

Romans 11:6

Pastor: Romans 11:6: Grace is no longer on the basis of works.

“But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.”

Far too frequently, one will encounter a Christian teacher or Bible reader quote Romans 11:6, “And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace” (NIV),¹ as though redemption in the period of the Tanach or Old Testament could be acquired via human action, and that the period of the Apostolic Scripture or New Testament offers redemption solely by God’s grace. The claim that is sometimes made, “Grace is no longer on the basis of works,” seems *most out of place* for people who are truly familiar with the overall Biblical narrative, reading the Scriptures holistically—because it seems to originate from the assumption that “grace” was something that people had *to actually earn* in the pre-resurrection era.

Most well-spoken theologians do recognize that God’s lovingkindness, grace, mercy, and favor toward His people have been freely available in any generation since the creation of humanity. It is highly useful to consider the emphasis of Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, in their book *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, who rightly state “that nowhere in the Old Testament is it suggested that anyone was saved by keeping the Law.”² (At most, Tanach verses that might be interpreted this way [e.g., Deuteronomy 6:25] present a hypothetical scenario that is humanly impossible, requiring God’s grace and mercy for deliverance.)

To review, the Apostle Paul’s remark about grace (*charis*, χάρις) has obviously been made within a much larger series of statements. Previously in Romans 10:21, Paul has expressed much of his internal pain over the reality that many of his Jewish brethren have rejected Yeshua the Messiah. Yet while many of the non-Jewish Romans could take Jewish rejection of Yeshua and the good news as a sign that only they have now replaced the Jews as God’s own, the Apostle is quite clear that this is not at all a correct conclusion. Referencing key Tanach passages, Paul substantiates how in past history there has always been a righteous remnant among Israel proper, who have remained faithful to Him:

“I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says in *the passage about Elijah*, how he pleads with God against Israel? ‘Lord, THEY HAVE KILLED YOUR PROPHETS, THEY HAVE TORN DOWN YOUR ALTARS, AND I ALONE AM LEFT, AND THEY ARE SEEKING MY LIFE [1 Kings 19:10, 14].’ But what is the divine response to him? ‘I HAVE KEPT for Myself SEVEN THOUSAND MEN WHO HAVE NOT BOWED THE KNEE TO BAAL [1 Kings 19:18].’ In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to *God’s gracious choice*” (Romans 11:1-5).

If in the period of Ancient Israel’s history, there can be those who commit utterly heinous acts against God’s Prophets, and yet there is still a remnant of those who are loyal to Him—then surely it would be **most inappropriate** for the non-Jewish Roman Believers to assume that they have completely displaced the Jewish people as God’s own. Paul instructs, “So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace” (Romans 11:5, RSV). Paul himself is a part of the First Century remnant of Jewish Believers in Yeshua, the ones who are to serve in making the richness of Israel’s olive tree made known to the nations at large (Romans 11:18-19). Those from the nations who come to faith in Israel’s Messiah are not to be arrogant or boastful against those of the natural Jewish branches, lest they themselves ever be broken off out of arrogance (Romans 11:17-21), *precisely because* of the kindness of God allowing any human being among His chosen (Romans 11:22).³

If inclusion among God’s community is to be reckoned on the basis of His grace, then how are readers to view Romans 11:6: “But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace”? If inclusion among the redeemed is to be reckoned because of God’s grace toward people, then is it at least possible that Romans 11:6 depicts that it could at one time have been by works? Some have taken

¹ This entry has been adapted from the commentary *Romans for the Practical Messianic*.

² Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 169.

³ If necessary, do consult the relevant sections of the author’s publication *Are Non-Jewish Believers Really a Part of Israel?*

Romans 11:6 to mean that at one point in history, the pre-resurrection era, God's grace could have been earned by doing various works. But is this really a responsible reading of the clause *ouketi ex ergōn* (οὐκέτι ἐξ ἔργων), "no more of works" (KJV/YLT)⁴? The adverb *ouketi* (οὐκέτι), obviously dependent on context, can mean "no more, no longer, no further" (LS).⁵

Within Paul's argument, of Romans 11:6, is certainly intended a dismissal of *any* human actions as somehow being able to merit or earn God's eternal favor (cf. Ephesians 2:8-9); God's grace originates entirely from His goodness and everlasting love as Creator. The conclusion of various Romans commentators, some of whom believe that Torah obedience is something that was only part of the pre-resurrection era, is quite notably that the adverb *ouketi* **does not** serve in terms of temporality—as though there were once a time when people could actually work to earn God's favor—but instead has a logical force to it.⁶ If those in the time of the Prophet Elijah were reckoned as being God's remnant by His grace, than anyone arguing that any kind of works—either "works" defined Biblically or "works" specified one's religious leaders or sect—will surely never work in terms of earning His favor:

C.E.B. Cranfield: "The variant οὐκ [*ouk*] is no doubt to be rejected as a stylistic improvement. The use of *ouke,ti* with a logical rather than a temporal force is found several times in Paul's letters."⁷

Douglas J. Moo: "οὐκέτι in both occurrences in this verse has a logical ('it is therefore not the case that') rather than a temporal meaning..."⁸

James D.G. Dunn: "οὐκέτι provides a logical rather than temporal connection, as in 7:20, 14:15, and Gal 3:18...The point is polemical...which Paul clearly recalls in summary fashion....The context here confirms the earlier observation that the 'works' referred to are a way of understanding election which Paul firmly rejects (election of grace, not from works)."⁹

Grant R. Osborne: "the *no longer* is logical, not temporal. It does not mean that in the [Old Testament] salvation came by works...The message is that human achievement can never make a person right with God because the law of sin and death is in control, and every individual is unable to be good enough."¹⁰

Among modern versions, the TNIV reflects the logical usage of *ouketi* in rendering Romans 11:6 with, "And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace." The argument Paul includes in this section of his letter to the Romans by no means suggests that there was once a time when God's grace could be earned by human action; it is to substantiate the fact that His chosen *have always* been reckoned as such by His grace or unmerited favor.

It is very difficult to convince a Messianic Believer who studies the Torah and the Tanach on a consistent basis to prove that the grace of God is somehow *not* an "Old Testament" concept. Why did the Lord deliver Ancient Israel from its slavery in Egypt? Was it because of the Israelites' deeds/works, or because of His grace? Why did the Lord not utterly wipe out Ancient Israel in the desert when the people disobeyed Him? Was it because of their deeds/works, or because of His grace? Why does God continue to preserve the Jewish people today, in spite of the fact that a great many of them have rejected Yeshua as the Messiah? Is it because of their works, or because of His grace? ***It is all because of His unbelievable grace!*** Most significant, the fact that Planet Earth—up until this point in time *and after many millennia of rebellion against God* and heinous sins of idolatry, sexual immorality, genocide, and world wars—does not spin off of its axis and cause humankind to

⁴ Ger. "so nicht mehr aus Werken" (1993 Elberfelder Bibel).

⁵ LS, 576.

⁶ BDAG, 736 defines *ouketi* (οὐκέτι) with "marker of inference in a logical process, *not*."

⁷ Cranfield, *Romans 9-16*, 547 fn#4.

Cf. Romans 7:17.

⁸ Moo, *Romans*, 678 fn#42.

⁹ Dunn, *Romans*, 38b:639.

¹⁰ Osborne, *Romans*, 287.

all freeze away from the Sun or burn up in the Sun or break up into pieces, is clearly because our Gracious God very much wants all to come to a saving knowledge of Him through His Son Yeshua (Jesus)!

Quite sadly, many of today's Christians who read Romans 11:6 and see the statement, "And if by grace, then it is no longer by works" (NIV), are of the false assumption that Judaism, both of the First Century and up until the Twenty-First Century, is a complete religion of human works where one must observe the Torah to be saved—in stark contrast to the religion of Christianity where one is saved through faith in Jesus. It might be true that Orthodox Judaism today does emphasize a person's deeds/works much more than a great deal of Christianity. But that does not automatically mean that there is no grace or mercy witnessed within Jewish teaching and theology (or for that matter that Orthodox Judaism is the only branch of Judaism that should be considered for such theology). To assert that grace is not a concept that is evidenced in the Tanach would be to negate the Psalmist's words:

"For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand *outside*. I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness. For the LORD God is a sun and shield; **the LORD gives grace and glory** [*chein v'kavod yittein ADONAI*, יהוה יתן וכבוד יתן]¹¹; no good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly. O LORD of hosts, how blessed is the man who trusts in You!" (Psalm 84:10-12).

Some may take issue with the Psalmist's words here, saying that the Lord only gives grace to those "whose walk is blameless" (NIV),¹² implying that what is said is that one must observe God's commandments in order to receive grace. This is an inaccurate view. The text is clear that while grace, *chein* (חַיִן), is found in the Lord, "no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless" (NIV), those who are presumably His people and who are living properly. Those who are obedient to the Heavenly Father, having lives which are *tamim* (תְּמִימִים),¹³ are naturally going to experience His grace and glory in a far more tangible sense than those who live in disobedience and obstinance against Him.

The Lord can, ultimately, *only* demonstrate the fullness of His grace upon those who have been spiritually regenerated, and have gone before Him for permanent forgiveness and restitution for their sins via Messiah Yeshua. Proverbs 3:34 says, "Though He scoffs at the scoffers, yet He gives grace to the afflicted." This verse is quoted by James the Just, "But He gives a greater grace. Therefore *it* says, 'GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE'" (James 4:6).

Does God's grace nullify the value and importance of God's Law? Judaism's widescale view, contrary to the view of much of modern Christianity, is that the Torah or the Law of Moses is actually a gift of grace by God to His people. The Torah is believed to have been given by the Lord as a part of His beneficence toward Israel, because the Torah will preserve Israel and keep His people upright. As the Mishnah tractate *Pirkei Avot* communicates,

"Great is the Torah because it gives life to those who perform it in this world and in the next as it says, 'For they are life to them that find them, and healing to all their flesh.' [Prov. 4:22] And it says, 'It shall be health to your navel and marrow to your bones.' [Prov. 3:8] And it says, 'It is a tree of life to all who hold fast to it and all its supporters are happy.' [Prov. 3:18] And it also says, 'They are a chaplet of grace [*l'v'yat chein*, לְוִיַת חַיִן]; a crown of glory shall it give you.' [Prov. 4:9] And it says, 'By me your days will be multiplied and the years of your life increased.' [Prov. 9:11] And it says, 'Length of days is in her right hand; riches and honor are in her left hand.' [Prov. 3:16] And it says, 'For length of days and years of life and peace shall be added to you.' [Prov. 3:2]" (m.*Avot* 6:7).¹⁴

¹¹ Grk. LXX *charin kai doxan dōsei* (χαρίν καὶ δόξαν δώσει); "will give grace and glory" (LXE).

¹² Heb. *l'holkim b'tamim* (לְהוֹלְכִים בְּתַמִּימִים); "from those who live without blame" (NJPS).

¹³ *HALOT*, 2:1749 offers a variety of applications for *tamim*, including: "**complete, unscathed, intact**," "**without fault, free of blemish**: of animals for sacrifice," "**perfect**," "**impeccable**," and "**honest, devout**."

Warren Baker and Eugene Carpenter, eds., *Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 2003), pp 1232-1233 adds, "When used in a moral sense, this word is linked with truth, virtue, uprightness, and righteousness...The term is used of one's relationship with another person...and of one's relationship with God."

¹⁴ Leonard Kravitz and Kerry M. Olitzky, eds. and trans., *Pirke Avot: A Modern Commentary on Jewish Ethics* (New York: UAHC Press, 1993), pp 102-103.

The ultimate manifestation of the Father’s grace is undoubtedly found in the sacrificial work of the Messiah Yeshua (Christ Jesus). Yet, the general favor of the Lord has surely been displayed throughout history toward those who recognize Him as Creator. The grace of God has been demonstrated toward His children who strive to obey Him, *even in their own* strength—certainly via material blessings of bounty and prosperity—as He steadily woos those who are attracted to Him into His full salvation and redemption. The Wesleyan theological tradition in which I was raised has tended to call this “prevenient grace,” whereby those who are unredeemed still nevertheless experience God’s favor because they are human beings made in His image whom He loves. “Saving grace” and “sanctifying grace,” in the Wesleyan theological schema, regard how God’s grace made manifest in the good news redeems people from sin, and then enables them to accomplish good works by the power of Christ within them.¹⁵ Sanctifying grace made manifest in a spiritually regenerated Believer manifests in good works; but such good works do not bring about salvation, yet are to be the clear result of it.

For someone such as myself, at least, Judaism tends to rightly recognize the presence of God’s prevenient grace. It has yet to recognize God’s saving grace in Yeshua. And, all Messiah followers—evangelical Christians *and even* some Messianics—need to grab a greater hold onto the significance of sanctifying grace.¹⁶ While in Romans 11:6 Paul expresses how grace can never result from human works, good works of obedience to God’s Law are to surely manifest themselves in the lives of those who have experienced such grace!

¹⁵ This is more fully elaborated upon in the relevant sections of Kenneth J. Collins, *John Wesley: A Theological Journey* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003).

¹⁶ Consult the various discussions appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.