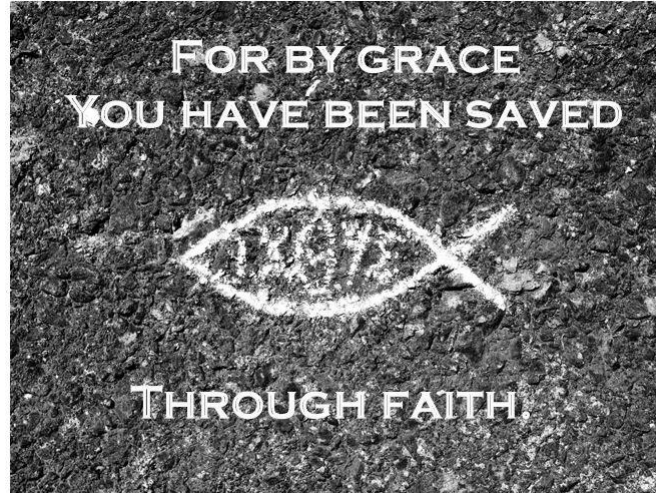


THE GIFT OF FAITH



Scripture:

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

¹O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. ²Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, those he redeemed from trouble ³and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

¹⁷Some were sick through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities endured affliction; ¹⁸they loathed any kind of food, and they drew near to the gates of death. ¹⁹Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress; ²⁰he sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from destruction. ²¹Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind. ²²And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices, and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

Ephesians 2:1-10

¹You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



THE GIFT OF FAITH

The Apostle Paul started this passage out with, “You were dead.”

In this teaching for the people of the church in Ephesus, he helps them reflect back on their lives before they had faith in Jesus. Paul reminds them that they lived their lives in fleshy, sinful, irritable ways before they followed the way of Jesus. Paul’s goal was that they would realize it is the grace of God that gives us the chance to have faith if we decide to pick it up and accept the faith offered to all of us through God’s amazing grace.

Faith is a gift given to us by God’s grace, but we can best utilize our gift of faith when we are open and aware and willing to share. Trusting in God’s grace leads us to have faith. There is a mutual dynamic between grace and faith.

THE SPIRIT OF GRACE

Mark Nepo says it this way: Faith is like someone falling off a boat. When you struggle against the water, you only make things worse. But when you breathe slowly, relax, stretch out your arms and look up to God you can settle into the water enough to let it carry you.

Close your eyes for a moment. Imagine and trust God. Have a willingness to accept and relax and breathe into grace which is the genesis of faith. Imagine you are like a fallen leaf afloat in a lake. You stretch out and surrender to the water and let it hold you up. That is God’s grace helping you float.

Like the fish can’t see the ocean they live in, we can’t see and totally comprehend the spirit of grace that is all around us.

Are you grateful for God’s amazing grace that led to your faith?

GRACE, PRAISE AND GRATITUDE

The *Amazing Grace* hymn says, “’Twas grace that brought us safe thus far and grace will lead me home.” And then it ends with

“We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise than when we’d first begun.”

Grace, praise and gratitude all go together. Grace and gratitude are also the key ingredients in the formula for fortitude and resilience, too!

Gratitude plays a huge role in the Christian life because as Christians our daily lives should shout out “Thank You!” to God through our actions and our words and our relationships with others. When thankfulness dwells in our souls it spills out our mouths.

When you are sincerely grateful for God’s grace and mercy that has allowed you to still remain here on earth, you realize that your time is short but your life has a purpose. The purpose is to not act dead until you have to, but to live each day as a gift from God. Live a faithful grateful life and share your life with others.

GRATIS

It’s interesting to discover how all of this is reflected in the meaning of words we commonly use and how they relate to each other.

The word for grace is related to the word for gratitude. In Greek *charis* is “grace” and *eucharis* (Sacrament of communion) means “gratitude or thanksgiving.” The English word “grace” comes from the Latin word, “gratis,” which means favor, free (no charge). All of this is in the word “gratitude.” Grace is gratis. God gives it to you at no charge. So we respond with gratitude!

When you take time to be in touch and aware of God’s grace, and accept it as unconditional love, undeserved and unearned, your life is happier. And you are thankful for God’s love that was grafted into your heart and embedded into your soul when you were created in the heavens and sent to earth as stardust.

Our lives are meant to be one big overflow of praise for God's grace spilling out over the edges and enabling us to accomplish everything we do in our work, our families, our churches, and in what we do to show love for our neighbor. What we do, how we live, what we accomplish matters only because it all flows out of God's grace!

THE PRE-CHRISTIAN LIFE

In the book of Ephesians, Paul, is referring to the pre-Christian life when he says you were dead. He is talking about how the sins of the world cause us to destroy ourselves. Alcohol, drugs, hate, isolation, greed, gossip are the things people cling to when they have no faith in God.

When you feel God's grace and have trust in God's unconditional love, then you take better care of yourself and others. Faith heals because it gives you hope for a better future and happiness every day.

Author, Dennis Waitley said, "Happiness is the spiritual experience of living every minute with love, grace, and gratitude."

CHOICES

James Altucher is a finance blogger and author of the book: *I Was Blind but Now I See*.

Altucher blogged about the two choices a person can make to get rid of the stress from depressing disappointments in life. He says:
CHOICE #1: We can say, "Well life sucks. So why should I contribute? It's just all horrible and it's not my fault, so heck with it."

Or

CHOICE #2: We can say, "I'm going to do something positive. I'm going to replace the negative with a positive. I won't let the dark side win."

Then he told the story of a young man who came up to him at a book signing and thanked him for his work. He asked the young man to tell him more about himself. So he said, "My name is Tim. I was six years old when I watched my dad executed on national TV. He was on death row. He killed six families in a steak house and then another family by the road."

Altucher learned that Tim's father and mother tried to rob a steakhouse. They didn't get away with it. And many people died.

Tim went on to say, "I was in and out of fourteen foster homes growing up. Everything bad you can possibly imagine happened to me,"

Tim said, "It was horrible. All my life, I kept wondering what was the point of this horrible life. Then when I was seventeen, I got a job doing construction. I had no other skills. I wasn't going to school. I was a nothing. I was upset and bitter all the time. But the great guy I was working for told me to go to a veterans meeting with him. So I went.

The veterans had seen the worst things you can see in the war. They had done the worst things you can do. I told them my story and they laughed at me. They said, "Listen, you think you are at the bottom? Your bottom is better than ninety-five per cent of the rest of the world."

So Tim started to have faith in himself and began working on real estate projects where in exchange for helping with his construction abilities, he would take part ownership (fifty-fifty in most cases) of the real estate.

He told Altucher, "I have millions of dollars in real estate now, and everyone I partnered with is in business, so I spend a lot of time connecting people up. I introduce good people to each other. If two people are good and you are the reason that even more good happens in the world, then you will benefit." Tim added, "I made a choice to be the best person I could be and turn the bad things in my past into something positive.

“When I was young, kids at school used to beat me up. They would shout that I was the “son of a serial killer!” But I’m not anymore. Now I know and have faith that I am a beloved child of God.”

GOOD NEWS

Spiritually speaking, Paul’s perspective is that without faith, we are dead. But there is good news, and it is the same good news that sparked the entire Reformation. It’s the good news that has transformed millions of lives these last two millennia. And the news is this: it is by grace you were saved through faith. And you didn’t have to do anything to deserve it. Just be grateful - or not. It’s not about doing, but only about receiving.

When you accept God’s grace deep down inside you, it is going to bubble up into the rest of your life! You can’t hold it in. It’s like when you shake up a can of Pepsi. When you open the can, it’s going to explode because the fizz was already in the can to begin with. Grace and faith in God is in you to begin with. So overflow with thanks and praise to God.

You were dead, and now you are alive. Or how John Newton said it: “I once was lost but now I’m found, was blind but now I see.”

If Paul was alive today, he would say, don’t be zombies, don’t be the walking dead.

Be alive in Christ. Be alive to the goodness of God in all of your life. Even the low times, and the struggles can help us feel alive. Without the clouds we would not be grateful for the sun. Without struggle there would be no peace. Thanks be to God for our faith that comes from the ineffable gift of grace! Amen.

Benediction:

Let God’s grace hold you and lead you to a deeper awareness of faith as you float through the forty days of this Lenten season. We are halfway there! And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever more. Amen



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