of “with”] the reception of God’s favor and kindnesses. A life of obedience to Jesus’ teachings and the apostles’ admonitions—in short, a life of good works—are not offered to gain favor from God, but nevertheless they *must* be offered in grateful response to God. To refuse these is to refuse the patron (who gave his all for us) the return he specifically requests from us.”⁹³

Believers must obey God throughout their living of the Christian life, as the New Testament directs often,⁹⁴ not as actions by which we merit God’s grace but as an inseparable part of the gratitude every recipient of grace owes its giver. Hebrews 12:28 would have made sense to any first-century client: “Since we are receiving an unshakable kingdom, let us show gratitude” (*echōmen charin*, lit. “have grace, or gratitude” Heb 12.28).⁹⁵

This verse from the gospel song “Love Lifted Me” expresses the fullness of gratitude to which grace obligates believers and in a spirit of joy that itself witnesses to grace:

All my heart to Him I'll give, ever to Him I'll cling,
In His blessed presence live, ever His praises sing.

⁹³ de Silva, 2177.

⁹⁴ Under the heading “V. Obeying God,” Walter Elwell’s *Topical Bible* lists these additional New Testament calls to obedience or descriptions of exemplary obedience: Matt 7.21; 28.19–20; Mark 3.35; John 8.51; 12.26; 13.15–17; 14.15, 21, 23; 15.5, 10, 14; 17.6; 21.15–17; Acts 4.19–20; 5.29, 32; 6.7; Rom 6.17; 16.19; 1 Cor 15.10; 2 Cor 7.15, 19; 9.13; 10.2, 5; Gal 5.7; Eph 2.10; 6.1–9; Col 3.20–24; 4.12; Phil 2.12–13; James 1.22, 25; 2.14–20; Heb 5.8–9; 11.8; 12.9; 13.15–16; 1 Pet 1.2, 14–16, 22; 4.17; 1 John 2.3, 5–6; 3.21–22, 24; 5.1–3; 2 John 6, 9; Rev 2.26; 3.8; 12.17; 14.12; 21.7; 22.14. Walter Elwell, ed. *The Hendrickson Topical Bible: A Survey of Essential Christian Doctrines* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, copyrighted to Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1991).

⁹⁵ de Silva’s translation, 2108.

Love so mighty and so true merits my soul's best songs;
Faithful, loving service, too, to Him belongs.⁹⁶

VI. Conclusion

This chapter began by showing that John 1.17—“For the law was given by Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”—contrasts the Old Testament grace of the Law with the much greater grace God expresses through the giving of Jesus Christ (without opposing the two). It then made visible the many expressions of God’s grace in Creation and in God’s covenants with Noah, pertaining to all humanity; and covenants with Abraham, Israel, and David, for the people God chose to show and mediate his grace to all peoples. Its probing of the Covenant with Israel also showed that the Law of Moses, the Torah, itself expressed God’s grace. This exploration of grace in the Old Testament showed that covenant grace carried with it the obligation that all recipients of grace respond to God’s gifts with faith and obedience. Turning to the New Testament, this chapter presumes readers know sufficiently the amazing grace that God’s ultimate gift of salvation through Jesus Christ is and focused instead on the obligation such grace carries: observing that the New Testament expresses some 800 imperatives for believers, the chapter probed obligation expressed first in the Inaugural Address of King Jesus (the Sermon on the Mount) and second in the Love Command, which exemplifies significant continuity between Old Testament Law and the gospel of Jesus. The brief introduction to obligations of grace in the Greco-Roman system of patronage shows that first-century believers brought to their Christian faith an existing cultural notion of grace that coheres largely with New Testament teaching. Grace given in the patronage system expected clients to return grace; thus, culture teaches that grace obligates its

⁹⁶ Verse 2. Lyrics by James Rowe, 1865–1933; music by Howard E. Smith, 1863–1918; copyright 1940 by Mrs. Howard E. Smith, assigned to John T. Benson, Jr.

recipients to respond properly to gifts; and this expectation coheres with the New Testament. The uniqueness of Christian grace lies not in exempting recipients of divine grace from responding with gratitude (which may be expressed in various ways, including obedience to the giver, God); clearly the New Testament prescribes that recipients of God's grace through Christ respond with gratitude. The uniqueness of New Testament grace lies instead in God's offering (1) his grace to enemies, even initiating this gift to them before they seek to reconcile with him; (2) an unparalleled quality and extent of grace: peace, reconciliation, forgiveness, adoption into his extended family, even sharing in the inheritance of his Son; (3) his ongoing personal patronage to all who believe, without regard for any other qualifying characteristics. The supreme deity seeking personal relationships with persons of any social standing, whether wealthy patrons or poor clients, is otherwise unknown in Hellenistic religions, but it is at the heart of the imperative of Jesus to take the gospel to the nations (Matt 28.19–20; Luke 24.47; Mark 16.15). Such grace obligates a response of grace that fits both the Giver and the gifts. "Gratitude" encompasses all appropriate responses, among which the New Testament calls for these often: thanksgiving, increasing God's honor through witness and praise, loyalty, and acts of service that include all manner of obedience. In the way of grace, none of these is offered to gain favor from God, but they *must* be offered in order to live by grace. Any who would diminish or deny such obligations of grace, however good their motives, nevertheless undermine and oppose the biblical grace they would advocate.⁹⁷

With eyes wide open to the mercies of God,
I beg you, my brothers [and sisters],
as an act of intelligent worship,

⁹⁷ Other chapters in this book interact with advocates of hyper-grace who do, or appear to, diminish or deny obligations of grace. Michael L. Brown likewise interacts with these in two excellent works: *Hyper-Grace: Exposing the Dangers of the Modern Grace Message* (Lake Mary, Fla.: Charisma House, 2014); and *The Grace Controversy: Answers to 12 Common Questions* (Lake Mary, Fla.: Charisma House, 2016).

to give him your bodies,
as a living sacrifice,
consecrated to him and acceptable by him.

Romans 12.1 PHILLIPS⁹⁸

⁹⁸ J. B. Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English* (London, UK: Geoffrey Bles, 1960).