

Titus 2.11-14

God's Grace

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 3 March 2024

God's Good News [3]

What is grace?

If you go to church things regularly, 'grace' is one of those words you hear a lot. But what actually *is* it? If you stop and think about it, we use it in pretty confusing ways. ¶ Before a meal someone might announce, 'Let's say grace' – and then say a prayer thanking God for the food we're about to eat. At the end of a service the leader might invite us to 'say the grace' together – and then we pray, 'May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God be with us all, evermore.'

They're probably our most common uses of the word, but they don't really help us find out what 'grace' really is. Billy Graham described it as 'unmerited favour' – the opposite of karma which is getting what you deserve. Another old favourite is to turn the word into an acronym: ¶ God's Riches At Christ's Expense.

How about this one sung by Bono in U2's *Grace* **f**:

What once was hurt, what once was friction
What left a mark no longer stings
Because Grace makes beauty out of ugly things.

U2, 'Grace'

Then there's Stormzy in *Blinded By Your Grace, Pt. 2* **f**:

Lord, I've // been broken // although I'm // not worthy //
You fixed me // I'm blinded // by your grace // you came
and saved me.

Stormzy, 'Blinded By Your Grace, Pt. 2'

Here's another that I rather like, from Bryan Chapell **f**:

[Grace is] a personal action by a personal God who saved us
from our helpless situation out of pure love.

Bryan Chapell, 'Intolerant' Grace, 70

Grace is not some abstract thing. Grace is *personal* and it *does something*. Grace makes a difference; it makes *all* the difference.

For what it's worth, here's the definition of grace that I wrote at the top of my notes **f**:

Grace means Jesus is the hero of our story, not 'me'

Grace appears (11)

That's where our passage begins: **the grace of God has appeared** (11). Our first heading is: Grace *appears*. Every time but one the New Testament uses the word **appear** it refers to Jesus. First and foremost then, grace is something to do with Jesus.

The climax of the second Lord of the Rings film – *The Two Towers* – is the Battle of Helm's Deep. Let me paint a picture for you. The people of Rohan are about to be overrun by the traitor Saruman and his army of Uruk-Hai. So they retreat to **J** Helm's Deep.

Named after a king of old, it's a fortress and huge wall nestled in the elbow of the mountains. No enemy has ever breached the wall to capture the fortress.

Throughout the night, **J** wave after wave of creatures attack. But even with elven archers as reinforcements, the enemy is too strong. Then they **J** blast a huge hole in the wall, allowing the Uruk-Hai to swarm through the breach.

Just as all is lost and Rohan is defeated, Aragorn remembers the words of the wizard Gandalf: 'Look to my coming on the first light of the fifth day; at dawn, look to the East.'

Aragorn looks up and there, on the crest of a hill he sees **J** a white rider on a white horse glowing in the light of the rising sun. Either side of him appears Rohan's cavalry – and as the **J** sun bathes the valley in light, blinding the enemy, they charge down the slope and win the victory.

Those inside the fortress did their best, they fought valiantly but ultimately the enemy was too strong. They didn't need advice or a better strategy – they needed a saviour! They needed someone outside the battle to come and rescue them.

We are the same. We are in a helpless situation because the problem isn't out there, the problem is in here *point at heart*. The problem is 'me' so all my effort, no matter how hard I try – none of it will help in the end. At the bottom of a deep pit I don't need advice, I need a Saviour – someone to lift me up and set me free.

Paul says (verse 11): **the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people**. The hero of our story isn't 'me' or Gandalf – it's Jesus, who comes from outside the battle, joins us in the fight, wins the victory for us and **offers salvation to all**.

J **Jesus is the hero of our story, not 'me'.**

Although not everyone responds to his offer, it is truly given to all – and that is the basis of what we now call ‘human rights’, the dignity and worth of *all* people – they are bestowed on us by God. You can’t look inside someone and *find* their ‘human rights’.

But valuing all people – including the weak – isn’t *natural* either. Glen Scrivener says ¶ **if we look at nature we discover the survival of the fittest and the sacrifice of the weakest. But the Jesus story is different: ¶ the *sacrifice* of the fittest for the *survival* of the weakest – so we don’t just survive but thrive and pass on the story to others.**¹

The Jesus story rings true because deep down very few people *actually believe* that **we are simply clever chimps produced by a brutal evolution, clinging to an insignificant rock, hurtling through a meaningless universe towards eternal destruction.**¹

Most of us have a sense that there is something more than that, something more than can be found with a scalpel or a microscope.

That something more is what appears, what is revealed in Jesus. The word **appeared** is like ¶ a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat. Spoilers: the rabbit was already there! Paul isn’t talking about something new but the *appearing of what is already there*: which is that **Jesus is the hero of our story, not ‘me’**.

So far from being a term for religious nuts, ‘grace’ is a connection point, because it names what many people instinctively know or believe – even if they don’t realise it or admit it. It’s a way for us to say, ‘Yes’ to people – ‘Yes, you’re right; people *do* have worth and value... *and this is why...*’

Grace teaches (12)

Paul says: **the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people** (11). Our first heading was: grace *appears*. But Paul carries on; grace is *more* than an offer of salvation to which we must respond. Let’s look at verse 12:

[Grace] teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.

Titus 2.12 (NIV)

Our second heading is: grace *teaches*.

Elton John thinks ‘Sorry’ is the hardest word, but actually I think it might be ‘No’. How often have you said something like, ‘Maybe,’ or ‘We’ll see,’ or ‘I’ll think about it,’ or ‘I’m not sure,’ or ‘Let’s talk about it later’ or ‘Yes if I have time’ ? I think it’s a British thing – what we mean is: **‘NO!’**

The best lies are subtle ones that distort the truth. One such lie is that if we feel something deeply or naturally, it must have been put there by God and is therefore good. Another lie is that God loves and affirms everything about us.

The truth is that God has made us with passion and emotion, with gifts and talents and personalities. The truth is that God loves us more than we can know and accepts us as we are. That's verse 11 of our reading: grace **offers salvation to all**, no matter who we are or what we've done.

But that's only part of the truth. All of us are **j** broken. We are not born as God intended. We do not live as God intended. We are not wholly evil but our rebellious nature means we all start out as **God's enemies**; that is how Paul describes us in Romans 5.10.

That's why God has to do more than simply save us, it has to do more than simply lift us up out of the pit – he has to teach us how to avoid falling back down into the pit again! In 1880 Canon Hay Aitken described Christians as 'learners in the school of grace'² – which I rather like. Thankfully God is a patient teacher because I – we – need constant reminders and make regular mistakes. But, by God's grace – that is, with God's help – we can improve, we can learn to live as God intended.

And that's the challenge of today's passage. The school of **grace teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions** and 'Yes' to **self-controlled, upright and godly lives** (12).

Ungodliness and worldly passions cover our outward behaviour and our inward thoughts and desires. This is where things get challenging. Our hearts are ever so tricky and deceitful, and we are ever so good at self-justification, at coming up with excuses and reasons why we don't need to stop this or that behaviour, why we can indulge this or that desire.

This is one reason why Christians use Lent as a prolonged and intentional period of reflection and repentance. Life is busy – we need to take time to ask God to help us see *specifically* where we need **to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions**. Is my use of social media, or what I watch on TV healthy and good for me? Are my attitudes shaped more by *The Guardian* or *Daily Express* than the Bible? What secret sins am I terrified of sharing with another person? What makes me feel ashamed? Or the terrible question: 'Does your god go away when the lights go out?'³

At one point in the film *Shrek* the character Donkey shrieks:
 'Don't die, Shrek! And if you see any long tunnels, stay away from the light!'

But I'm telling you this morning: run *towards* the light. It is painful because the closer we draw to God, the more we know his love for us, the more we become aware of how sinful we truly are. But it is also life-giving because the closer we draw to God the more we learn the school of grace's positive lesson: how **to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age** (12).

This is how we respond to the **grace** and **salvation** of verse 11. God gives life *first*; we respond with changed lives *second*. Like the Christian life should be every day, Lent is more than turning away, it is also turning towards. That is what repentance means: turning, away from the old life of sin and self-centredness and towards the new life of godliness and self-control.

And what a witness it is when Christians truly do this, because it shows not only the truth of God's grace but its power to change and transform as well. Bryan Chapell talks about **the necessity of rigorous godliness for gospel witness**.⁴ *Repeat* For, if the world looks at us and sees no difference – why listen to what we say? At best we are irrelevant, at worst terrible hypocrites.

J Grace *teaches* – but are we willing to learn its painful and life-giving lessons?

Grace costs (13-14)

Paul can't go long without bringing it back to Jesus. Why? Because **Jesus is the hero of our story, not 'me'**. Verse 13 **!**:

We wait for the blessed hope – the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

Titus 2.13-14 (NIV)

Who **gave himself**? Jesus.

Who **redeems us from all wickedness**? Jesus.

Who **purifies for himself a people that are his very own**? Jesus.

This is grace. We respond, but our part – being **eager to do what is good** – is wrapped in all Jesus has done for us; *he's* the hero.

Yesterday I was preparing this sermon. Having had a few days off I had a lot to do, so Jess cooked dinner by herself. When it was ready she called me through to the kitchen – and afterwards she cleaned up so I could go back to my study to carry on working. (We normally share better than that!)

I didn't prepare the bean chilli, nor did I clean up afterwards. My part wasn't much – it was simply to eat and enjoy what she had given me. Jess gave, I responded.

That is how grace works. Only it isn't a meal God gives, it is his precious Son. For grace – all God has done for us and gives to us in Jesus – is offered freely and generously, but it was not cheap. Grace costs. It cost the Father his Son. It cost Jesus his life – paid willingly, given lovingly – but oh! what a cost!

The glorious truth of grace is that Jesus willingly and lovingly paid the costly price **to redeem us from all wickedness**. The glorious truth of grace is that Jesus's precious blood washes and purifies us so we can be **his very own** people – **eager to do what is good**.

This is the better story of the gospel, better than every other story. And **Jesus is the hero of our story, not 'me'**.

Yes but how?

As I've been speaking, maybe people you know and love have popped into your head as you've thought, 'I could share that with her,' or, 'He really needs to hear that,' or, 'Next time I see her I might tell her that.' My hope is that this series helps us grow in confidence in what the gospel is, and how to share it with others.

Here are a few tips from today's passage.

1. Sharing the gospel doesn't begin with learning to talk about Jesus, it begins with us responding to God's grace. We need to be saved. We need to be learners in the school of grace. If we aren't, no matter how powerful or eloquent our words, no-one will listen. And nor should they.

2. Join the dots. Before we speak, first we need to listen. What people think, their worldview, is like a 'join the dots' picture. At first glance it looks like a random collection of stuff. But most people do think there is something more, even if they don't realise it – our job is to show how the dots join up to show Jesus.

3. Show Jesus is the hero. Sharing our testimony, our story of faith, is important. Some of us have a story of conversion like John Newton – captain of a slave ship who wrote *Amazing Grace* – or St Paul. Many don't; but that's nothing to be ashamed of. Don't invent or exaggerate your story – but do make Jesus the hero. Here's a simple phrase anyone can use: 'I couldn't have got through X without Jesus.' Or, 'my parents / friends believed in Jesus, lived like it, and I wanted to be like that too.' The focus of our testimony isn't *our* transformation but *his* grace. **Jesus is the hero of our story, not 'me'.**

Grace appears... grace teaches... grace costs... how might you respond today to the wonderful gift of God in Jesus? How might you become a learner in the school of grace? How might you share this better story with someone who doesn't know Jesus yet?

Let us pray.

¹ Glen Scrivener, *Post-Christianity podcast, Faith and Faithfulness*, 23 November 2023.

² Quoted in John Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, (Nottingham: IVP, 1996), 193.

³ Bryan Chapell, *'Intolerant' Grace*, *Reformation & Revival*, Vol. 7 No. 3 (1998), 77

⁴ Chapell, 87.