

*Read also Isaiah 49:8-16*

You are driving down a busy highway and someone yields to let you in when you find yourself in an “exit only” lane but you need to be two lanes over to go straight. THAT’S GRACE.

You call your best friend on her birthday to unload about something that has happened to you. You never say “Happy Birthday!” because you forgot it was her birthday. You also forgot to send her a card. Three days later you remember, call her, and she said, “Don’t worry about it! I’m not celebrating those anyway!” THAT’S GRACE.

You get a new kitten and name her Gracie because she’s so sweet, but after living with her for three weeks her name demands a change to Little Devil. But you decide not to give her to your mother. THAT’S GRACE.

Grace. How do you define it? According to Paul, it’s best defined by a contrast. Someone is grace-filled as compared to something else. You know it is grace when someone yields in traffic because most people do not yield. I felt the grace of my friend compared to my thoughtlessness. With cats, grace typically does not exist at all, except on your part!

Paul writes to Ephesus to teach them about God’s grace. It is God’s number one identifier throughout the Bible. Do you think of God as a God of judgment in the OT and a God of grace in the NT? Do not make that error. The Old Testament defines God as

*Gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to forgive iniquity, transgression and sin.* (see Ex. 34:6f; 2 Chron. 30:9; Neh. 9:17, 31; Joel 2:13; Jon. 4:2)

So grace is God’s identifier. To understand God’s grace we have to see it in contrast – our contrast. Here it is. READ Eph. 2:1-3.

SIN is not an appreciated word these days. The other day, listening to K-LUV’s (98.7) morning show, I heard a discussion on, *what makes you a bad person?* It was seriously hard for anyone to say someone was bad. The worst person described was someone who went to the library and changed books around. Now while the radio station discussion was “tongue-in-cheek,” Paul’s discussion is serious.

He says sin permeates this world; that it’s in the air we breathe; it’s a spirit at work which brings spiritual illness, that works out in disobedience; through the passions of our flesh and desires of the mind. It’s this overwhelming shadow on the world.

Some people have fantastic stories of being rescued from sinful lifestyles, with their lives being transformed. Josh Hamilton tells such a story, which you have heard. Others say, “I haven’t really done all that stuff. I was raised in a Christian home and never rebelled.”

But God says, “All have sinned and fall short of God’s glory” (Ro. 3:23) The Bible says, “We have all (like sheep) gone astray; we have turned to our own way” (Is 53:6).

And this breaks God's heart.

"The LORD observed the extent of human wickedness on the earth, and he saw that everything they thought or imagined was consistently and totally evil. So the LORD was sorry he had ever made them and put them on the earth. It broke his heart" (Gen. 6:5-6).

So what do you do with a broken heart?

What would you do?

Destroy them?

Be angry forever?

Pay them back? Make their lives miserable?

God thought about it. But God couldn't do it. Why not?

*For the LORD your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him" (2 Chron. 30:9).*

Now, let's read the contrast of our sin, as Paul describes it: READ Eph. 2:4-7

God chose to forgive, not condemn. That seems utterly amazing, considering how hard forgiveness is for us, but Scripture tells us, even though . . . "the wages of sin is death, the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Ro 6:23).

That's GRACE. It is a FREE GIFT.

Did you hear it? God grace –

- rich in mercy;
- great love for us;
- makes us alive together with Christ;
- raised us up with Christ, making us sit with Him in heaven;
- in order that HIS GRACE SHOWS.

It's immeasurable.

And, it is not only for the future, for heaven, but it is attainable right now, right here, in this life.

The Bible says, "He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Col. 1:13).

The best way I can describe it is through a story Jesus told. Now some ancient scholars (Origen, Ambrose, Augustine and even an Egyptian commentator named Ibn al-Tayyib) say that Jesus' story is actually a symbol of His actions toward us.

"And a certain Samaritan, traveling, came to a man who had been beaten, robbed, and left for dead. When he saw him he had compassion on him. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put him on his own donkey and took him to the inn,

and took care of him. The next day he took out and gave two denarii to the manager and said, 'Take care of him and whatever more you spend I, on my return, I will repay you.'" (Lk. 10:25-37)

Sometimes we fall in the ditch by our own doing. We travel down the road of life, come to a fork in the road and take the wrong exit. Other times we are ambushed by circumstances or the devil. Mostly it is a combination of both.

Yet Jesus has compassion.

Jesus is not afraid of ditches. He boldly moves in, at the risk of His own life. It was a great risk for the Samaritan to take care of the Jew in Jewish territory. Jesus comes into Satan's domain, this world whose air is even filled with the power of the prince of darkness, and picks us up, no matter how injured with sin, heals our wounds, brings us back to the right path, pays the price so that we may be with him here and now – and in heaven.

Catch a look at the expression on His face in F. G. Watt's painting and you will see the extraordinary love and compassion.

Grace is about the love and compassion and faithfulness of Christ which overcomes that shadow of sin.

So let us read Paul's famous definition: READ Eph 2:8-9

How are you responding to the GRACE God has offered? Do you see yourself as clearly needing grace? Do you rejoice in the gift, embracing it daily with all your heart, mind, and soul? Your acceptance of it is a matter of eternal importance.

And, receiving it, you are not meant to continue on that road of sin or continue to fall into the ditch, or continue to be subject to the power of evil or false powers of a self-driven, broken culture. No. God intends good for you. That is why He goes into the ditch after us, to bring us out and set us on the right road, a road which leads to a great future, both now and forever.

"For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things He planned for us long ago" (Eph 2:10).

GRACE. May your life be filled with it as we all live fully into what our God has for us.

AMEN