



## atonement series #1

g<sup>r</sup>ace: the savior's generous and earnest invitation

Come forth unto me

3<sup>n</sup>ephi 11.<sup>13-17</sup>

<sup>13</sup>\**The Lord spake unto them saying:*

<sup>14</sup>*'Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world.'*

<sup>15</sup>*"And<sup>1</sup> the multitude went forth, and thrust their hands into his side, and did feel the prints of the nails in his hands and in his feet; and this they did do, going forth one by one until they had all gone forth, and did see with their eyes and did feel with their hands, and did know of a surety and did bear record, that it was he, of whom it was written by the prophets, that should come. <sup>16</sup>And when they had all gone forth and had witnessed for themselves, they did cry out with one accord, saying:*

<sup>17</sup>*"Hosanna!*

*Blessed be the name of the Most High God!'*

*"And they did fall down at the feet of Jesus, and did worship him."*

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<sup>1</sup> The '\*' that will often be found in quotations from the Book of Mormon, indicates that I have dropped the ubiquitous "And it came to pass" from the quotation.

We are studying atonement under ten titles:

“Fall: Our Need of Atonement”

“Grace: The Savior’s Generous and Earnest Invitation”

“At-one-ment: The Savior’s unity and connectedness with us”

“Sacrifice: What Jesus Suffered for Us”

“Glorification: The Savior’s Resurrection, Ascension, and Enthronement”

“Justification: How We Repent and Change”

“Renewal: The Hope, Joy, Peace, and Power of Atonement”

“Sanctification: Imitating and Living a Life of At-one-ment

“Thanksgiving: In Praise of Atonement”

“The Song of the Righteous: A Prayer unto me”

We will cycle through this series of titles several times, each time examining different scripture passages that reflect each title. As part of this *1st Series*, we have already explored our first title, “Fall: Our Need of Atonement,” through a study of Alma 34.<sup>8-9</sup>. Here, Amulek instructs a live audience as to humankind’s need for atonement. His instruction is intense and uncompromising. He uses extreme and repetitious vocabulary, and utilizes a simply literary device known as an envelope in order to highlight and emphasize his point.

*Front side of envelope:*

“According to the great plan of the Eternal God there must be an atonement made...”

*Message:*

“...or else all mankind must unavoidably perish; yea, all are hardened; yea, all are fallen and are lost, and must perish...”

*Back side of envelope*

“...except it be through the atonement which it is expedient should be made.”

Amulek’s extreme and, often, unnecessary language—the repeated “all,” the redundant “all” proceeding mankind, and the unnecessary “must” before “unavoidably”—all this illustrates the intensity of Amulek’s own feelings about the need, his appreciation for Jesus’ revelation of atonement, and his intense desire to drive the point home to a reluctant audience.

In examining “Grace: The Savior’s Generous and Earnest Invitation” as part of our *1<sup>st</sup> Series*, we will remain in the Book of Mormon and explore one of its most cherished narratives: The Savior’s personal visit to the Nephites as found in 3 Nephi. We will limit our study to 3 Nephi 11.<sup>12-17</sup>.

#### the lead up

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Due to a series of storms and other natural disasters that lasted several days and were unlike any other in their recorded history, Nephite society is in shambles. A large percentage of the population has perished in the catastrophe. After nearly a year,<sup>2</sup> the infrastructure and institutions that hold society together still lay in ruins. Survivors remain in shock,<sup>3</sup> uncertain how to regroup and rebuild.

While the human cost in lives and emotional well-being is not to be trivialized, this experience also serves as a kind of metaphor or parable; symbolic of our need of atonement. The individual Nephites and Nephite society that are in free fall, with individuals and institutions incapable of jump-starting themselves, are a metaphor for the fall spoken of so often in scripture. The need that individual Nephites and their society have for something extraordinary if there is to be a reconstitution of man and society is a metaphor for the state of all humankind.

Something extraordinary *does* happen in Nephite history. First, they hear a voice, repeatedly, as if it came from the skies. It is the most extraordinary voice, bringing with it the most extraordinary emotional and physical effects, even though its message is not quite clear.

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<sup>2</sup> See 3 Nephi 8.<sup>5</sup> and 3 Nephi 10.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>3</sup> 3 Nephi 11.<sup>1</sup>

“It was not a harsh voice, neither was it a loud voice; nevertheless, and notwithstanding it being a small voice it did pierce them that did hear to the center, insomuch that there was no part of their frame that it did not cause to quake; yea, it did pierce them to the very soul, and did cause their hearts to burn.”<sup>4</sup>

Looking up from whence the voice seems to originate, “they saw a Man descending out of heaven; and he was clothed in a white robe; and he came down and stood in the midst of them...”<sup>5</sup> But this could not be a man. Perhaps, they thought, he was an angel. But, no, this was neither man nor angel. This was Jesus Christ. God, Himself. The God of the Nephite people. The God of the Book of Mormon.

\*“He stretched forth his hand and spake unto the people, saying:

‘Behold, I am Jesus Christ, whom the prophets testified shall come into the world. And behold, I am the light and the life of the world; and I have drunk out of that bitter cup which the Father hath given me, and have glorified the Father in taking upon me the sins of the world, in the which I have suffered the will of the Father in all things from the beginning.’”<sup>6</sup>

We glean much from this divine self-revelation. Prophets can speak of him in the third person. “He is this.” “He is that.” “He did this.” “He did that.” “He wants this.” “He wants that.” But there is simply nothing, nothing like a God speaking of and for himself. “I AM.” So, we will come back to this self-revelation at a later time. But, for now, we wish to turn to and bask in the Savior’s generous and earnest invitation.

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<sup>4</sup> 3 Nephi 11.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>5</sup> 3 Nephi 11:<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> 3 Nephi 11.<sup>10-11</sup>

“Come forth unto me.”

There are some words that, if I had my way, would be exorcised from the LDS vocabulary. “Spirit prison.” That’s one. I am pretty sure it is not a prison. “Spirit school” is more like it, if I do not misunderstand my Mormon eschatology. I am even more certain that God doesn’t place people there as punishment. Rather, they are there for their own protection and instruction. It is an act of divine mercy.

“Do ye suppose that ye shall [be required to?] dwell with him under a consciousness of your guilt? Do ye suppose that ye could be happy to dwell with that holy Being, when your souls are racked with a consciousness of guilt that ye have ever abused his laws? Behold, I say unto you that ye would be more miserable to dwell with a holy and just God, under a consciousness of your filthiness before him, than ye would to dwell with the damned souls in hell. For behold, when ye shall be brought to see your nakedness before God, and also the glory of God, and the holiness of Jesus Christ, it will kindle a flame of unquenchable fire upon you.”<sup>7</sup>

No, any punishment that might be dished out at “spirit school” is self-imposed. But, as I so often say, that is a subject for another homily.

“Commandment.” That’s another word far, far too profligate in our vocabulary and culture. The God whom we call, “Father,” and the God we call “Son,” do way, way, way more instructing and inviting than they do commanding—this too deserves its own homily, or two, or ten.

But it is absolutely certain, beyond certain, beyond the proverbial shadow of a doubt that these four words, “Come forth unto me,” are by way of invitation, not commandment.

“Come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may

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<sup>7</sup> Mormon 9.<sup>3-5</sup>

feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet...”

his generosity...

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To call the invitation that Jesus extended to Nephites present at the time of his descent, his condescension, “generous” and “earnest” is an understatement of gigantic proportions.

First, we will say that this invitation is “generous” in both kind and degree. What do we mean?

It is generous in kind because, well, look who is being invited! Don’t be fooled by the fact that “it was the more righteous part of the people who were saved,”<sup>8</sup> preserved in the storms and natural calamities. Given the horrendous state of society before the catastrophes, it is not libelous to say that the bar was not all that high. Besides, remember, “All are hardened; yea, all are fallen and are lost.” Why, even at our best, when we might be serving God “with all [our] whole souls,” we are, even then, “unprofitable servants.”<sup>9</sup> “All”—really, Isaiah? You’re going to go there? Pull an Amulek?—“*All* our righteousness are as filthy rags.”<sup>10</sup>

Though resurrected and glorified, this is the same humble Jesus who was so open, so extravagant in his invitations during his mortal ministry.

“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden...”<sup>11</sup>

No, this “multitude” is composed of pretty ordinary Joes and common Sallys. It is a multitude of folks laboring under and laden with all sorts of spiritual toil and burdens, just like their brothers and sisters on the other side of the globe.

And yet, look how generous Jesus is in degree! “Thrust!” “Feel!” “Touch my wounded

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<sup>8</sup> 3 Nephi 10.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See Mosiah 2.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 64.<sup>6</sup>. “Filthy rags” is “menstrual cloth.”

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 11.<sup>28</sup>

body.” “Make contact, interact with my resurrected, glorified, divine body!”

Oh, the intimacy of it all! Oh, the generosity of it all! Is there any evidence, anywhere, of his love for and commitment to us greater than that which is found in these wounds? These prints, even the prints in his feet, Oh, how beautiful they are!

“O how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that is the founder of peace, yea, even the Lord, who has redeemed his people; yea, him who has granted salvation unto his people; for were it not for the redemption which he hath made for his people, which was prepared from the foundation of the world, I say unto you, were it not for this, all mankind must have perished.”<sup>12</sup>

Yes, to hear him *speak* of himself is glorious and wonderful. But to be allowed to touch him, touch him intimately, touch the greatest, most blessed tokens of love in the universe, it is almost too much. Beyond words. What atonement! What at-one-ment! What connectedness!

Yes, this invitation to touch was an act of atonement. When the invitees are finished touching him, there will be a powerful bond, an unbreakable link, a blessed and cherished connectedness. Now that’s generosity!

... **a**nd earnestness

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I suppose you’ve been a concert, a fair, a sporting event, and hopped in your car to leave only to find yourself waiting, and waiting, and waiting as thousands of other people attempt to exit at the same time.

I have no doubt that our Book of Mormon “multitude” is far more orderly and polite than those impatient crowds of spectators, but, it is quite the multitude—2500, according to the text’s estimate.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Mosiah 15.<sup>18-19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> 3 Nephi 17.<sup>25</sup>

“This they did do, going forth one by one until they had all gone forth, and did see with their eyes and did feel with their hands...”

Just how earnest is Jesus about his invitation, “Come forth unto me,” would you say?

Very, I’d say.

“One by one.” “One by one” they ALL went forth. Every single one of them seems to have had their own personal audience with Jesus as they “did see with their eyes and did feel with their hands” his wounds, his tokens of love.

I suppose that you’ve considered this before, but I’ll ask anyway. How long would it take 2500 people to stand, form a line, approach, touch, say what they needed to say, hear what they need to hear, and move away? How long did each individual have with the Savior? How long to touch his wounds? No doubt, it varied according to the need, as Jesus always serves the one as the one needs served. Nevertheless, we are talking about a lot of time. Hours. And hours.

Just for kicks, lets assume each person was given just 15 seconds—this seems unrealistically short, but, hey, it’s just for kicks. That means it took ten and one-half hours for everyone to meet with and touch him. It seems likely that it was longer—hours longer. Now, I know Jesus has all the time in the universe, but still, he is ministering to time-bound mortals. There’s much they need to learn. There’s much he has to say. He can cover a lot of ground through group work.

But, there is nothing more important than the individual, the one. There is nothing that will teach each member of the multitude more about God and his economy, nothing that is likely to change who he or she is and transform their character than to touch his wounds, token of his love, his fidelity, his atonement, his attachment.

Yes, Jesus is pretty earnest in his invitations. He’s pretty committed to being there for those



who need him, whatever it takes and however long it takes.

They did cry out

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Jesus has conducted his final audience. Everyone has now seen and touched for themselves. The 2500 individuals are, once more a multitude. But it is a united multitude. They have experienced for themselves Jesus' at-one-ment. They have felt the unity into which he willingly enters with them. His example of oneness is infectious.

“They did cry out with one accord...”

Now, I know that this can be read simply as a mundane statement that they all cried out together, at the same time. Some have read it in the belief that the multitude's “Hosanna,” was part of a planned cultic event. Maybe. But, however one understands their joint cry, it seems reasonable to see it as a symbol of the multitude's unity—an initial oneness that would last two hundred years. Even the ministry of a prophet as powerful as Alma could only produce a few years, possible a dozen years at best of unity and peace. But when Jesus ministers personally, one by one, he can raise peace and unity to a whole new and higher level.

“Hosanna,” as you no doubt know, means something like, “Save us,” or “Save now.” It sounds like a request and a hoped-for future. But, here, it seems to me, we hear something else. I, at least, hear, “He has saved us.” “He has saved us now.”

I suppose that one could conclude that the multitude's “Blessed be the name of the Most High God!” is uttered to God, the Father. But, I think not. The Most High God is standing right before them in the person of Jesus.<sup>14</sup> The Most High God has stood for hours ministering to them one by one in the most intimate fashion. They cannot remain standing. And they cannot remain neutral.

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<sup>14</sup> Not that it really matters, as Father and Son are so deeply one.

“And they did fall down at the feet of Jesus, and did worship him.”

Don't you dare ever let anyone tell you, as it has been told me, that we honor, but do not worship Jesus; that we worship one God, Heavenly Father! This is false on more levels than we can count. But... yes, you guessed it, that's a discussion for another time.

## g<sub>race</sub>

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We have discussed the generosity and earnestness exhibited in the invitation that Jesus extended to the 2500-people-strong multitude of Nephites: “Come forth unto me.” Inasmuch as this is our first homily concentrated on our title, “Grace: The Savior’s Generous and Earnest Invitation,” we thought it might be a good idea to say a few words about that first word: “grace,” and how we see it relating to this and all subsequently studied invitations.

I grew up LDS. Sat in thousands of meetings as a child, youth, young adult, young husband, and young father. I was nearly thirty years old before I heard this word, “grace,” spoken in an LDS meeting appreciatively. That’s changed, thankfully, but as I was growing up, I only heard grace spoken of pejoratively. It was something other people believed in. If I were a painter, I could paint you a picture of the familiar and beloved faces, the countenances of my fellow Mormons as they belittled and scoffed at the concept and those who believed in it. I loved this people, these scoffers. It brings me no pleasure to point out their unjust and prejudiced ignorance and criticism.

It was in 1985 that I first heard “grace” spoken positively in an LDS meeting. I remember the date because the utterance came from my own mouth. Believe me when I say, in my preparations for my address I struggled mightily with whether or not to use the word. Would tomatoes fly? Would I be called into the bishop’s office afterwards? Would anyone ever again listen to a word I had to say? Trust me, I looked for another word. But it was the perfect word to describe the perfect Being that I had encountered on a perfect day in my very own, very imperfect “prayer closet.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Alma 33.<sup>7</sup>

Today, wiser than we once were, we use the word appreciatively. We most often speak of grace as “enabling power.” In this usage, “grace” is something we possess as a bestowal from God. So, upon reflection, the reader might be a little surprised by my statement that grace is the perfect word—as if it were an adjective—to describe a “perfect Being”—God. We might use the adjective, “graceful,” to describe God, but not the noun, “grace.”

Well, let’s think about this noun for a moment. A number of my friends and family members enjoy watching one or more of a plethora of dance shows and contests that are broadcast on TV. On occasion, a dancer will move them through his or her dance movements and/or emotional projection. On such occasions, I might hear something like, “She’s so graceful.” I might, however, just as easily hear, “She possesses such grace.” I could be wrong, but I don’t think such art enthusiasts mean, “she possesses enabling power,” or “she bestows enabling power.” They are saying something about the character of the dancer herself; about the perceived beauty of the dancer and her performance.

While you are thinking on that, another example of how the word is used might be in order. It is common for some to offer “grace” before a meal. Here, we might think of a Spanish speaker with their, “gracias,” or an Italian with his or her, “grazie”—“thank you.”<sup>16</sup>

That’s grace.<sup>a</sup>

What does the dinning petitioner, the Spaniard, the Italian mean when they offer up their “grace.” Maybe “enabling power” can be found somewhere in there. “May the meal enable me.” That could work. “Thanks,” says the Spaniard or Italian, “for enabling me with your word, act, gift, etc.” That could work too, I suppose. But, they might just as likely be expressing appreciation, saying “thank you for your kindness and help.” In fact, it would seem that “thanks” works better than some form of enabling power in these examples.

So, in the case of the dancer we have an expression of awe at the character of their

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<sup>16</sup> And similarly, of a Frenchman with his “merci.”

performance when we speak of their “grace.” We see an expression of “thanks” for our having been moved by it. In the case of our petitioner and receiver, we hear an expression of thanks and appreciation.

Here, it seems to me, we get closest to the idea of “grace.” When we “thank” another, we express gratitude and appreciation. Our gratitude and appreciation suggests acceptance. We accept, appreciatively, the meal. We accept, appreciatively, the kindness.

What, then, does scripture mean by “the grace of God”? First, “grace” is a quality possessed by deity. Like a dancer, God is, in Himself, beautiful and moving. His character moves. This is part of what I wished to describe all those years ago. I had met the most beautiful of Beings.

Second, God is accepting, as implied in the “thanking.” He is appreciative of us. He actually likes and enjoys us. He is a Being of massive goodwill. This is the second thing I discovered in my imperfect secret closet, and wished to express when I spoke of his grace. Though I had approached him in weakness and sin, God was not disdainful of me. He appreciated my approach, and accepted me by taking me into his embrace and fellowship. His will to do good to and for me was extraordinary, some might say excessive. His goodwill toward and acceptance of me was, and is to this day, the most incredible thing I have witnessed or experienced—or expect to experience—during my short sojourn on earth. The grace, the beauty of His Being was such that I do not anticipate ever seeing any more impressive a Being throughout the duration of eternity.

If we are to find the idea of “enabling power” in the grace of God, it is not because grace *is* enabling power. It is because enabling power *flows from* the grace of God. It may seem like nitpicking, but the difference is real and meaningful. When we see how accepting and goodwilled he is, we are more than encouraged. We are, indeed enabled. We can move forward boldly, without fear of error, knowing that he will accept us and appreciate us in our failed attempts to do and be what we think we should do and be.

Thus, “Grace: The Savior’s Generous and Earnest Invitation.” Jesus could and did

generously and earnestly invite the Nephites, through touch, to enter and understand one of the most sacred and powerful moments of his life—and thus of the cosmos—his passion.<sup>17</sup> He welcomed them into fellowship with him because that’s exactly the kind of Being he is: a Being full of grace, acceptance, and appreciation. In the many decades, centuries, and millennia since that great Nephite multitude’s experience of his grace, he hasn’t changed. Not one wit.

## Conclusion

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Nephite society was in shambles. It had fallen. Many had perished. Many more felt lost. Recovery seemed far off, if even possible. Into this void, this chaos, Jesus strode or, rather, descended. Better yet, condescended—condescended because he came down to be “with,” associate, and form connections. He would spend hour after hour on that first day, inviting individuals, one by one, to “come forth unto [him]” and intimately handle his resurrected and glorious body; to feel, understand, and appreciate through the wounds that decorated his celestial body his commitment to them. He did this because... well... he could do nothing less. That is the kind of being he was and is. That is the kind of grace he possesses. It is the kind of grace that any may witness and be moved by if they will but arise and come and look and feel.

We marvel at his invitation and their privilege. We almost envy them. We look forward to the day when we may be so blessed, for we too are invited to come forth, look, and feel.

“Look unto me in every thought;  
doubt not, fear not.  
Behold the wounds which pierced my side,  
and also the prints of the nails in my hands and feet...”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> This is not a “Mormon” bit of vocabulary for Jesus’ suffering and death—which we, inappropriately, in my view often call “his atonement.” “His atonement” existed long before the passion that occurred at the end of his mortal ministry and will last long, long past it. But, while it may not be a word that fits comfortably in Mormon lingo, it is scriptural. “To whom also he shewed himself alive after his passion [could be translated ‘suffering’] by many infallible proofs....” (Acts 1.3).

<sup>18</sup> DC6.<sup>36-37</sup>

Until that day, we will always remember and trust in His inner, His characteristic, His dispositional goodwill. We will raise our voice in awe, in gratitude, and in hope.

“Hosanna!

Blessed be the name of the Most High God!”

Without hesitation or shame, we will “fall down at the feet of Jesus, and... worship him.”

“Even so, come, Lord Jesus”!

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<sup>a</sup> The Hebrew word most commonly associated with the English translation, “grace” is *ḥānan*. For those who wish it, here is a brief summary of the word, its meaning, and connotations.

This is Hebrew *ḥānan*. While basic lexical information and historical etymologies can never tell the whole story, it seems wise to begin exploring the meaning of words at this level before moving to the specific literary context. With that in mind, we can begin by saying that “the basic meaning of the root *ḥnn* is ‘grace’.... The noun is first a term of beauty. It denotes an aesthetically pleasing presentation or aspect of someone or something, and is properly the quality someone or something possesses. The response to this projection of beauty is also *ḥēn*, ‘favor.’ The derived sense is used in Hebrew primarily for the pleasing impression made upon one individual by another.... The verb *ḥānan* means ‘be gracious,’ being used almost exclusively in the derived sense, ‘show favor’....

“Two basic meanings are distinguished in Arab. *ḥanna* : (1) ‘yearn or long for,’ and (2) ‘feel tenderness or compassion,’ ‘express sympathy.’ The latter is more closely connected with the Hebrew root.... Common to both Arabic and Hebrew is the use of the respective verbs in situation that presuppose a prior alienation” (*TDOT*, Vol. V, p. 22, 23).

“*ḥnn* is used of favor shown in personal relationships; it can refer to ordinary acceptance or kindness, or else favor of a special nature, such as pity, mercy, or generosity. In the latter case, the usual limits established by law or custom are transcended.... *ḥnn* is active acceptance and active favor. To be gracious means to aid the poor, feed the hungry, deliver those in distress from defeat and death. In all cases *ḥnn* is a positive term” (*TDOT*, Vol. V, p. 24).

“In the basic stem the verb □□□... denotes the kind turning of one person to another as expressed in an act of assistance. The root meaning ‘to stoop,’ ‘to be inclined’ has been conjectured. But □□□ does not just denote the kind disposition and then the outer act as something detached from the inner mood. It rather means the attitude of a person in its direction to another in a specific gracious action.... It expresses gracious address to another” (*TDNT*, Vol. IX, p. 377).

Based on the Hebrew, then, we could say that *ḥnn* is first something that God possesses within his own being. It is part of His character. It is a trait he possesses. It is independent of human existence and experience. However, in encountering God, the human can experience pleasure from this divine character trait. When a human experiences the “grace of God” he experiences the “pleasing” aspect of God. He experiences God’s “impressive character” and the “good-pleasure” or “good feelings” God possesses for him. These good feelings God possesses toward him often results in God’s assistance toward him.

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*hûs*, “be compassionate, show compassion, be sorry for, pity, sympathy for.” In poetry, parallel with *hanan*. “The construction with ‘ayin (‘eye’) may preserve a more original sense: ‘the eye overflows [undoubtedly with tears] concerning (‘al) a person or thing,’ i.e., the actual subject weeps or suffers on account of something or some situation. It is easy to see how this earlier meaning could be used to express emotions thought of in less concrete terms, especially pity” (*TDOT*, Vol. \*, p. \*).

Greek, *χάρις*, is what delights.” (*TDNT*, Vol. \*, p. \*). It has much the same range of meanings as Hebrew, *hānan*. It can mean “charm,” “sympathy,” “kindness,” “gladness,” “favor,” “acceptance,” “goodwill,” “generosity,” etc.