

Grace in the Old Testament
A Series on the Difference Between Grace and Forgiveness: Part 1

When someone offends you, do you forgive or give grace? When you offend someone, do you seek forgiveness or seek grace? In today's culture, forgiveness and grace are often seen as synonyms and used interchangeably; but, do they really have the same meaning?

Grace is the English translation for the Greek noun "charis." In the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, the most common Hebrew noun that the Greek translation is based on is "hēn." Before the birth of Jesus Christ, what did "grace" mean in the Old Testament?

In the Old Testament, "hēn" is a voluntary act among human beings where a stronger person comes to help one who is weaker by circumstance or natural weakness. The act is a reflection of the stronger person's favorable inclination towards the weaker; however, human being often express "grace" with an expectation of a reciprocal favor.

He also commanded them saying, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: 'Thus says your servant Jacob, "I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed until now; I have oxen and donkeys and flocks and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find **favor** (hēn) in your sight.'"" (Gen 32:4-5)

In this instance, Jacob is attempting to ingratiate himself with Esau. Jacob seeks to merit and obligate Esau's "grace."

But Hamor spoke with them, saying, "The soul of my son Shechem longs for your daughter; please give her to him in marriage. Intermarry with us; give your daughters to us and take our daughters for yourselves. Thus you shall live with us, and the land shall be open before you; live and trade in it and acquire property in it." Shechem also said to her father and to her brothers, "If I find **favor** (hēn) in your sight, then I will give whatever you say to me. Ask me ever so much bridal payment and gift, and I will give according as you say to me; but give me the girl in marriage." (Gen 34:8-12)

Shechem clearly uses "hēn" as a conditioned transaction (i.e. if you do this, I will do that).

In other instances, in which human beings express hēn," the activity is more in line with the meaning of a stronger person's favorable inclination towards the weaker.

So they said, "You have saved our lives! Let us find **favor** (hēn) in the sight of my lord, and we will be Pharaoh's slaves." Joseph made it a statute concerning the land of Egypt valid to this day, that Pharaoh should have the fifth; only the land of the priests did not become Pharaoh's. (Gen 47:25-26)

When the Egyptian people deplete their money and livestock to purchase food, Joseph purchases their lives and land and provides them with food and seeds; however, he only asks that the people share only 1/5 of their harvest with Pharaoh (Gen 47:13-24). In this instance, the Egyptian people felt indebted, because they recognized that Pharaoh did not treat them as genuine slaves. They sought to serve Pharaoh in gratitude and prove themselves worthy of his grace.

Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Listen carefully, my daughter. Do not go to glean in another field; furthermore, do not go on from this one, but stay here with my maids. Let your eyes be on the field which they reap, and go after them. Indeed, I have commanded the servants not to touch you. When you are thirsty, go to the water jars and drink from what the servants draw." Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground and said to him, "Why have I found **favor** (hēn) in your sight that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?" (Ruth 2:8-10)

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Here Boaz's act approaches the meaning of divine grace. In this instance, Ruth is the recipient of Boaz's grace, because he recognized her love for her mother in law and Naomi's God (Ruth 1:16-17; 2:11-12).

When used to describe God's act with a human being, divine "hēn" includes the meaning of "favorable inclination;" but, because of ontological differences, God's "hēn" is not with the limited sense of a human being.

The Lord said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them." But Noah found **favor** (hēn) in the eyes of the Lord. (Gen 6:7-8)

In this instance, God's "hēn" is against the background of judgment of the great "wickedness of man" (Gen 6:5). As the only man who walked with God, righteous and blameless (Gen 6:9), Noah was saved from God's judgment (Gen 6:13); God's "hēn" was conditioned on Noah's faith.

But the Lord was with Joseph and extended kindness to him, and gave him **favor** (hēn) in the sight of the chief jailer. (Gen 39:21)

Although Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his sons (Gen 37:3), the Bible does not indicate why God was with him; but, God's "hēn" was dispensed through other human beings who saw and treated Joseph favorably.

So I will stretch out My hand and strike Egypt with all My miracles which I shall do in the midst of it; and after that he will let you go. I will grant this people **favor** (hēn) in the sight of the Egyptians; and it shall be that when you go, you will not go empty-handed. (Ex 3:20-21; 11:3; 12:36)

In keeping with His covenant promises to Abraham (Ex 2:24-25), God's "hēn" was dispensed through Egyptian citizens who saw and treated the nation of Israel favorably when they embarked on the Exodus.

The Hebrew meaning of "hēn," as a superior person favorably inclined towards a weaker individual, originates and is established by the Old Testament text. This grace is seen among human beings; however, it is also express as a means to manipulate those they perceive as superior for a beneficial return.

God's "hēn," His favorable inclination, is a divine example of what God means by grace. It is an act by a superior with no expectation of a reciprocal return, and God may use other human beings through which to dispense His grace. God extends His grace:

- 1) When a human being has a genuine faith in God, and
- 2) To the people of Abraham in upholding His covenant promises to Abraham.

It is through the prism of God's commitment to His covenant that God's grace is seen as "unmerited favor;" but, to inherit God's covenant promises, one must have a genuine faith in Him.

References:

1. Brown C, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, (1979).