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1 GRASPING THE FAVOR OF GOD

I walked into the student center just as she walked out. I couldn't help but look, and felt an immediate attraction to this lovely young woman. Yet I was a second semester freshman, and I soon discovered she had been there longer than I. Could this slight difference in age put an end to the dreams I already had? I knew it might stop her, but I would not let it stop me.

Happily, it did not stop either of us. Our dates to the local Sonic drive-in and our late-night walks around the campus became frequent. The favor of God was kicking in.

By the next semester, I found myself falling in love with her. Howard Payne University in Brownwood, Texas, served as the place where God brought together a west Texas girl with this south Texas boy. On December 31, 1976, Jeana and I got married.

Although not all of our 28 years of marriage have been easy by a long shot, we never considered an alternative. Not once did we stubbornly refuse to work out our issues or allow killer conflicts to burrow deep into our hearts and begin their destructive work.

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ven as I write this book, I'm happy to report that God has given both of us a renewal of honeymoon love. I've never experienced more unconditional, sacrificial, and willing love for my wife. I sense that we're walking in an unusual season of marital life, and it thrills me. After almost 29 years together, we are empty nesters — and we love it. We loved being together before the kids ever came along, and we love it now that they've left.

What causes something so wonderful as this? What enables us to enjoy it? Nothing but the favor of God.

◆◆◆ FAVOR AND YOUR MARRIAGE ◆◆◆

What about your marriage? Does love flourish? Do you still feel honeymoon love, or does that seem impossible? The favor of God can change any marriage. You might not have started out right, or it may not be right even now, but His favor can change everything.

When we started having children, Jeana felt very concerned about creating an environment that would encourage our kids to love the Lord and His church. As a pastor's kid herself, she knew that many PKs (pastor's kids) struggle on both counts. Even before our children were born (and continuing yet today), we prayed that the Lord would give our boys a heart for God.

When people would ask, "How can I pray for you and your family?" I would always reply, "Pray that my sons will grow up loving Christ and loving the church." And you know what? The Lord has answered those prayers! So far as we know, Josh never had a moment of rebellion against God. Today, he's married to a lovely girl named Kate who also loves Christ. Nick is beginning seminary, studying to be a pastor. He just married a wonderful woman named Meredith.

Did I deserve such blessings? Hardly. So why does one faithful pastor, who loves his children at least as much as I do, lose two of his kids? Why am I so bountifully blessed? What prompts something like that? Nothing but the favor of God.

◆◆◆ FAVOR AND FRIENDS ◆◆◆

Over the years, God has blessed us with many great friends. We love going out to dinner with them, and God has been pleased to advance His kingdom through our friendship. When our friends walk through challenges, we've been there for them, and they have been there for us. I must not forget my long-time friends with whom we had some meaningful moments together in seminary. It's indescribably wonderful to have quality friends who also serve God.

Why have we been able to develop such good and healthy friendships, when so many pastors I know have not? Is it because we share a few things in common? Or is something else going on here? What makes great friendships like these possible? I believe it is nothing but the favor of God.

I relate these incidents for no other reason than to illustrate the huge difference that enjoying the favor of God can make to your life. The favor of God is not for pastors alone, but also for truck drivers, school teachers, grocery clerks, engineers, professional models, fast food cooks, salespeople, factory workers, newspaper reporters, advertising executives, postal workers, and day care providers. Favor falls on men and women, boys and girls. It's for moms and dads, aunts and uncles, grandmas and grandpas. It's for single people and married people, urban people and country people. It affects Republicans and Democrats and Libertarians and independents.

◆◆◆ WHAT IS THE FAVOR OF GOD? ◆◆◆

How can favor make a difference to your life? To find the best answers to those key questions, we have to turn to the Word of God. You will be amazed at the answers you find there!

NO MATTER WHO
YOU ARE, WHERE YOU
LIVE, OR WHAT YOU
DO FOR A LIVING, YOU
CAN SET YOURSELF UP
TO RECEIVE — AND BE
BLESSED OUT OF YOUR
SOCKS BY THE FAVOR
OF GOD.



I began scouring the Bible a couple of years ago to learn all I could about the favor of God. The first thing that surprised me was how often the subject came up in both Old and New Testaments. Many crucial points in biblical history turn on whether someone did or did not receive the favor of God. If you read the Book of Genesis, you will see the favor of God popping up at the most important places and times.

Consider the very first time in the Bible that we see favor come into play:

In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor.¹

The word translated “favor” here is the Hebrew term *ra ab*, which means to gaze steadily with interest or to regard with favor. The word never refers to a casual or disinterested glance. When God grants someone His favor, He takes a keen and lively interest in that person. He observes, watches, studies, and lovingly fixes His steady gaze on the one so favored. What an amazing privilege!

So then, the favor of God is when God fixes His gaze upon you, even the details of your life.

People want to make a difference with their life. If you want your life to make a difference, change the world of business, and make your life count for eternity, you will not be able to maximize your life without finding the favor of God.

Why did God look with favor on Abel’s offering, but not on Cain’s? We’re not explicitly told. God always wants our best, however, and God always honors wholehearted obedience. I believe God favored Abel because of two things. First, he gave God the firstborn, the best. Second, he did so with an obedient spirit. God tends to show His favor to those who eagerly obey Him.

Conversely, Cain did not choose to do right, and so presented God an unacceptable offering. He ignored God's admonition to do what was right. In the end, he committed the Bible's first murder. And so the Bible remembers Cain as someone who "*was of the evil one,*"² and contrasts him with his "*righteous*" brother.³

◆◆◆ FINDING GOD'S FAVOR ◆◆◆

When you think of Noah and the ark, what comes to mind? Perhaps you picture cute little children's books filled with cuddly animals and a quaint little boat, or an adorable, soft mobile hung over the crib of an infant. Only rarely, it seems, do most of us picture a devastated world devoid of all life except for one seasick man and his woozy family, all of whom spent almost a year bobbing on a swollen sea with a zoo full of equally seasick wild animals.

Remember the story? Humankind had grown so brutish and wicked that God was determined to wipe out the entire evil race. He decided to send a flood that would take the lives of everyone on earth — well, almost everyone. The Bible says simply, "*Noah, however, found favor in the eyes of the LORD.*"⁴

The word translated "favor" in this passage is not *sa ah*, but *ben*. This is the Hebrew word most often translated "favor" in our English versions, and it means friendly regard, approval, or gracious kindness. It is used to describe any free act of kindness toward another. The word usually describes a strong personal relationship, often between a superior and a subject.

In the Bible, "to find favor" means to receive the attention and respect of another, and to receive great benefits from that person. The word often has the sense of showing kindness to the poor and needy.

THE FAVOR OF GOD
CAN ACTUALLY MAKE
THE DIFFERENCE
BETWEEN LIFE AND
DEATH AND NOBODY
KNEW THAT BETTER
THAN NOAH.



Why did Noah receive God's favor? Again, we're not explicitly told, but immediately after learning that God bestowed His favor on Noah, we read that "*Noah was a righteous man, blameless among his contemporaries; Noah walked with God.*"⁵ Apparently, God loves to bestow His favor upon that kind of person.

God favored Noah, along with his family. They escaped the rampaging waters of the flood, while everyone else on earth — all those who did not receive God's favor — died in the violent, swirling deluge.

The Hebrew word *ben* comes from the verb *hanan*, and that little verb lives on in many of the names we hear every day. You heard it the last time you called for Hannah, or Anna, or Ann. You recall it whenever you speak the name Nancy or Anita or Annette, or John or Jean or Juan or Hans or Jan or even Ivan. Every one of those names descends directly from *hanan*, and should remind us of the wonderful favor of God.

◆◆◆ FINDING FAVOR IN THE NEW TESTAMENT ◆◆◆

The New Testament also tells us about the favor of God. At the very beginning of the Gospel of Luke, an old woman named Elizabeth finds out that she is going to have a son, even though for decades she had not born any children, and for decades already had been too old to get pregnant.

"The Lord has done this for me," the ecstatic woman declared. *"He has looked with favor in these days to take away my disgrace among the people."*⁶

The word translated "favor" here is the Greek term *epicidon*, which literally means "to fix one's gaze upon or to concern oneself with." It is very similar in meaning to the Hebrew term *sa ah* that we already considered. God fixed His eyes upon Elizabeth and granted her the desire of her heart, a son — a child who would grow up to become John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus.

The favor of God can accomplish jaw-dropping miracles! Could you use one? If so, then perhaps you may want to learn all you can about the favor of God.

One New Testament word gets translated “favor” about six times. That word is *charis*, as found in Luke 1:30, which describes an encounter between an angelic messenger and a young woman named Mary.

“Do not be afraid, Mary,” the angel says, *“for you have found favor with God.”* Mary had found such great favor, in fact, that God chose her from all the women in the world — and from all of human history — to bear the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ.

The same remarkable word describes Jesus himself as He grew up: *“And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and with people.”⁷*

Would you like to enjoy that kind of favor? The kind that set Mary apart from all other women throughout all history? It also portrays the kind of favor that characterized the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. You don’t need angelic or miraculous events to be favored; God can use the smallest details of your life for tremendous favor.

◆◆◆ FAVOR AND GRACE ◆◆◆

The idea really isn’t so outlandish as it might seem, for that kind of favor. The word *charis* appears in the Bible more than a hundred other times in the form of “grace.” In fact, “favor” and “grace” are closely related. We see this even in the Old Testament. Remember Noah?

While most English translations say that he found “favor” in the eyes of God, some say that he found “grace” in the eyes of God. So what’s the difference? God offers His “favor” and “grace” to those who really want it. Do *you* want it? If we look at “secular” history (I tend to think of all history as bound up in God’s overall plan!), we see innumerable examples.

WITHOUT ANY
QUESTION AT ALL,
THERE IS A STRONG
CORRELATION AND
RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN GRACE AND
GOD’S FAVOR. ANY
MEASURE OF GOD’S
FAVOR THAT COMES
TO YOU OR ME, TAKES
PLACE FOR ONE
REASON ALONE: THE
GRACE OF GOD



In our own time, Beverly LaHaye became heartsick over the direction our country was taking morally, and so founded Concerned Women for America, the largest women's organization in the country. I dare say the efforts of CWA helped put the debate about morals and ethics on the national table for discussion. Beverly took on a difficult task and her willingness to do so was a factor in being favored by God. She was favored for a reason.

THE FAVOR OF
GOD IS BOTH
MYSTERIOUS AND
TANGIBLE.



At least one other word also gets translated "favor" in the New Testament. *Dektas* means favor, acceptable, or welcome, and appears in passages such as 2 Corinthians 6:2: "I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation" (NIV). This kind of favor is offered to all, right now, regardless of heritage or background or personal history. God extends this kind of favor to *you* right now

and says, "If you have never accepted my offer of salvation, now is the time. Don't delay. Don't put it off! All you must do to enjoy my favor in salvation is to accept it, free and without cost to you, right at this very moment."

In His great grace, God right now is extending His favor to you and me, inviting us to place our faith in His Son, Jesus Christ, who died for our sins and who rose again to bring us salvation. Have you experienced this side of God's favor? If not, I urge you to discover what it's all about. Let the favor of God smile upon you — and keep *you* smiling for all eternity! If you've already taken this step of faith and have started down the interstate of God's favor, I invite you to keep moving with me. Believe me, the wonders ahead are more than worth the trip!

◆◆◆ WHAT DOES FAVOR DO? ◆◆◆

What happens to those who personally experience the favor of God? What kind of benefits do they receive? How does the favor of God fill their lives with blessing after blessing?

Let me try to entice you with a few examples of what it means to find and enjoy God's favor. Then you tell me if it's worth pursuing with all your strength.

- Those who receive God's favor also receive "honor," along with the promise, *"He does not withhold the good from those who live with integrity."*⁸
- God's favor firmly establishes the work of a person's hands.⁹
- God's favor helps us endure tough times.¹⁰
- God's favor protects "the righteous" like a shield.¹¹
- God's favor translates to great power in prayer.¹²
- God's favor turns even one's enemies into unexpected allies.¹³

Would you like to be honored by the Creator of the universe? Would you like to enjoy *all* of the good things that God wants to give you? If so, then you need to find and enjoy God's favor.

- Does your life feel a bit unsteady, a little shaky, and not very secure? If so, then you need to change all of that by finding and enjoying God's favor.
- Or are you going through some tough times? Do you feel under the rain clouds, in the middle of a downpour, or trapped in the snarling winds of a hurricane? If so, then you need the favor of God.
- Do you need protection? If so, then you need the favor of God.
- Would you like to see more of your prayers answered? If so, then you need the favor of God.
- Could you use some help from an unlikely source? If so, then you need the favor of God.

◆◆◆ THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SUCCESS AND FAILURE ◆◆◆

Finding the favor of God can mean the difference between success and failure, joy and heartache, laughter and tears, even life and death. Neither you nor I can order God to give us the full range of His favor. We also cannot manipulate Him into a corner so that He has no choice but to grant it to us. He grants His favor according to his love and grace and not necessarily according to our achievements or personal record of godliness.

Yet, as one Bible hero shows us, we can also align ourselves with God's purposes and God's desires that we place ourselves in a prime position to experience God's favor. That should give us great hope!

◆◆◆ ATTRACTING GOD'S FAVOR: DAVID ◆◆◆

The life of David shows us that while we can never "deserve" or "earn" God's favor, we can live in a way that tends to attract His favorable attention.

David began life as the youngest and least regarded son in a family of little to no national influence. In fact, David had earned so little respect by his early teen years that his father didn't even include him when the prophet Samuel — a figure of enormous national prominence — stopped by the family homestead to see all of Jesse's sons.¹⁴ Yet despite David's apparent unimportance, God tapped him to succeed Saul as king of Israel.

Had David earned such a privilege? Clearly, not. Then why did God pick him over every other young man in Israel? Why not pick Jonathan, the son of Saul and rightful heir to the throne, who became David's closest earthly friend? Jonathan, after all, possessed many of the same godly qualities that David demonstrated. So why was David chosen and not Jonathan?

Chalk it up to the favor of God. That, at least, is the New Testament's take on the subject. In a massively politically incorrect summary of Israel's history, Stephen, the first martyr of the church, described David simply as one who "found favor in God's sight."¹⁵

Stephen could have used many other terms to picture the great David: king, prophet, warrior, poet, singer, conqueror of Jerusalem, ancestor of Jesus.

Stephen chose none of those terms. Instead, he summed up the life of David with a single thought: the man enjoyed God's favor.

We don't have to take Stephen's word for it, of course. Jesus himself did a pretty good job of summing up David's life and the favor he enjoyed after David declared his desire to build a permanent home for the ark of the covenant. God instructed the prophet Nathan to tell David:

I took you from the pasture and from following the sheep to be ruler over my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have destroyed all your enemies before you. I will make a name for you like that of the greatest in the land. . . . I will give you rest from all your enemies.

The LORD declares to you: The LORD himself will make a house for you. . . . I will raise up after you your descendant, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. . . . Your house and kingdom will endure before Me forever, and your throne will be established forever.¹⁶

Isn't our God amazing? He really wants to favor you!

Many centuries later, Stephen looked at the life of David and proclaimed that the king owed everything good in his life to the favor of God. Just consider how the gracious, undeserved favor of God had blessed David so tremendously:

- God took a boy who "followed" sheep and turned him into a man who "ruled" the Lord's own people.
- God went with David wherever he went, even into the hard and difficult places.
- God caused the defeat of all David's enemies and gave him rest from the battlefield.

- God, by His own choice, decided to build a “house” for David, when David had expressed a desire to build a “house” for God.
- God would make sure that David’s kingdom never ended.

◆◆◆ GRACE UNMERITED ◆◆◆

What could such favor be other than God’s grace being demonstrated? How would David have seen it, other than as a gracious gesture from his Almighty Lord?

Did David “earn” any of this gracious treatment? No. Did he receive this abundance of divine favor as payment in return for good deeds? No. God’s favor can’t be earned, nor can it be received as a wage for labor performed. David knew this — and sadly, he would see the flip side to this truth many years later.

One sad day, David committed adultery with another man’s wife, and then arranged for his murder. The Lord held David fully accountable for his reprehensible actions and reminded David both of His favor and how the king had so badly abused it:

I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave your master’s house to you and your master’s wives into your arms, and I gave you the house of Israel and Judah, and if that was not enough, I would have given you even more.

Why then have you despised the command of the LORD by doing what I consider evil? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife as your own wife — you murdered him with the Ammonite’s sword. Now therefore, the sword will never leave your house because you despised Me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own wife.³⁷

To my mind, the saddest line of all appears after the Lord recounts the staggering favor He had shown to David before his affair. “*And if that was not enough,*” the Lord says mournfully, “*I would have given you even more.*” What amazing favor did David forfeit by his foolishness? We’ll never know.

David understood that he could not demand God's favor. When the child born through his adultery fell gravely ill, and Nathan the prophet declared that the little boy would surely die, "David pleaded with God for the boy. He fasted, went home, and spent the night lying on the ground. . . . and would not eat anything."¹⁸ Later, to a bewildered cadre of servants, David explained his behavior: "While the baby was alive, I fasted and wept

because I thought, 'Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let him live.'"¹⁹

This is the "perhaps" of God's favor. In this case, the "perhaps" came up a "no." The child died.

All along, David knew that he could never demand divine favor. Yet still he asked for it. How did the king respond when this time God did not show David His favor? What did David do when his infant son died? Did he curse God? Scream at Him? Accuse Him, berate Him, scorn Him, or abandon Him? No. A man who has tasted the favor of God knows there is nothing better, even when that favor eludes him for a time. Instead, the Bible says, "Then David got up from the ground. He washed, anointed himself, changed his clothes, went to the LORD'S house, and worshiped."²⁰

That's what a man who has experienced the favor of God does, even when he confesses his deep and terrible guilt. Those who have tasted God's favor can never get enough of that favor. So they pray for it, hope for it, and look for it. They do so not because they deserve it, but because they know God is gracious.

David, the Bible tells us, was a man after God's own heart.²¹ Although Scripture does not say so, the reverse seems just as true to me — the Lord was a God after David's own heart. When those two things come together, I doubt God's favor can lag far behind.

HAVE YOU EVER
CONSIDERED HOW
MUCH FAVOR YOU MISS
WHEN YOU FAIL TO BE
WHAT GOD WANTS YOU
TO BE? HAVE YOU EVER
WONDERED WHAT YOUR
LIFE WOULD BE LIKE IF
GOD SET HIS GAZE ON
YOU FOR A LIFETIME?



◆◆◆ PRAYING FOR GOD'S GRACIOUS FAVOR ◆◆◆

It's good to get in on the open "secret" of God's good favor. It encourages our hearts to know that it exists, that it has blessed and continues to bless God's people, and that it can clear away the darkest clouds and roll back the loudest thunder.

But in another way — so what? How can knowing about God's favor benefit us right now, right here, right where we are? If that favor is an expression of God's grace and something we can't earn, work for, or deserve, then what *practical* difference can knowing about it make in our day-to-day lives?

I think the apostle Paul would like to handle that one. In telling a few friends about some rough times he endured in one far-flung corner of the world, he once let slip another little "secret" about God's gracious favor. Paul didn't merely want them to know of God's existence but, instead, he implored them to *pray for it!*

Paul told his friends that God had not only delivered him from a terrible end, but that he expected him to continue to do so in whatever adventures awaited him. He told them that on God "*we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us.*" How could Paul entertain such a hope? Where did he muster the confidence that God would continue to deliver him? It grew in his heart. Paul told his friends, "*As you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.*"¹²

Yes, God's favor is a gracious gesture, free and undeserved and unearned — on the house, so to speak. By his example, Paul urges you and me to *pray for it!* This is not some creaky old theological relic to be dusted off and appraised at an antique show. Instead it is a living, dynamic, potent force for good that Paul thinks we should be calling down on one another.

It is called "favor," the favor of God; that incredible experience when God fixes His gaze upon you, even the details of your life.

So, just one last question, and I'm done.

Are we?

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