

GOD'S GRACE

Gift, Presence, Mercy, and Participation

Stuart Hollinger

Working Book 0.2 - September 2026

*Grace should not become another thing we master. If it is truly God's grace, then the
Giver always exceeds our account of the gift.*

Before the Book

This book needs to stand on its own because **grace is not merely one intuition among many**. It is a whole field: gift, mercy, favor, presence, forgiveness, transformation, freedom, judgment, participation, Christ, the Spirit, the Body of Christ, and the strange way one person's grace-shaped participation can alter the Moment another person receives.

The word itself is deceptively small. Christians use 'grace' to name several closely related realities. Sometimes it means God's unearned favor. Sometimes it names God's action toward a creature. Sometimes it names divine help, indwelling, transformation, participation in divine life, the condition of being received rather than rejected, or the power by which a person becomes capable of what they could not simply produce from themselves. Different Christian traditions organize these meanings differently. This working book will not pretend those differences do not exist.

Instead, the book starts with a more primitive question: **what are we even referring to when we say God's grace?** Before asking how grace feels, how humans extend grace, or what grace does psychologically, we have to distinguish grace as it is from our experience and representation of it.

GOD'S GRACE AS GOD GIVES IT != MY EXPERIENCE OF GRACE != MY RESPONSE TO GRACE

That distinction will run through the whole book. A person may feel forgiven and misunderstand God. A person may feel nothing and still be the object of mercy. A person may talk beautifully about grace while treating others mercilessly. A person may extend extraordinary patience without possessing the power to save another soul.

Scope

This is an explicitly Christian theological exploration. It is not presented as empirical proof of God, and it will distinguish theological claims from psychological or Matrix descriptions.

The goal is not to shrink grace into a definition. The goal is to get enough conceptual clarity that the mystery becomes clearer rather than flatter.

Contents

PART I - GRACE IN ITSELF

1. Why Grace Needs Its Own Book
2. What Is Grace?
3. Grace Is Not a Substance Floating Between God and Us
4. Gift, Favor, Presence, Power, Participation
5. The Giver Is Greater Than the Gift
6. Grace, Holiness, and Judgment

PART II - GRACE REACHING A SUBJECT

7. Grace and Finite Reception
8. Receiving What Cannot Be Earned
9. Grace and Freedom
10. Grace and the Nervous System
11. Shame, Guilt, and Return
12. Grace and Transformation

PART III - GRACE BETWEEN SUBJECTS

13. Grace-Bearing Capacity in a Moment
14. Grace-Shaped Environments
15. Empathy Is Not Salvation
16. Forgiveness, Permission, and Boundaries
17. The Stronger Person Bending
18. Grace and the Body of Christ

PART IV - GRACE ACROSS TIME

19. Grace Before Merit
20. Grace in Failure
21. Grace Does Not Erase Consequence
22. Repeated Grace and Formation
23. Grace and Becoming

PART V - CHRIST AT THE CENTER

24. Grace Has a Face
25. The Cross and the Cost of Grace
26. Resurrection, Spirit, and New Capacity
27. Grace Beyond the White Box
28. Worship as a Response to Grace

PART VI - THE FINE LINES OF GRACE

29. Grace and Permissiveness
30. Grace and Irresponsibility
31. Surrender and Passivity

- 32. Humility and Self-Erasure
- 33. Acceptance and Approval
- 34. Grace and Control

PART VII - THE MATRIX AND GRACE

- 35. What the Matrix Can and Cannot Say
- 36. God Is Not the God Shape
- 37. Representation of Grace Is Not Grace
- 38. Grace Transforming Configuration
- 39. The Map Must Bow to the Gift

PART VIII - TRYING TO EMPATHIZE UPWARD

- 40. God's 'Nervous System' as a Creaturely Metaphor
- 41. The God Who Knows Every Subject
- 42. Holy
- 43. Submission Without Comprehension
- 44. Grace Is Not a System

PART IX - ATTENTION AND EMBODIED PARTICIPATION

- 45. Attention and the Governing Purpose
- 46. The Body We Bring to the Moment
- 47. Grace Within and Beyond Our Initiative
- 48. Participation and the Wish for Control
- 49. Giving and Receiving in the Same Moment

GOD'S GRACE

PART I

Grace in Itself

CHAPTER 1

Why Grace Needs Its Own Book

Grace is too structurally central to be filed as one more spiritual intuition.

A book of intuitions can collect flashes: an image, a moment of awe, a strange connection, a theological possibility. Grace behaves differently. Once we begin asking what grace is, almost every other Christian question is pulled into the room.

What does it mean for God to give? What is the relation between grace and justice? Does grace merely change God's attitude toward us, or does it change us? Is grace identical with forgiveness? Is grace an event, a relation, a power, a presence, or participation in God? How can grace be free if discipleship is costly? How does grace relate to judgment? Can one person carry grace for another? Can grace shape a room without transferring salvation? What happens when someone repeatedly receives grace and refuses transformation?

These are not side questions. They are different angles on the same mystery.

This is why the book needs two movements at once. The first is **grace in itself**: what Christians are trying to name before we reduce grace to human feeling. The second is **grace in participation**: what happens when finite subjects receive, resist, embody, distort, extend, or respond to grace inside actual Moments.

Starting intuition

Grace is not only a topic. It is a relation between the creature who cannot make themselves God and the God who gives what the creature cannot manufacture.

CHAPTER 2

What Is Grace?

The simplest definitions are true enough to begin and too small to finish.

A common Christian shorthand says grace is **unmerited favor**. That is indispensable. Grace is not wages. If something is strictly owed because it has been earned, it is no longer grace in the same sense.

But 'favor' can sound merely legal or emotional, as if grace meant that God privately decides to feel nicer toward us. Christian theology has often meant more. Grace can include God's action, help, presence, forgiveness, indwelling, transformation, and participation in divine life. Traditions disagree about how these meanings are ordered, but the disagreement itself warns us not to flatten grace into one psychological metaphor.

So this book will use a broad working definition:

Working definition

God's grace is God's free self-giving goodness toward creatures - received as gift rather than earned possession - by which God forgives, sustains, draws, heals, empowers, transforms, and brings creatures into communion with Himself.

That definition is intentionally relational. Grace is not a commodity God keeps in a warehouse. It is always grace **from** God, **toward** creatures, **for** some good grounded in God.

The phrase 'in itself' therefore does not mean we can stand outside God and inspect grace from nowhere. It means we are trying to ask what grace is before confusing it with our mood, our interpretation, our moral performance, or our social imitation of it.

CHAPTER 3

Grace Is Not a Substance Floating Between God and Us

The gift should not be imagined as independent of the Giver.

Human language makes nouns feel like objects. We say 'I received grace' and can unconsciously picture grace as a spiritual substance passing from God's hand into ours. That picture can be useful in poetry, but it becomes misleading if grace is treated as something that could exist independently of God.

Whatever distinctions theology eventually makes between divine favor, divine action, created effects, indwelling, sanctifying transformation, or participation in divine life, the central point remains: **grace is not autonomous from God.**

GOD -> GRACIOUS GIVING -> CREATURELY RECEPTION / TRANSFORMATION

This matters because otherwise grace can become a technique. We start asking how to acquire the 'grace substance,' how much someone has, whether one person can transfer it, or how to manipulate the conditions that produce it. The Christian claim is more personal and more destabilizing: grace belongs to the freedom of God.

That means grace can be mediated through sacraments, Scripture, prayer, other people, suffering, forgiveness, community, or ordinary life without any created mechanism becoming sovereign over God.

Do not confuse the channel with the Giver. Do not confuse the effect with the Source.

CHAPTER 4

Gift, Favor, Presence, Power, Participation

Grace may be one reality encountered under several aspects.

One reason grace becomes confusing is that the same word is used at several levels.

Gift: grace is not earned. Something is received that the recipient cannot place God in debt for.

Favor: grace names God's benevolent relation toward the creature rather than condemnation as the final word.

Presence: grace may be experienced not merely as a changed status but as God drawing near, dwelling with, or making communion possible.

Power: grace can mean divine help that enables repentance, endurance, love, holiness, courage, or action beyond the creature's unaided capacity.

Participation: grace can name the creature being brought into a life that is not self-originated - sharing, by gift, in communion with God.

These should not be collapsed too quickly. A legal metaphor may illuminate forgiveness but say less about transformation. A therapeutic metaphor may illuminate healing but say less about justification. A participatory metaphor may illuminate communion but be misheard as erasing the Creator-creature distinction.

The question is not 'Which single metaphor wins?' but 'What does each metaphor preserve, and what does it risk hiding?'

CHAPTER 5

The Giver Is Greater Than the Gift

Grace should lead beyond grace-talk toward God.

There is a subtle spiritual danger in becoming fascinated with grace as a concept while losing fascination with God Himself. A person can study mercy, forgiveness, election, sanctification, spiritual gifts, and divine action until grace becomes the object of attention instead of the gracious God.

The relation should remain ordered:

GIFT -> GIVER

This is not because the gift is unimportant. The gift reveals the Giver. But the theological end of grace is not that the creature becomes a collector of spiritual benefits. It is communion, love, worship, transformation, and life with God.

This also creates a Fine Line: **receiving God's gifts versus using God as the means to obtain the gifts.** Comfort, peace, forgiveness, power, healing, insight, and even salvation-language can become ways of making God instrumental.

Grace is good because God is good. God is not good because He gives us the experiences we prefer.

CHAPTER 6

Grace, Holiness, and Judgment

Grace becomes sentimental when holiness disappears.

If grace is described only as acceptance, it can begin to sound as though God has no opposition to evil. But biblical Christianity does not solve the tension by making God less holy. Grace is astonishing precisely because the One who gives it is not morally indifferent.

Judgment and grace therefore cannot simply be placed in opposite boxes, as though justice belongs to the angry God and grace belongs to the nice God. The Christian claim is that the same God is holy, just, merciful, loving, and gracious.

This means grace is not the denial that something is wrong. Often grace begins by making truth survivable. The sinner can confess because condemnation is not the only horizon. The harmed person can name harm without needing vengeance to become their identity. The community can discipline without pretending the offender has ceased to be a person.

Grace does not require evil to become less evil. It means evil does not possess the final creative authority over what God can still do.

GOD'S GRACE

PART II

Grace Reaching a Subject

CHAPTER 7

Grace and Finite Reception

What God gives and what a finite subject can presently receive are not identical.

A central Matrix distinction becomes useful here without claiming to explain grace itself. A finite person never receives Reality from a view from nowhere. Grace, if truly from God, exceeds the person's representation of grace.

GRACE AS GOD GIVES IT != MANIFESTATION TO ME != MY REPRESENTATION OF IT

A person may interpret conviction as rejection. Another may interpret permissiveness as grace. Another may experience profound peace and assume every belief present during the peace has been divinely certified. Another may feel spiritually dry while remaining faithfully sustained.

This is why phenomenology cannot carry the whole theological burden. Feeling grace is not identical to being in grace; feeling abandoned is not proof of abandonment; intensity is not truth.

At the same time, the answer is not to distrust all experience. Human beings encounter God as embodied subjects. Tears, relief, fear, peace, awe, bodily release, courage, confession, and joy can be meaningful manifestations. They simply remain creaturely reception rather than God's total self-description.

The experience may be real without the interpretation being exhaustive.

CHAPTER 8

Receiving What Cannot Be Earned

Grace changes the grammar from achievement to reception.

Human beings are trained by many Systems to think in exchange: perform, earn, deserve, receive. Grace interrupts that logic.

This can be emotionally harder than it sounds. Earning preserves a kind of control. If I can earn acceptance, I can explain why I possess it. I can compare myself with others. I can secure identity through performance. Gift removes that leverage.

Receiving grace therefore requires a strange surrender: allowing goodness to arrive without first converting it into wages.

That does not make effort meaningless. Christian life can involve intense discipline, repentance, obedience, sacrifice, endurance, and work. The Fine Line is between **effort as response to grace** and **effort as an attempt to make grace owed**.

GRACE -> RESPONSE not PERFORMANCE -> GOD OWES ME

Grace does not abolish action. It abolishes boasting in action as the source of the gift.

CHAPTER 9

Grace and Freedom

A gift can invite without becoming coercion.

Grace raises an old theological problem: if God acts first, what happens to human freedom? Different Christian traditions answer the mechanics differently, but the existential problem can be stated simply.

If grace merely leaves the person exactly as they are, it seems weak. If grace mechanically forces the person, love and response seem emptied of meaning. Christian theology therefore repeatedly searches for language in which God's initiative is real and human response remains real.

For this book, the useful distinction is between **sovereignty and participation**. The creature does not author grace. Yet the creature's yes, no, resistance, surrender, repentance, trust, obedience, and love are not unreal.

Grace can be prior without making the response imaginary.

This is a theological version of responsibility without sovereignty: I am not the source of the gift, but my participation in the Moment still matters.

CHAPTER 10

Grace and the Nervous System

Grace may be received through a body without being reducible to the body.

Humans do not receive anything as disembodied observers. Fear tightens the chest. Shame changes posture. Forgiveness can produce tears and release. Worship can alter breathing, attention, muscle tension, and felt orientation.

So it is reasonable to ask how grace is embodied. It is not reasonable to conclude that because grace has bodily correlates, grace **is nothing but** those correlates. The same event can be described at multiple levels.

A grace-shaped encounter may reduce threat, widen perceived possibility, or make confession psychologically survivable. Another person's patience may lower the interpersonal cost of truth. Prayer may reorganize attention. Worship may place one's self-importance inside a larger frame.

Those are empirical or psychological questions. The theological claim - that God is graciously acting - is a different level of claim.

Embodiment is a route of creaturely reception, not a scientific proof of divine causation.

CHAPTER 11

Shame, Guilt, and Return

Grace can separate 'I did wrong' from 'I am beyond return.'

Guilt and shame are easily collapsed. Guilt can identify an act, failure, debt, or responsibility. Shame can expand the failure into the whole identity: I am the thing that is wrong.

Grace makes a different movement possible. It does not need to call wrong right. It can say: this is true, this matters, and **you are still addressable**.

That may be one of grace's deepest existential powers. A person can remain in relation to Reality after discovering something terrible about themselves. Confession becomes possible because truth no longer has to mean annihilation.

This does not guarantee emotional relief. Sometimes grace first intensifies moral clarity. But the horizon changes from final self-condemnation to the possibility of repentance, repair, forgiveness, and transformation.

Grace can make truth bearable without making truth smaller.

CHAPTER 12

Grace and Transformation

The gift is not only that the past is reclassified; the participant can become different.

A purely external concept of grace can leave the person untouched: God forgives, but nothing changes in the subject. A purely internal concept can make grace indistinguishable from self-improvement. Christian theology usually insists on both divine initiative and real transformation.

The important distinction is:

FORGIVEN != FINISHED

Grace may forgive a person before the person has become what love requires. That is not a defect in grace. It is the beginning of formation.

A grace-shaped life therefore has trajectory. Habits can change. Action Horizons can widen. Shame can lose governing power. Mercy can become easier to extend. Truth can be faced with less self-protection. The person's orientation can become increasingly ordered toward God and the good of others.

Grace receives the person without pretending the person's present configuration is the final form of the person.

GOD'S GRACE

PART III

Grace Between Subjects

CHAPTER 13

Grace-Bearing Capacity in a Moment

Two people can have equal worth and unequal present capacity.

In a difficult Moment, one person may have more patience, stability, clarity, emotional room, knowledge, or freedom than the other. That does not make the stronger person more valuable.

GREATER CAPACITY != GREATER WORTH

But greater capacity can create greater possible service. The person with more room may be able to absorb a misunderstanding without retaliating, wait longer, explain more gently, forgive faster, or carry more of the practical burden.

This is what the phrase **grace-bearing capacity** is trying to name. It does not mean grace is a substance stored in one nervous system. It means a person who has received and been formed by grace may presently possess more capacity to participate graciously.

The line is important because spiritual hierarchy can easily appear: 'I am closer to God, therefore I am superior.' The better Christian inference is almost the opposite: **if I have more room, I may have more room to serve.**

Capacity creates possible responsibility, not higher human worth.

CHAPTER 14

Grace-Shaped Environments

One person's participation can alter the conditions another person receives.

Grace does not have to transfer salvation from one person to another for grace-shaped participation to matter socially.

Suppose one person refuses escalation, tells the truth without humiliation, forgives without erasing boundaries, remains calm enough to hear the other person, and keeps the relationship open to correction. Their action becomes part of the other person's System.

GRACE-SHAPED PARTICIPATION -> CHANGED SHARED MOMENT -> DIFFERENT OPTIONS FOR THE OTHER

The other person may now find apology easier, fear lower, honesty safer, or retaliation less necessary. The first person's grace-shaped participation has altered the second person's Action Horizon.

This is a powerful claim even before making any supernatural interpersonal mechanism. Social environments can become more or less hospitable to repentance, truth, courage, and love.

A person cannot save another by proximity. A person can help create a Moment in which the other's faithful participation becomes easier.

CHAPTER 15

Empathy Is Not Salvation

Feeling another person deeply is not the same as redeeming them.

Empathy can become spiritually inflated. If one person's peace, compassion, or faith changes another person's state, it is tempting to imagine that salvation itself is somehow flowing through resonance.

The distinction must remain sharp: **Christ saves; human empathy does not.**

Empathy can still be one of the means by which people become more reachable. Being accurately understood can reduce defensive threat. Being loved can make confession possible. Witness can make Christ thinkable. Community can sustain someone through a crisis.

But these relational goods should not be silently renamed salvation.

Grace can be mediated relationally without making the mediator the Savior.

CHAPTER 16

Forgiveness, Permission, and Boundaries

Grace releases vengeance without requiring the continuation of harm.

One of the most common distortions of grace is the demand that the harmed person prove grace by removing every boundary.

But forgiveness, permission, reconciliation, and trust are not identical. Grace can forgive while still naming danger. A person can release vengeance while requiring distance. Reconciliation may require repentance and changed behavior. Trust may rebuild slowly because trust concerns future reliability.

FORGIVENESS != PERMISSION != RECONCILIATION != RESTORED TRUST

This is not a loophole for hidden revenge. Boundaries can themselves become punitive or controlling. The Fine Line is whether the boundary serves truth, protection, repair, and genuine good, or whether it becomes a socially acceptable form of vengeance.

Grace does not require pretending that consequences are cruelty.

CHAPTER 17

The Stronger Person Bending

Power can reveal grace when it is voluntarily subordinated to love.

There is an enormous difference between being unable to retaliate and being able to retaliate but refusing because love governs the action.

INCAPACITY != VOLUNTARY SURRENDER OF CAPACITY

This matters because Christian gentleness is often mistaken for weakness. Yet grace can appear precisely as controlled strength: the ability to bear cost without making another person bear the maximum cost available to you.

The person with more power in a Moment - physical, emotional, financial, institutional, intellectual, or relational - stands at a Fine Line. Power can become domination, or it can become stewardship.

Grace does not require power to disappear. It can require power to be offered back to the good.

The question is not only 'How much power do I have?' but 'What is governing the power I have?'

CHAPTER 18

Grace and the Body of Christ

Grace can differentiate members without ranking their worth.

The Body of Christ gives a communal image for differentiated participation. Members are not interchangeable, yet none can honestly say the whole body exists for their private function.

Grace may therefore appear not only as individual forgiveness but as **gifted interdependence**. One person teaches. Another encourages. Another organizes. Another bears suffering. Another notices the neglected person. Another gives materially. Another creates room in a System for a gift that had no pathway.

Human communities can misrecognize these gifts. A System can assign the wrong role, suppress a capacity, or confuse visibility with value.

A healthy Christian System does not manufacture a person's place in the Body. It helps gifts, needs, capacities, and fruits become visible enough for faithful discernment.

Grace can therefore be communal without becoming collectivist. The member remains a subject, and the Body remains more than an aggregate of private projects.

GOD'S GRACE

PART IV

Grace Across Time

CHAPTER 19

Grace Before Merit

Grace is not the reward at the end of becoming good.

If grace only arrives after sufficient improvement, grace has become wages. Christian grace reverses the direction: the gift arrives as the condition under which new becoming becomes possible.

GRACE -> REPENTANCE / FORMATION / LOVE not PERFECTION -> GRACE

This does not mean every temporal relation is simple. People can resist, relapse, return, grow, and fail again. But the basic logic remains anti-meritocratic at the level of divine gift.

The creature's transformation can be a fruit of grace without being the purchase price of grace.

CHAPTER 20

Grace in Failure

The place where grace becomes visible is often the place where self-sufficiency collapses.

Success easily permits the illusion that we are self-originating. Failure exposes dependence. That does not make failure inherently holy, and suffering should not be romanticized. But failure can reveal what achievement concealed.

Grace in failure does not always mean immediate rescue from consequences. Sometimes grace is the possibility of truth after failure, relationship after shame, help after pride, repentance after rationalization, or a future not completely defined by the worst Moment.

The person can say: this happened; I did this; I cannot undo it; and still, the story is not metaphysically closed.

Grace does not turn failure into success. It can prevent failure from becoming the final name of the person.

CHAPTER 21

Grace Does Not Erase Consequence

Mercy and causality are not opposites.

A forgiven action can still have consequences. Bodies heal slowly. Trust rebuilds slowly. Money can remain lost. A sentence can remain remembered. Institutions may still need to protect people.

The fantasy that grace should erase every consequence confuses moral relation with causal history.

Grace can change what consequence **means**, how it is borne, whether it becomes vengeance, and what new participation becomes possible. But grace does not require Reality to pretend the past did not occur.

Forgiveness can transform the future without falsifying the past.

CHAPTER 22

Repeated Grace and Formation

What is repeatedly received can become something a person becomes capable of giving.

Grace has a recursive social dimension. A person repeatedly forgiven may become more capable of forgiving. A person repeatedly met with patience may learn patience. A person repeatedly allowed to tell the truth without annihilation may become less defensive.

This is not automatic. Grace can be exploited, misunderstood, or resisted. But repeated gracious participation can change configuration over time.

RECEIVE -> RESPOND -> PRACTICE -> FORMATION -> NEW CAPACITY

This is one reason communities matter. A System that repeatedly embodies truthful grace can make some forms of becoming easier; a System that repeatedly humiliates failure can make concealment rational.

Grace is not behavior engineering, but grace-shaped environments can have formative effects.

CHAPTER 23

Grace and Becoming

Grace receives what is and calls toward what is not yet.

There is a tension inside grace that should never be resolved by deleting one side. Grace says: you are received. Grace also says: you are not finished.

Acceptance without becoming can collapse into stagnation. Becoming without acceptance can collapse into anxious self-salvation.

RECEIVED NOW + CALLED FORWARD

This may be one of the most beautiful structures in Christian life. The person does not need to become worthy enough to enter the process; the process itself can be the outworking of having been received.

Grace is not 'stay exactly as you are forever.' Grace is also not 'become acceptable before you may come near.'

GOD'S GRACE

PART V

Christ at the Center

CHAPTER 24

Grace Has a Face

Christian grace is not finally an abstract moral principle.

A neutral philosophical system might describe mercy, forgiveness, giftedness, or non-merit. Christianity makes the stronger claim that grace is revealed personally and decisively in Jesus Christ.

That means grace is not merely the universe having a generous tendency. It is tied to who God is and what God does.

This is also why Christ should not be reduced to 'leader of Christianity.' Within Christian theology, Christ has universal significance: creation, revelation, reconciliation, lordship, judgment, and life are all related to Him.

The Christian claim is not merely that Jesus teaches grace. It is that grace is inseparable from God's self-giving in Christ.

CHAPTER 25

The Cross and the Cost of Grace

Free to the recipient does not mean costless in the Christian story.

Grace can be trivialized when 'free' is heard as 'cheap.' The cross resists that flattening. The gift is not purchased by the recipient, yet Christian faith locates grace inside costly divine self-giving.

This preserves two truths at once: the recipient cannot boast in purchasing grace, and grace is not God's casual indifference toward evil.

The cross therefore holds mercy and judgment together in a way that abstract definitions struggle to do.

Grace is free as gift, not weightless as Reality.

CHAPTER 26

Resurrection, Spirit, and New Capacity

Grace does not end at acquittal.

If the cross is interpreted only as cancellation of debt, Christian life can become static. Resurrection and the Spirit open the question of new life.

The Christian claim becomes not only 'you are forgiven' but 'you can be made new.' The Spirit is not merely an emotional afterglow of pardon but, within Christian theology, God's active presence forming, empowering, guiding, convicting, comforting, and uniting.

This is where grace and capacity meet most strongly. The person may become able to participate in ways that their prior configuration could not sustain.

Grace does not merely change the account of the old life; it opens the possibility of a new one.

CHAPTER 27

Grace Beyond the White Box

Grace is not merely admission into a moral club.

The earlier image of the white box of goodness is useful if handled carefully. Christianity can genuinely name good and evil. But grace cannot be reduced to God deciding who qualifies for the white region.

If Christianity is true, the Good is grounded in God, not in social approval. Grace is therefore not the reward for being successfully accepted into a humanly defined moral category.

Grace may actually dismantle the person's obsession with appearing inside the white box. The person can confess being outside a standard without abandoning the Good itself, because their hope is not self-presentation.

Grace does not make good and evil unreal. It removes moral self-presentation as the creature's final ground of belonging.

CHAPTER 28

Worship as a Response to Grace

Some thoughts about grace do not terminate in explanation.

There are moments when reflection on grace seems to outrun conceptual language. The asymmetry becomes overwhelming: Creator and creature, holiness and dependence, knowledge and finitude, gift and inability to repay.

At that point worship can be understood not as intellectual failure but as an appropriate mode of response. The person stops trying to make the mystery small enough to possess.

AWE -> WORSHIP -> SURRENDER -> PARTICIPATION

This does not mean every intense feeling is divine revelation. It means that within Christian faith, accurate recognition of creaturely dependence can rationally culminate in praise rather than endless analysis.

Grace understood only as information has not yet reached the full Christian response.

GOD'S GRACE

PART VI

The Fine Lines of Grace

CHAPTER 29

Grace and Permissiveness

Mercy crosses into permissiveness when love stops telling the truth about harm.

Grace can tolerate weakness without calling destruction good. Permissiveness avoids necessary truth, boundary, or correction in the name of being gracious.

The Fine Line asks whether mercy is preserving the person while still opposing what harms the person and others.

Grace says, 'you are not reducible to this wrong.' Permissiveness says, 'there is no need to call it wrong.' Those are not the same.

CHAPTER 30

Grace and Irresponsibility

A gift does not erase participation.

If grace is guaranteed, someone may reason, why care what I do? This treats grace as insulation from Reality rather than reconciliation to God.

The Christian answer is not that grace becomes earned after all. It is that grace creates a new relation in which responsibility becomes more meaningful, not less.

A person does not obey in order to force God to become gracious. A person obeys because grace has changed the horizon in which obedience occurs.

Grace removes the need to self-save; it does not remove the call to participate.

CHAPTER 31

Surrender and Passivity

Submitting to God is not the same as refusing to act.

Surrender can become spiritualized avoidance: 'God will handle it' becomes a reason not to apologize, decide, protect, work, or speak.

But Christian surrender is better understood as surrender of sovereignty, not surrender of participation.

GOD IS SOVEREIGN != MY ACTION IS IRRELEVANT

The person releases the fantasy of total control while still stewarding the capacity actually available.

Surrender asks who governs the action, not whether the creature acts.

CHAPTER 32

Humility and Self-Erasure

To become small before God is not to become unreal.

Humility can be distorted into hatred of the self, fear of gifts, or refusal to occupy legitimate responsibility. But Christian humility does not require pretending gifts do not exist.

The Fine Line is between **decentering the self** and **denying the creature God actually made**.

A person can acknowledge strength without claiming self-origin. They can receive praise without making praise their god. They can lead without treating leadership as superior worth.

Humility is truth about the self under God, not falsification of the self.

CHAPTER 33

Acceptance and Approval

Receiving a person does not mean approving every participation.

Grace can hold the person open to relationship while still evaluating actions, patterns, and orientations.

This distinction matters in families, churches, friendships, and moral disagreement. If acceptance means approval of everything, moral language collapses. If disapproval means total rejection of the person, grace collapses.

A person can be loved as a person while a particular act is truthfully opposed.

CHAPTER 34

Grace and Control

Grace invites participation; control tries to guarantee the outcome.

Because grace desires good, it can be tempting to force the good 'for' another person. But control often reveals that we cannot tolerate the other's agency inside the process.

Grace-shaped care can teach, warn, persuade, discipline, set boundaries, and even intervene strongly under real responsibility. The Fine Line is whether the other person remains a subject whose participation matters, or becomes merely the object of our spiritual project.

Wanting someone's good does not make you sovereign over their becoming.

GOD'S GRACE

PART VII

The Matrix and Grace

CHAPTER 35

What the Matrix Can and Cannot Say

A descriptive framework can map conditions around grace without generating grace.

The Existential Matrix can distinguish participant, Moment, System, manifestation, representation, orientation, action, and becoming. Those distinctions can help us describe where a person is, what reached them, how they interpreted it, what options they saw, and what changed afterward.

None of that proves divine grace.

The Matrix can model a grace-shaped environment. It can study forgiveness, reduced threat, increased honesty, changes in Action Horizon, or patterns of interpersonal stabilization. But the theological statement 'God gave grace here' exceeds the empirical model.

The Matrix can describe creaturely participation around grace. It cannot turn grace into a variable that captures God.

CHAPTER 36

God Is Not the God Shape

Our orientational architecture is not God.

The project has long distinguished the higher-order orientational role historically called the God Place from the actual God Christians worship.

GOD != MY GOD SHAPE != MY IDEA OF GOD

This is especially important with grace. A person's representation of a gracious God may be distorted. Another person's theology may be precise while their embodied orientation remains dominated by fear, status, or control.

Grace can therefore challenge the God Shape. God, if real, is not obligated to fit the architecture by which the creature currently organizes Him.

The God Shape is corrigible. God is not a construct produced by our need for orientation.

CHAPTER 37

Representation of Grace Is Not Grace

The book itself can become a substitute for the gift.

A person can become extremely articulate about grace and increasingly graceless. That possibility should haunt every chapter.

THEOLOGY OF GRACE != PARTICIPATION IN GRACE

Representation matters. Bad theology can distort practice. Good distinctions can prevent cruelty. But representation reaches its proper end when it returns the subject to participation: repentance, forgiveness, worship, courage, truth, love.

The most accurate chapter on grace is still not grace itself.

CHAPTER 38

Grace Transforming Configuration

Grace may appear in the Matrix as changed capacity without being reducible to capacity.

Suppose a person moves from shame-driven concealment to truthful confession, from retaliation to forgiveness, from compulsive self-justification to rest, or from fear to courageous love. The Matrix can describe the change in configuration.

Body state may shift. Representations may change. The Action Horizon may widen. Orientation may reorder. New behaviors may become possible.

A Christian may interpret the transformation as grace. An empirical observer may describe psychological and social mechanisms. These accounts can coexist at different levels without one automatically proving or canceling the other.

Mechanism and meaning should not be collapsed simply because they describe the same Moment at different levels.

CHAPTER 39

The Map Must Bow to the Gift

A framework about finite participation must know when to disappear.

Grace exposes the limitation of every system that tries to become complete. If grace is God's free action, no creaturely framework can make God predictable by definition.

The Matrix should therefore become more humble, not more totalizing, when grace enters the picture. It can distinguish where we are confused. It can help identify a Fine Line. It can show how one person's action changes another's environment.

Then it must stop.

Discern -> receive -> love. The map should serve participation and then get out of the way.

GOD'S GRACE

PART VIII

Trying to Empathize Upward

CHAPTER 40

God's 'Nervous System' as a Creaturely Metaphor

We begin with the only subjectivity we know from inside and immediately exceed it.

A human being knows what it is like to receive the world through one body, one nervous system, one stream of attention, one history, one local Moment. We then look at another person and try to empathize across the gap.

The intuition 'imagine God's nervous system' is therefore not a literal biological claim about God. It is a creaturely metaphor attempting to scale subjective awareness beyond anything the creature can inhabit.

The metaphor breaks almost immediately, and the breaking is part of the insight. God, within classical Christian belief, is not one giant organism among organisms. He does not need nerves to reconstruct what another subject feels.

The metaphor is useful when it reveals creaturely limitation; it becomes misleading when it turns God into a super-sized human.

CHAPTER 41

The God Who Knows Every Subject

Trying to imagine divine knowledge can convert judgment into awe.

From inside my nervous system, another person can seem absurd, broken, evil, irrational, beautiful, threatening, or incomprehensible. My judgment is made from a tiny aperture.

Then comes the intuition: what would it mean for God to know this person without having to infer them from posture, words, reputation, or fragments? And not only this person - every person, every history, every hidden wound, every intention, every possibility, every lie, every love, every consequence.

The attempt to imagine that position does not make the human mind divine. It does the opposite. It reveals the distance between local subjectivity and the theological claim of divine knowledge.

**MY PERSPECTIVE: LOCAL, PARTIAL, RECONSTRUCTIVE
GOD'S KNOWLEDGE: NOT REDUCIBLE TO MY MODE OF KNOWING**

The intuition is not 'I now understand how God sees everyone.' It is 'there is no way my local judgment exhausts the position from which God knows them.'

CHAPTER 42

Holy

Some theological asymmetries are felt as worship before they are solved as concepts.

The word that keeps appearing is **holy**. Not merely morally nice. Not merely more intelligent. A different order of being and spiritual position.

When the creature tries to imagine God's relation to all subjects, the response can become: there is no way. No way I can hold this. No way my perspective can rival this. No way my private nervous system is an adequate court for the whole of another person's being.

That recognition can produce worship because the comparison is not between two equal observers with different data sets. It is between creature and Creator.

Awe can be the felt recognition of an asymmetry the concept cannot contain.

CHAPTER 43

Submission Without Comprehension

The inability to comprehend God does not make all beliefs about God equally true.

Submission can be misunderstood as anti-intellectual surrender: stop thinking because God is mysterious. That is not the conclusion.

The better relation is that inquiry continues under creaturely humility. We test interpretations, study Scripture, reason, compare traditions, examine fruits, and correct ourselves - while refusing the fantasy that successful theology makes God mentally containable.

The person can therefore submit without pretending not to think, and think without pretending thought is sovereign.

Faith seeks understanding. Understanding does not abolish the creature-Creator distinction.

CHAPTER 44

Grace Is Not a System

The last safeguard is the same as the first: God is not the map.

This book can become another white box: a defined structure of what grace is, where it appears, how it behaves, and what it should produce. That would be useful only up to a point.

Grace is not valuable because it fits this book. The book is valuable only if it helps distinguish what grace is not, makes certain confusions less likely, and returns the reader toward God, Christ, repentance, forgiveness, worship, and faithful participation.

The deepest claim of the book is therefore intentionally not a definition.

Grace begins in God before it becomes our concept, reaches us before it becomes our achievement, and remains larger than every representation by which we try to hold it.

Close the book when the Moment requires love.

PART IX

Attention and Embodied Participation

The question becomes concrete when I consider the body and attention I bring into a Moment. I can change what I eat, how I prepare, and what I pursue. Those choices affect my experience and my participation. I want to understand how this belongs within grace, while leaving room for what I have not understood about the Giver.

CHAPTER 45

Attention and the Governing Purpose

Perhaps the main point is what I am focused on. Someone may enter a Moment seeking to feel as good as possible. Someone else may seek achievement, relief, understanding, or another person's good. I often find myself contemplating God's Will and grace, asking what pleases Him. Each orientation changes what seems important enough to notice and act upon.

Attention has more than an object. It also has intensity and flexibility. I can pursue a goal with care while remaining able to respond to something unexpected. I can also hold that goal so tightly that anything outside it appears to be an obstacle. The same aim can occupy a very different place in my relationship with the Moment.

The gym makes this visible to me. Training hard to build muscle feels different from arriving without a fixed plan and following the session more intuitively. Yet a plan can free attention by reducing the decisions I need to make. Intuition can involve listening carefully, but it can also follow whatever impulse happens to be strongest. Neither description alone establishes how faithfully I am participating.

Here the immediate object of attention differs from the governing purpose, or *telos*. Counting repetitions can serve the larger purpose of caring for the body. Listening closely to another person can express a love of God without requiring an uninterrupted internal commentary about God. A purpose can organize an activity even when it is not the explicit subject of every thought.

What pleases Him therefore becomes a question about the life this attention produces. Micah directs attention toward justice, kindness, and walking humbly with God. Galatians describes the Spirit's fruit in qualities including love, patience, gentleness, and self-control. These passages offer criteria for discernment rather than a ranking of mental states. Contemplation itself remains answerable to love; Paul makes even extraordinary spiritual knowledge insufficient without it. [1–3]

Focusing on grace can change what I notice, and what I notice can change what I offer another person. That is a meaningful possibility. It also leaves a question open: am I becoming more available to what love requires, or increasingly occupied with observing my own spiritual condition?

Inquiry as an Expression of Love

I want to clarify the purpose of this inquiry. When I examine how I am affected within a Moment, the question can be heard as a wish to manage my condition or establish that I am positioned correctly. My own account begins elsewhere: with love for God, and with an interest in the nuances of these experiences. A question about myself can be one way that a wider love gives direction to attention.

The traffic encounter developed in *Fine Lines* makes this distinction concrete. I can remain uncertain about what caused the immediate sensitivity while recognizing why I want to contemplate it afterward. The reaction and the inquiry have related but distinct histories. Love for God as the motive of the inquiry neither explains every emotion in the event nor makes every action within it right.

I hold the experience at a slight distance so that it can be described, considered from more than one perspective, and revisited. There may be a use in hindsight: several accounts could make a pattern or distinction clearer than one account can. Keeping them also allows a later interpretation to answer to what was actually recorded, including what I did not understand at the time.

These records would be accounts of lived experience. They could help us compare attention, felt changes, relations with others, and the meanings I give them. They would not by themselves measure grace or establish which events were caused by divine action. That limit leaves room for a useful inquiry: the experience can be examined carefully while its theological interpretation remains open.

A record should preserve the event, the feeling, the question, and the proposed explanation without quietly turning one into another. It should also preserve correction. If an explanation mistakes love for God for a wish to secure an ideal self-image, that difference matters to what we are studying. An interpretation has to remain responsive to the subject's clarification.

The effort need not earn its place solely through a future technique or discovery. Contemplation can itself express love. A later practical use may emerge, but attention can already have meaning as an attempt to know and respond more deeply. Within this inquiry, I want to remain faithful both to that love and to the uncertainty of what I have not yet understood.

CHAPTER 46

The Body We Bring to the Moment

Taking 250 mg of caffeine before training gives me a markedly different experience from going without it. My approach to the session changes, and so does the way I relate to people. This raises a spiritual question because the body through which I participate has changed. It does not, by itself, tell me that God's graciousness has increased or decreased.

Another example begins the evening before. If I eat a lot of granola bars and sleep poorly, I can arrive at the gym with my gut feeling bad. I experience that Moment differently from one in which I have eaten well and slept well. This is an account of what I notice in my own experience. It does not establish which ingredient or habit caused a particular symptom, or that a food has a fixed spiritual meaning.

The practical distinction is between my physical condition, the experience available to me, and what I do within it. Discomfort can occupy attention I would otherwise give elsewhere. Feeling energetic can make some actions easier. Neither condition determines the meaning of every response: I can act patiently while uncomfortable, and I can overlook someone while feeling excellent.

Caffeine provides a useful reminder that these comparisons have bodily complications. It can increase wakefulness and energy, while sensitivity varies and anxiety or restlessness can occur. Suddenly going without habitual caffeine can bring withdrawal symptoms, including irritability and difficulty concentrating. A caffeine-free day may therefore include withdrawal rather than represent a settled baseline. [4]

Within this book's broad account of grace as sustaining life, the body belongs within participation. Eating, sleeping, resting, and preparing can matter because they affect the person who arrives in the shared Moment. Caring for those conditions can be an act of responsibility. It cannot place God in debt or make a comfortable experience evidence of greater divine favor.

Reduced capacity also creates occasions for receiving. I may need another person's patience, practical assistance, or permission to acknowledge a limit. Paul's account of grace remaining sufficient while an affliction persists prevents bodily ease from becoming our sole criterion. The account does not tell us that every discomfort was deliberately sent to teach a lesson. [5]

My condition changes what I can bring to the Moment. It also changes what I need to receive from it. Both belong in an account of participation in grace.

CHAPTER 47

Grace Within and Beyond Our Initiative

I seem to encounter two perspectives. In one, grace is received within and shared through me. I experience myself willingly participating, expressing something that feels consonant with God's goodness. In the other, grace seems to be at work beyond me, and I find myself being drawn into it or used by it before I fully understand the larger movement.

These are provisional descriptions of experience. They do not establish a new taxonomy of divine powers. By being one with grace, I mean a sense of willing communion and participation; I am not claiming to become the source of the gift. By being used by grace, I mean taking part in a good I did not originate or fully direct. My judgment and willingness still matter.

Two distinctions are entangled here. One concerns where something is encountered: within my experience or through the world beyond my initiative. The other concerns my mode of participation: receiving, responding, or giving expression. They can combine in more than one way.

Distinction	One perspective	Another perspective
Where it is encountered	Within my awareness or willingness	Through other people and circumstances
How I participate	Receiving help or being changed	Responding and giving expression

A willingness to forgive may be experienced inwardly as something received. Joining another person's effort to help can be an active response to something encountered outside my own plans. An event can therefore involve both perspectives. Paul speaks of his own labor and grace working with him together; the relationship between divine initiative and human action need not appear as a simple alternation. Christian traditions differ on how that relationship should be explained. [6]

Being affected by a circumstance is not enough to identify it as God's guidance. Circumstances can include confusion and harm. The interpretation remains open to examination through truth, love, responsibility, and the good of those involved. Calling something grace cannot exempt the response from discernment.

The distinction is useful because it makes room for participation that exceeds my preferred sense of agency. I may find meaning in giving, but also in accepting help, changing direction, or joining a good that was already underway. What changes is my relation to the gift, without that change allowing me to calculate the Giver.

CHAPTER 48

Participation and the Wish for Control

The wish to understand grace can become a wish to use it for a specific end. If I can change my focus or condition now, can I change how grace is exercised next? There is a practical question here about consequences, and a theological question about whether those consequences disclose a reliable mechanism of divine action.

My choices can affect a shared situation. Listening before replying may alter what another person feels able to say. A boundary may interrupt something harmful. Preparation may leave me with more attention to offer. These are possible effects of participation, even when I cannot secure the result. Grace as gift also leaves the end I desire open to correction: I may seek help winning an argument and come to recognize a need to understand or apologize.

Ephesians describes grace as gift while connecting the recipient's life with good works. This allows action to matter without turning it into a claim that a chosen result is owed. A practice can express receptivity; it does not establish authority over what God must give. [7]

A mathematical model could begin with a narrowly defined human outcome. Let Y mean a specified constructive outcome, A a deliberate response such as listening before answering, R a comparison response, and C the relevant circumstances. A proposed quantity would be:

$$\Delta = P(Y \mid do(A), C) - P(Y \mid do(R), C)$$

P means probability; do means deliberately choosing the response. The expression asks how much the chance of Y differs between the two responses in comparable circumstances. No numerical values or positive effect are established here. Estimating it would require an appropriate comparison and attention to other explanations, including expectations, prior relationships, and the other person's choices.

This quantity would describe an effect of an action. It would leave God's contribution unmeasured. A Christian interpretation may understand ordinary causes as means through which grace is encountered; the model alone can neither establish that interpretation nor exhaust it.

For now, the explicit principles are modest. Receiving a gift creates no entitlement to a specified result. My response can still have consequences. Felt ease cannot function as a meter of divine favor. The good I seek remains open to correction. These principles give inquiry some discipline without pretending to supply a technique for making God predictable.

CHAPTER 49

Giving and Receiving in the Same Moment

Consider an imagined gym encounter. I arrive tired and uncomfortable. Someone notices and treats me patiently. I accept their kindness, become less defensive, and later extend patience to another person. Within the theological reading being explored here, grace is encountered through someone else, received inwardly, and expressed outwardly. Receiving and giving are connected within one developing situation.

The example matters because it loosens the assumption that the best participant is always the person with the most to give. A person can contribute by receiving honestly. Accepting help may allow another person's generosity to have its intended effect. Acknowledging a limit can make a relationship more truthful. None of this guarantees that every offer of help is good or that every request must be accepted.

It also changes how I understand letting the grace of God do its thing. I can act wholeheartedly while remaining willing to reconsider my interpretation and my desired outcome. Surrender can coexist with attention and responsibility. A planned workout can remain open to adjustment; an intuitive one can remain accountable to the body's limits and to other people.

The question is therefore larger than how to generate an ideal internal state. How does a person participate faithfully when capacity changes, when giving becomes difficult, or when the good of the Moment begins somewhere beyond their own plans? I do not need to resolve every aspect of grace before taking the next considerate action or accepting the help actually offered.

My participation takes shape through my focus and bodily condition, in relation to other subjects and circumstances. It can continue when I cannot hold all of those relations clearly at once. The inquiry remains open at precisely the place where I discover that I am both someone who can respond and someone who still needs to receive.

Appendix A - Core Distinctions

Distinction	Why it matters
Grace / Merit	Grace is gift; merit is what is claimed as deserved.
Grace / Experience of grace	The theological reality is not identical to the participant's feeling or interpretation.
Grace / Human graciousness	A human can embody grace-shaped participation without becoming the source of divine grace.
Forgiveness / Permission	Releasing vengeance does not require allowing continued harm.
Forgiveness / Reconciliation	Reconciliation requires relational conditions beyond unilateral forgiveness.
Capacity / Worth	More present capacity can create more possible service without creating higher human value.
Surrender / Passivity	Surrender of sovereignty does not erase creaturely participation.
Humility / Self-erasure	Creaturely smallness before God does not require denying gifts, agency, or responsibility.
Grace / Permissiveness	Grace can oppose evil while refusing to reduce the person to evil.
Representation of grace / Grace	A theology, feeling, or model is not identical to God's gracious action.

Appendix B - Scripture Map for Later Expansion

This working edition is conceptual rather than a verse-by-verse biblical study. A later revision should build a full Scripture apparatus around the themes below, carefully reading each passage in context rather than using verses as slogans.

Grace as gift / not wages: Romans 3-5; Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:1-10

Grace and Christ: John 1:14-18; 2 Corinthians 8:9; Titus 2:11-14

Grace in weakness: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Grace and transformation: Romans 6; 1 Corinthians 15:10; Titus 2:11-14

Grace and approach to God: Hebrews 4:14-16

Grace and community / gifts: Romans 12:3-8; Ephesians 4:7-16; 1 Peter 4:10

Forgiveness and mercy: Matthew 18; Luke 15; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:12-13

Grace and holiness: Romans 6; Hebrews 12:14-15; 1 Peter 1:13-16

Appendix C Sources for Part IX

These sources support the scriptural interpretations and limited caffeine observations in Part IX. The proposed mathematical expression is a conceptual model of human participation, with no estimated effects.

- [1] [Micah 6 verse 8](#). Justice, kindness, and humility as criteria for faithful living.
- [2] [Galatians 5 verses 22 to 23](#). The fruit of the Spirit and the qualities of participation.
- [3] [First Corinthians 13 verses 1 to 3](#). Spiritual knowledge and gifts considered in relation to love.
- [4] [MedlinePlus Caffeine](#). U.S. National Library of Medicine overview of caffeine effects, individual sensitivity, and withdrawal. Consulted 9 September 2026.
- [5] [Second Corinthians 12 verses 7 to 10](#). Grace in the presence of an affliction that remains.
- [6] [First Corinthians 15 verse 10](#). Human labor and grace working together in Paul's account.
- [7] [Ephesians 2 verses 8 to 10](#). Grace as gift and a life directed toward good works.

Working Questions for the Next Revision

- Is grace best treated as one reality with several aspects, or do important theological distinctions require a more explicit taxonomy?
- How should Protestant 'favor' language, Catholic accounts of sanctifying / created and uncreated grace, and Eastern Christian participation / divine energies be compared without flattening them?
- What exactly is the relation between grace and God's love? Are they coextensive, or does grace name God's love under the condition of creaturely need, sin, finitude, or gift?
- Can 'grace-bearing capacity' be retained as a useful human-level term without implying that saving grace is transferable between subjects?
- How should common grace, saving grace, sanctifying grace, charismatic gifts, providence, and mercy be distinguished?
- How should grace relate to judgment, hell, election, predestination, free will, and universal divine desire without forcing one denominational settlement too early?
- What is the Fine Line between trusting grace and presuming upon grace?
- How does grace operate in the Body of Christ when one member has more present capacity than another?
- Can grace be empirically studied only through proxies and fruits, while its divine source remains theological?
- What does it mean to say that grace is 'in itself' if every human account is creaturely and mediated?

Questions arising from Part IX

- How can I distinguish a change in bodily capacity, a change in felt closeness to God, and a change in the way I participate?
- When does attention to grace help me respond to others, and when does observing my spiritual condition consume the attention the Moment requires?
- How do receiving inwardly and being drawn into a good beyond my initiative overlap without erasing agency or treating every circumstance as divine guidance?

Closing Sentence

The creature does not climb into grace by becoming worthy of God. Grace is the mystery that God gives before the creature can become the kind of being who knows how to receive the gift properly - and then continues giving while the creature learns to live from what it has received.