

First Peter No. 28 “The God of All Grace”

1 Peter 5:10-11

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Text Comment

- v. 11 The statement in v. 10 is an inclusio, matched by the statement in chapter 1:3-7 where the same thing is said at greater length in very similar language. In other words, by saying the same thing at the beginning and the end of his letter, Peter has identified his primary theme. So, for 1 Peter, we might conclude that the title of the letter is “Present Suffering for Christ leads to Eternal Glory.” Or, “The God of all grace will sustain his People and Lead them to Glory.”

We are almost finished with Peter’s first letter. Peter has all the while been speaking about faith in the teeth of the persecutions which these particular Christians were suffering at the time he wrote the letter. He urged them from the beginning of his letter to its end, with some asides along the way, to stand firm, no matter the cost to themselves. And he gave them reasons for doing so. He told them that their suffering was in the highest and ultimate sense sent from God himself to test and to purify their faith and therefore they had reason to expect good and holy things to result from these trials. What is more, those who were persecuting them would someday have to give an account to God for the evil they had done to his people. In other words, their heavenly Father would in due time see to the vindication of his children. But, Pete conceded, they had to think *in the long term*. There was no divine promise that a Christian wouldn’t lose his life for his faith in Christ or, as the Savior himself, die with many thinking that he got what he deserved, or suffer the loss of things in this world that he or she would never recover! The future may belong to us but only if we have the faith to believe that.

Then Peter argued, Christians need to embrace the fact that suffering in this life, especially suffering for one’s faith, offers believers an opportunity to share in their Savior’s suffering, to identify with him, and to love him in a most practical and important way by imitating him who suffered for doing good. All of that, Peter said, would be to their immense joy and satisfaction and honor when Jesus Christ was revealed. And, most recently, from the 6th verse of chapter five, Peter assured them that in the midst of their trials God cared for them; they were not forgotten. Finally, he reminded them that the Devil also had a role in their troubles and that it was every Christian’s duty to resist his evil work in every way they could.

In these final two verses of the argument Peter then sums up the whole by offering this final encouragement to the saints. You may suffer a while longer – though however long, it will be a “little while” compared to your eternal glory! – but the God of all grace will restore you and make you and keep you strong! God will help you and see to your perseverance and your eventual triumph! Soli Deo Gloria!

The God of all grace will do this is how Peter puts it. And that is our subject this evening: the God of *all grace*. And what precisely is that grace? Grace; it is a common word in the Bible as you all know. Peter uses it ten times in his first letter. It is an important word in the Bible. It is

probably safe to say it is one of the *most important* words the Bible. But it has become a religious word and like other religious words that are commonly used it is a word we get used to and stop thinking about: words like “glory,” and “faith,” and “holy,” and even “God.” We find it easy to use such words without much thought; certainly, without careful thought. Think of the phrases “holy cow” or “Oh my God,” or “faith-based organizations,” or “glory be!” In no such expression does the true meaning of the word bear any resemblance to its use or show any understanding of its actual meaning. When my nephew was a little boy he was asked to pray at table and he began, “Dear heavenly Father, for his own glory...” Just words without meaning, familiar words, too often spoken too little considered. How often do we do very much the same thing, speak them without really any thought or conviction?

We grew up learning that grace means “unmerited favor.” And it means that to be sure. It also very definitely includes the idea of love because in the Bible it is frequently virtually a synonym for love. Also, for mercy. All of these things are included in the idea of grace. But it is much more than that. It is not merely an affection that resides in God’s heart, it is the energetic commitment, it is the powerful determination of Almighty God to work in the lives of human beings, to change their minds and hearts, to create faith in Christ, and to move the will to embrace the Lord and his salvation. Grace is what lifts them up out of sin and death and eventually delivers them to heaven. Grace is love at work, it is God’s affection combined with God’s power; it is mercy shown to the undeserving at the critical point. God’s grace is what the good news is all about. We are bereft of any hope of eternal life; we are consigned to face the judgment of God alone and helpless *apart from the grace of God*. Grace is for the desperate!

But so much of the time grace is less than that in our thoughts and words. We come to take it for granted. We sing “Amazing Grace” but are only rarely actually *amazed!* Don’t forget, *the Pharisees believed in grace*. They thought God was loving and merciful toward his people. But they fashioned a view of themselves, of sin, and of salvation that transformed God’s grace from the mighty, mysterious, unpredictable, thrilling things it is into mere leniency on God’s part, a willingness to overlook faults for those who were doing at least the bare minimum. Grace was reduced to little more than cheerful goodwill.

And in our day, our antinomian day, a day when nobody is thinking about the Judgment of God, a day in which we are preoccupied with ourselves, a day in which we have learned that affirming ourselves and others is more important than virtually anything else, and in which we have developed a program or a process for almost any kind of self-improvement, it was inevitable that grace would be denatured. It was impossible that when “do your own thing” and “believe in yourself” are the mantras of our culture we would not have trouble keeping grace truly grace!

But, since “grace” is an important biblical word, Christians must use it, even if they accommodate it to a less than fully biblical concept of grace. So, for example, some years ago an advertisement for a “grace-based” diet plan came across my desk. No counting calories; no making of the overweight feel guilty; all was affirmation. I have a feeling there was not much weight loss in the “grace-based” diet plan either. And, more seriously, many pastors speak about grace so often, so constantly that two inevitable consequences ensue. *First*, the subject begins to bore people because only the very rare preacher can preach what is effectively the same sermon Lord’s Day after Lord’s Day and make the subject fresh and powerful every week. And *second*,

the other subjects of Holy Scripture that together form the context of the biblical understanding of grace are ignored or underrepresented in the preaching and the result is that grace unwittingly comes to mean something else, something much less. You cannot understand what the Bible means by the grace of God unless you are thoroughly instructed in and impressed by its teaching of the full extent of human sin and guilt, the hardness and foolishness of the human heart, about the reality and ferocity of the wrath of God, about the inevitability of divine judgment and the nature of that judgment. But those subjects are getting short shrift in our time. So, grace becomes commonplace because it has been reduced to God's kindness to nice people like us, not the personal intervention of the Almighty to rescue helpless sinners. What is more, one cannot understand divine grace if he doesn't realize that this amazing grace is entirely compatible with struggle and trial in the Christian life, with times of spiritual darkness and defeat, with moral failure, with doubt, and even with a sense of abandonment by God and even with risk. The Bible rings the changes on all of that reality even while it proclaims the grace of God. Peter does that here, in fact.

So here's the problem: much of the time, God forgive us, *we are either bored with God's grace, or confused by what it actually is and what it brings to pass in our lives.* We're so used to the idea of God being loving and merciful we take that for granted while struggling to understand why God, being loving and merciful, doesn't treat us better than he does. In any case, far too much of the time we are not deeply moved by the grace of God, we are not amazed by it. I tell you, and you yourselves know, that if at any moment we could see ourselves in hell, suffering the just punishments of that place and that condition of human existence – I won't call it "life" – all on account of our insufferable devotion to ourselves and our cherished sins against God and man; or if for just a moment, we could see ourselves in heaven, with that broad smile upon our faces and with the tears of joy streaming down our cheeks, looking with amazement at all those surpassingly beautiful and glorious things in that place where you and I have no right to be; or if at any time we could be carried back to that day at Calvary and see the Lord Christ shedding his blood and giving up his life for us and hear him cry out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"; or if more often we could physically feel, as some of us have had some experience of feeling, the absolutely delicious feeling of the love of God and the peace that passes all understanding and the joy of everlasting salvation suddenly filling our hearts; I say, you wouldn't think God's grace a small thing, an ordinary thing and you would be the furthest thing from bored. You would be astonished, abashed, thrilled, and grateful beyond words. Your heart would sizzle!

Grace is not the tame, familiar thing we let it become through long familiarity! Grace is a mighty thing, as mighty as God. It is even, in some ways, a dark and difficult and dangerous thing. Why? Because it is the power in this world that separates human beings from one another for time and eternity. It places the believer on the other side of a great chasm, separated sometimes from people you love deeply and dearly. Our Savior said it would. It would divide even the members of the same family from one another. It requires you to deny yourself and take up your cross. It is a terribly powerful thing, this grace. It creates new life in the hearts of the dead, but a life they didn't necessarily ask for, and, in some respects, a life they didn't necessarily want. It sustains and protects God's people day by day and year by year when they are assaulted by all the cunning and all the power of the evil one seeking their destruction. There is a mighty battle in this world and the Devil is on one side and the grace of God is on the other side. And aware of

the desperate nature of this battle and the terrible stakes of either victory or defeat, even the Apostle Paul, the champion of God's grace, warned the Corinthian believers not to receive the grace of God in vain! How can the grace of God be received in vain? Paul does not say, but he warns us nevertheless not to receive the grace of God in vain. [2 Cor. 6:1] Divine grace is no guarantee to anyone who does not embrace it, depend upon it, live by it, and nurture it.

What is more, and of this I am sure, there is not a Christian in this room who has anything more than the barest idea of how much divine grace he or she needs or consumes in any given 24-hour period. As the 17th century Puritan William Jenkyn once put it, "There are as many miracles wrought as a saint is preserved minutes." [*Commentary on Jude*, 1680] To the unbelieving world grace is a harmless idea. They don't believe it, but it is harmless enough for Christians to believe it. It is simply positive thinking, confidence that things will turn out well. Don't the self-help gurus tell us that those who think positively will enjoy better results? So they don't mind our talking about the grace of God. They don't mind, that is, until we remind them that the grace of God means, for example, that a Nazi war-criminal who repented at the end of his life – as perhaps one or two of them did - or David Berkowitz, the famous serial killer the Son of Sam, could go to heaven while the victims of their crimes might not because they died without that grace of God. Then they despise the grace of God, they think it a terrible thing, horribly unjust even cruel. So everyone thinks until they come to realize that they too are terrible sinners, utterly unworthy of God's grace.

Take, for example, one of my favorite illustrations of this reality, of which church history furnishes us with such a vast number. There was a man in Japan, Tokichi Ichi, who was hanged for murder in 1918. He had been sent to prison more than twenty times in his life before he was finally executed. Tokichi was famous in the criminal community for the ferocity of his cruelty. When punished, even when tortured, it was a matter of principle with him that he would never apologize, never acknowledge that anything that he had done was wrong. And, of course, as a Japanese in the early years of the 20th century he knew nothing about and cared nothing about Christ or the Christian gospel.

But just before he was tried that last time, Tokichi was sent a Bible by two women missionaries. After a follow-up visit by one of them, Tokichi began to read the story of Jesus' trial and execution. He came to the sentence, just one sentence, "And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'" And God's grace, that mighty power with love and mercy behind it, tore open that man's heart in that Tokyo jail cell and in a moment changed him root and branch, transformed him into what Paul called a "new creature in Christ." He knew almost nothing about the Christian faith, but grace had taught him this!

"I stopped: I was stabbed to the heart, as if by a five-inch nail. What did the verse reveal to me? Shall I call it the love of the heart of Christ? Shall I call it His compassion? I do not know what to call it. I only know that with an unspeakably grateful heart I believed."

Now *that* is divine grace, perhaps only more obvious in Tokichi's life than yours, but the same thing with the same result. In his case just a sentence in the Bible was all it took because God's mercy and love and power was in that sentence. After he was sentenced to death, Tokichi, suddenly a completely new man in ways that baffled everyone who knew him, accepted his

sentence as, he said, “the fair, impartial judgment of God.” Near the end, he was directed by those same two lady missionaries to the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:8-10 where the Apostle paradoxically describes the Christian as “sorrowful yet always rejoicing,” “poor, yet making many rich.” Of those words he wrote shortly before his death.

“People will say that I must have a very sorrowful heart because I am daily awaiting the execution of the death sentence. This is not the case. I feel neither sorrow nor distress nor any pain. Locked up in a prison cell six feet by nine in size I am infinitely happier than I was in the days of my sinning when I did not know God. Day and night...I am talking with Jesus Christ.

“As poor, yet making many rich.” This certainly does not apply to the evil life I led before I repented. But perhaps in the future, someone in the world may hear that the most desperate villain that every lived repented of his sins and was saved by the power of Christ, and so may come to repent also. Then it may be that though I am poor myself, I shall be able to make many rich.”

That, brothers and sisters, is the grace of God; that is the dramatic and wonderful change it creates in human beings, and that is the grace that is in our hearts too if we are Christians. That is the mighty, mysterious work *that God has done in us too* if we are his children. And that is the grace that will bring you, Peter says, at last to the heavenly country, to that place where you would never, could never have got by yourselves. That is what grace is and what it does. It is so powerful, so utterly outside of our control, so mysterious in its operation, so unexpected and sudden its results, and so majestic in its result that it could take a cruel and heartless murderer and, in a moment, turn him into a humble lover of Christ and a lover of other human beings, whom, up to that moment, he had treated with indifference, scorn, and cruelty. A man who refused to admit that his life had been evil suddenly was a man who not only readily admitted that he deserved to be executed for his crimes, but accepted his fate with peace because he knew his life was in the hands of his heavenly Father.

Tell me, if you can, is there a greater transformation that ever occurs in human life? A more wonderful, more surprising, more inexplicable, more unexpected event in human life? A man or woman can get from poverty to riches by buying a lottery ticket. In fact, someone is bound to win such games. Someone will get rich. You can get much prettier with plastic surgery. You can open doors of opportunity that would otherwise be shut to you by getting a good education. You can become a better athlete, even a famous athlete at least in part by devoting yourself to the craft of that sport. You can become happier by marrying well or getting a good job. But a human being can get from moral and spiritual badness to moral and spiritual goodness, he or she can get from hell to heaven, from the wrath of God to peace with God, from Satan’s kingdom to God’s family *in only one way*. Angels themselves, powerful as they are, are not strong enough to make a bad heart good. And what is more, nobody else in all the universe has enough love to want to make multitudes of bad, ugly hearts good and to put up with the bad until they are finally completely good. When human hearts are as disagreeable as ours, only one person has both the willingness and the ability to change them. And so he has in vast numbers and so he does today and will do until the end of time.

We often, I think, tend to underestimate the power and working of divine grace because, after all, we remain quite sinful people in this life and it doesn't seem to us that the difference God's grace has made is as great as all that. It is true; you will never see the full difference, until you can see a man who is made perfect in heaven there with the glory of God upon his life and compare him with a man who is now in hell, all the restraints removed and the full effects of his sinfulness and selfishness made obvious to all.

But that is the difference that grace makes. It is the difference between heaven and hell, between life and death, between darkness and light, between evil and good. Already the difference exists. It can be observed in the commitments of people's lives. Nothing else makes a man or a woman want to be truly holy before God but the power of divine grace. They might want other things for themselves, but not the holiness of God. Nothing else makes a man or a woman who by nature hates God and fears God really love God except divine grace. Nothing else can make a man or a woman honestly admit the truth about his or her own badness except divine grace. And all you have to do is look within yourself and observe the life of others to know that that is true. Look at the people you know, the people around you. They don't cherish God. They are utterly unwilling to admit how genuinely bad they are.

Listen, your ministers and elders hear all the time people say that we don't understand the grace of God. I've had the grace of God thrown up to me a number of times over the years by those whom we have confronted because of their sins. I don't understand the grace of God, they say, because I continue to make an issue of their behavior. But divine grace is not leniency, it is never leniency in the Bible. It is a mighty power in a human life that transforms life according to the image of Jesus Christ. Remember Paul's fear: that people would receive the grace of God in vain. Grace is so powerful it can compel a Christian man or woman to repent of sin, to strive to live a holy life, and to persevere in that life no matter the hard work, inconvenience, and weariness required. People who know the grace of God never content themselves with a life they know is displeasing to God.

Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all!

Grace begins the Christian life and it continues it to its end. It is sovereign and irresistible. Christ didn't ask Paul whether he'd like to believe in him. He told Paul that he was now a Christian and that he would suffer much in serving Jesus Christ. And for the rest of his life that was what Paul was: a suffering servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. God didn't ask Justin whether, after that conversation on the beach that introduced him to the gospel, he was willing to lay down his life for Christ. Grace made him willing to be martyr. God didn't ask Martin Luther if he wanted to become the most hated man in Europe when his grace opened Luther's heart to the meaning of the gospel in that Erfurt tower. But that is what God's grace made of Martin Luther and it was God's grace that enabled him then to live that terribly difficult life. And so it has been God's grace in your life and mine that made us Christians in defiance of our indifferent and stubborn hearts and then has preserved us in that faith through disappointment, confusion, and trial. Powerless to disobey the summons of God and unable to turn aside from the way of Jesus Christ, we have followed on because we cannot help it. God's grace is more powerful than we are.

There's a southern aphorism that goes like this: "When you find a turtle on top of a fence post, you know it did not get there by itself." Well so it is when you find a human being following Christ. He didn't simply change his mind or turn over a new leaf. There has been a total change of that person's nature. He could no more effect that himself than he could give himself life in the first place. But God can and does. God speaks and it is so. That is divine grace – that mighty power, that new creation, that incomprehensible transformation of a man and a woman.

And surely Peter is absolutely right to say that once a man or woman has felt the force and the power and effect of that divine love and that divine power in his or her heart he or she has nothing to fear from the troubles and trials and tribulations of life. If God be for us, who can be against us?

A book full of stories of the grace of God is Benjamin Brook's *The Lives of the Puritans*, a three-volume set of short biographies of significant English Puritans of the 16th and 17th centuries. One of Brook's short biographies concerns one Richard Rothwell, who was born in 1563. He became a follower of the Puritan school only later in his life. Rothwell was a precocious student as a young man, graduated from Cambridge University and then, as was the case with most men of academic brilliance in those days, he was ordained to the ministry of the Church of England even though he knew absolutely nothing about and cared even less for the grace of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ, a sad fact true of many Anglican priests in those days. Indeed, in the early years of his ministry there wasn't a thing that remotely resembled Christian discipleship or the love of God. In fact, the man was a thief and a bully. On one occasion he was caught red handed killing a deer on another man's property and when the owner caught him at it and tried to keep him from taking the dead animal, Rothwell beat him up and tied him to a tree where he remained through that day and the following night before somebody finally found him and let him loose. Rothwell did not have an attractive personality, much less was he a man who betrayed any evidence of Christian commitment. And then one day Brook, says, everything changed. [ii, 349-350]

It pleased God to *send his grace* to this man and to put an end to this behavior and this is how it happened. He was playing bowls one Saturday afternoon with the most profane men in the next town. A Mr. Midgley, the vicar of that town happened to walk by. Mr. Midgley felt he couldn't just pass by without saying something, so he pulled Rothwell aside and read him the riot act. He said how disappointed he was that a Christian minister should be spending his Saturday, not only not preparing for his responsibilities on Sunday, but spending it in profane company, with men who had no interest in the gospel of Christ. He could have sought to win those men to Christ, but to encourage them in a sinful way of life was no business for a Christian minister. Well, what do you suppose would happen if you said something like that to somebody like that today? He'd probably respond exactly like Rothwell did – he was infuriated; he was offended! He told Midgley to mind his own business and turned his back and walked back to his game. It wasn't until the game was over and he was walking home that Midgley's rebuke rose unbidden, unwanted, but irresistibly in his mind. His mind for some reason would give him no rest. He didn't want to think about what Midgley had said; he had no interest taking the rebuke to heart. He hated the man for saying what he had said. But he could not get the rebuke out of his mind. To make a long story short, the next morning he was found in Midgley's church, instead of his

own, listening to Midgley preach. Under the spiritual instruction of that good old man, Rothwell became a Christian himself, a serious Christian and a faithful minister.

His new convictions revolutionized his life and his ministry and brought him almost immediate persecution. Not only from the unbelieving church authorities, but from his own parishioners who were happy to have had the ministry they used to get from Mr. Rothwell but did not like the ministry they were getting from him now. In fact, on one occasion an attempt was made on his life by his own parishioners. He persevered, the Lord helped him, and made him a singularly effective gospel minister. He was known for a saying he repeated often: "Persecution is the pledge of future happiness." [351] Apparently he had read First Peter!

Just one of ten thousand accounts of the grace of God. It wasn't Rothwell himself. He would never have changed; he didn't want to change. God reached down, decided it was time in that man's life. God suddenly, unexpectedly transformed that man root and branch into a different man altogether, a man he would have despised the day before. Rothwell hardly knew what hit him! And then God's grace set him on a course that proved difficult, taxing, even dangerous and yet the same grace that began his new life confirmed and strengthened him in it. This is Peter's point precisely. Divine grace will not necessarily prevent suffering, but it will prevent any lasting harm, it will steel the soul to endure hardship, and it will guarantee the believer's eventual triumph. Peter himself suffered a martyr's death not many years after he wrote this letter but because of God's grace, because of that powerful work that had been done in him, Peter's death like his Savior's before him was more the beginning of his life than its end.

A last word from Charles Spurgeon, who devoted his life to proclaiming the grace of God since it met him and changed him suddenly and forever that snowy Sunday morning when he was 15 years of age.

"Ah, the bridge of grace will bear your weight... Thousands of big sinners have gone across that bridge, yea, tens of thousands have gone over it. I can hear their trampings now as they traverse the great arches of the bridge of salvation. They come by their thousands, by their myriads; ere since the day when Christ first entered into his glory, they come and yet never a stone has sprung in that mighty bridge. Some have been the chief of sinners and some have come at the very last of their days, but the arch has never yielded beneath their weight. I will go with them trusting to the same support; it will bear me over as it has borne them." [Cited in Murray, *Forgotten Spurgeon*, 164]