

The church - a creature of grace

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[0 : 01] Grace. It's one of the most used words in a Christian's vocabulary, isn't it? The Christian journalist Philip Yancey calls it the last best word.

Listen, he says to how we use the word. We say grace before meals, acknowledging what is before us is a gift from God. We are grateful for someone's kindness and gratified by good news.

Those are grace words speaking of thankfulness and pleasure. A musical composer may add grace notes to a musical score. They are not necessary, but they make the melody more pleasing, more beautiful.

And if we forget to pay a library fine or are late in paying our mortgage, well, the library or bank might extend to us a grace period.

Totally undeserved. Or just listen to the way that we use it in the negative. We talk about someone falling from grace. Someone who has lost respect and favour.

[1 : 11] So grace. It's a beautiful word, isn't it? We've been singing all about it this morning. It's all about undeserved kindness. But grace can also feel like a delicate word.

For some people, it suggests weakness, being wishy-washy. After all, it's not a person or institution offering a grace period, really only allowing himself to be taken advantage of.

It's not a parent constantly offering grace, being nothing more than overindulgent, allowing their children to get away with bad choices.

To be gracious, perhaps, can sound the same as being vulnerable. And that's not something we like. Vulnerability opens us to the possibility of being victimised and mistreated.

So yes, grace may be a word of beauty. But maybe grace is also a word of weakness. Now, ponder that a little.

[2 : 17] And come with me to Ephesians. So far, what have we been hearing about Jesus? We've been hearing about his power. Let me read chapter 1, verse 9 to 10 to you again.

He made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ. To be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment, to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

Now, if you've been here the last two weeks, you're probably picking up by now that this is one of the key verses in Ephesians. Paul has been emphasising Jesus' power. Through Christ, he says God is going to transform the whole world.

He's going to bring all of heaven, all of earth under him. That's his master plan. And last week, we heard about how Jesus is the exalted Lord, far above all rule and authority and name.

Well, that's power right there. But if you were a member of the Ephesian church, you would hear this and think, really?

[3 : 29] Let's reveal the evidence. This guy Jesus has been executed on a Roman cross. Is that power? And his follower, Paul, who's been going around proclaiming Jesus, where is he sitting now?

In a Roman prison. Is that power? Seems like Rome is more powerful than Jesus. And today, if we're living in a place like Egypt, or Syria, or North Korea, it sure seems like there's a lot of people and organisations that are more powerful than Jesus.

Even in Malaysia, I'm sure we are sometimes tempted to think that way. God is going to transform the world through Jesus? Sure doesn't feel like it.

But Paul wants us to know. God's power is real. It's true. It's really alive. And it's at work in us.

Last week, he prayed that it might be so. But this week, he wants to show us more than that. He wants to show us where God's power really lies.

[4 : 43] And here's the mystery of the Gospel. His power lies in that word we began this sermon with. Grace. That sounds paradoxical, doesn't it?

Grace and power, they don't go together. Grace, on the one hand, is delicate and gentle and tender. Power, on the other hand, is strong and energetic and mighty. But in the person of Jesus Christ, they do come together. In Christ, God's grace is simultaneously the most beautiful thing and the most powerful thing in this entire universe. In Christ, God's grace is what is going to bring this entire universe under the reign and rule and authority of Christ. And God's grace is our only hope in this cracked and fractured world. It's vital. Through grace and grace alone, God is going to powerfully transform this world one life at a time. And that's what Paul really wants us to get this morning in Ephesians 2, verse 1 to 10.

[6 : 01] So again, make sure the passage is open in front of you and let's explore three facets of God's grace together this morning. Firstly, God's grace is vital.

It's vital. Now, I think most, if not all of us, are familiar with the story of the Titanic. This legendary cruise ship struck an iceberg on its maiden voyage at 11.40pm on the night of April 14, 1912 and sunk two hours and 40 minutes later.

Now, when the ship first struck the iceberg, the passengers generally did nothing. They continued playing cards, sang songs, or else they were sleeping.

Many of them were not aware of what happened. And those who were, they did not initially panic since the ship was meant to be unsinkable. They had no idea how desperate their situation was. They had no idea they needed rescue. And Paul takes care to make sure that we are not in the same boat as those Titanic passengers.

[7 : 21] He alerts us. You're in a desperate situation. He says, you need rescue. You need to know God's grace is absolutely vital. As for you, he says in verse 1, you were dead in your transgressions, peace and sin.

It's hard to be more blunt than that. You were dead, Paul tells us. Now, in the Bible, to be alive is to be connected to the source of life, God himself.

And sin and transgressions is all about breaking that connection with God. It's about telling God, let's break up. I want to go my own way.

And when that happens, well, our arms and legs might keep moving. Our brains might keep working. Our hearts are still pumping. But for all intents and purposes, we are dead.

Notice, we are not just sick. We are not just fragile. We are not just bedridden. We are dead. The screen monitoring our spiritual vital signs has a flat line.

[8 : 37] And tell me, if you are dead, is Panadol going to do the trick? Is an insulin injection enough to revive you?

They have no effect. When we sin, we become unplugged from the life of God and become spiritual zombies living as dead people.

That's what we were. And if we are dead, disconnected from God, that means we cannot function the way we are designed to.

We can't function spiritually. We were created to enjoy the very presence of God. But we've given up that right. We can't function vocationally.

God has called us to look after this world, to enjoy the fruits of the Garden of Eden, to find pleasure in our work. But now we are ruled by sin, which corrupts and pollutes and destroys everything it touches.

[9 : 42] So if we created an app that allows kids to make music videos, for instance, sin touches and twists that app in such a way that people use it to post pornographic material instead.

I just read that in a news article this week. And we can't function relationally. Not only is our relationship with God broken, but our relationship with each other becomes dysfunctional.

Think of the billions and billions of marital arguments that have happened in the last thousand years. Basically, we are like phones without a battery.

Unless it is plugged back to a power source, the phone can't function at all. No matter how many times you press the numbers or magically wish it to make a phone call.

And unplugged from God, we can't function the way we're supposed to. But our desperate situation doesn't stop there.

[10 : 47] Look what else Paul says in verse 2. We followed the ways of this world. The idea here is that we're following the world the way a dog follows his master while on a tight leash.

The dog can't escape. And our hearts have been so captured by this world that after a while, we don't even notice we are on a leash.

And that's why Paul last week had to pray that the eyes of our heart be open. And it's not just the world, but verse 2 again. It's the ruler of the kingdom of the air who has us on a leash.

That's referring to the devil who's hijacked this world to populate it with maid abusers, pedophile rings, greedy corporations, and so on.

But just in case we're quick to identify the devil as the only problem, Paul makes sure to remind us otherwise. Verse 3. Notice he says, us, not them.

[12:09] We don't get to excuse ourselves and blame the devil or someone else. The problem is inside us. We might not abuse mates, but we all have verbally abused someone in our minds.

We might not commit adultery, but we all have at times let our thoughts stray too far. We give in to our sinful nature.

And the result of all this is in verse 3. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

Why is God angry? Not because he's so bad, which is how we might naturally interpret it. It's because he's so good.

He cannot tolerate even the tiniest bit of anything that is not good. Just imagine you have a glass of water and just imagine you put a drop of rat's urine in it.

[13:17] Just drop. Would you call that glass of water clean? Well, when we say, what's wrong with a small eye once in a while?

What's wrong with closing one eye to the mistreatment of migrant workers out there? Well, it's a bit like tolerating a few drops of rat urine in a glass of water. We do so because we don't understand what it means to be 100% purely good.

It reveals the extent of our slavery to the thinking of this world. But God is 100% pure and good.

And he can't live with even that little drop of rat urine. Now, all this doesn't sound very palatable to our ears, does it?

All this talk about sin and death and the wrath of God makes us uncomfortable. We shouldn't talk so much about this we whisper to each other. Especially if there are unbelievers in this room, it will just turn them off.

[14:30] Perhaps you are the unbeliever and you are feeling turned off. Isn't this the problem with religion? And what about all the talk of grace that you started with at the beginning?

Exactly. It's precisely because we want to understand how deep grace goes that we have to understand how deep our problem goes.

think of it this way. If you had stage 4 cancer but your doctor insisted that you merely had a fever, you wouldn't think much of your doctor when you found out the truth, would you?

You'd be upset because that means you've been simply wasting your time taking Panadol. and what if you had stage 4 cancer and your doctor came and told you that a treatment has been found but if you only thought that you had a fever, you probably wouldn't get that excited about it.

Sure doctor, that's nice for those who have cancer you think but why are you telling me? I don't need it. But if you do know that you have stage 4 cancer, well you get very excited wouldn't you?

[15:50] Because you have an accurate understanding of your condition, you understand how vital this treatment is. Well God's grace is vital for our condition.

When you know that you are spiritually dead, not just weak, not just sick, but dead, then you won't waste time simply trying to improve your moral lives.

You won't waste money trying to go on a pilgrimage somewhere to feel more spiritual. You know you will need a more radical rescue and you'll be crying out to God for his grace because you can't live without it.

Well is that you today? Do you recognize your condition? Do you realize you need this treatment?

Well listen to the diagnosis of the Bible.

Don't ignore it. Because if you do, you ignore the treatment right in front of you. You won't think that it's great. And worst of all, you remain under God's wrath.

[16:59] So do keep paying attention and let's learn about God's grace instead. God's grace. And this takes us to the second facet of God's grace this morning.

Secondly, God's grace is powerful. God's grace is powerful. If our condition is this bad, we don't just need resuscitation, we need resurrection.

And only one person in this world can provide that. And that's what makes verse 4 so great. But because of his great love for us, God.

You see, if God himself didn't intervene, we'll still be dead. If God himself didn't intervene, we'll still be under bondage. If God himself still didn't intervene, we'll still be under judgment.

But because of his great love for us, God intervened. He alone can resurrect us. Verse 5, he made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.

[18 : 13] It's like that phone without a battery again. It's dead. But the moment the phone gets plugged back to a power source, it becomes alive again.

And God plugs us back to himself through Jesus to bring us back to life. But that really is a weak illustration of what's really happening when God's grace comes to us.

I mean resurrecting a phone and resurrecting a person, there's really no comparison is there? And keep reading verse 6. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.

It's not just that we've been made alive, it's that our seating arrangements have changed. In sin, you had originally been relegated to a hellhole, but in Christ, look where you are seated, in the heavenly realms with Christ.

Last week, if you were here, we were told that when God raised Christ from the dead, Christ was seated at the right hand of God, the position of highest honour and deepest intimacy with him.

[19 : 38] But guess what? Christ is not alone. You are seated with him. You share in his victory. You're not fighting for a seat at the most prestigious and wonderful banquet in all of history.

if you trust in Christ, you are already on the VVIP table. And there's plenty of room.

Are you fighting to belong somewhere? Are you seeking to gain acceptance to a certain group? Perhaps you're seeking validation by trying to become part of a certain network and an inner circle. Then you think, oh, life would really begin for me. Well, notice, that won't be enough because you will still be worrying over whether you're performing well enough to remain part of that inner circle. You remain stressed over whether you're saying the right things or doing the right stuff to maintain your status in that group. But if you truly know Jesus, you are already in.

[20 : 48] your position as part of his gang is secure. Christ has sealed it with his blood. You've got the best seats in the house.

You're seated with Jesus who gives you life to the full. You have the ear of Jesus, the one who's defeated the devil and reigns above all human governments and angelic beings.

Why? All because, end of verse 5, it is by grace you have been saved.

Is grace about weakness? Well, yes, on one level it is. Because that phrase, it is by grace you have been saved, captures the determination of Jesus to go to that place of weakness for you.

the cross. At the cross, we have God looking his weakest. He's crucified. And yet, it is at that place of weakness, the cross, that he was at his strongest.

[22 : 06] Because at the cross, you were resurrected, you were made alive. Grace speaks of power in weakness. how counter cultural.

So, never think of God's grace as less than powerful, even though it comes in the appearance of weakness. peace. The preacher, Simon Ponsonby, tells this true story.

Over 20 years ago, he heard about these two young men, only 19 years old. They were from middle class families, raised in loving and stable homes, and they had gone to good schools.

And they dream of joining the SAS, that's the British Military Special Forces. So, they spent their weekends in the gym, learning survival techniques and all that sort of thing. But, unfortunately, they began to think that to really have a shot at joining the SAS, SAS, they mustn't just be prepared to kill, they must have actually killed someone.

And so, that's what they did. They abducted a random taxi driver, and as one person held him down, the other stabbed him to death.

[23 : 31] And Simon Ponsonby used to tell this story whenever he wanted to describe the darkness of our hearts. This story, he says, perfectly illustrates Ephesians 2 verse 1 to 3.

But around 2014, one of his colleagues who work in prisons came to him, and he said, you know, that story you always use whenever you want to talk about evil and sin, about those two young men?

Well, one of them is going to be released early from prison, and he's become a Christian. In fact, he's going to join our church. while Simon couldn't believe it.

But it was true. And now, every week, he sees this man sitting in his church, reading his Bible, worshipping God, welcoming the stranger, being involved in ministry to prisoners.

God's grace. What has happened to this man? Ephesians 2, verse 1 to 3 wasn't the end of the story. By God's grace, God completely transformed him from the inside out.

[24 : 42] Ephesians 2, verse 4 to 6 has now become his story. He was dead. He has now been made alive.

God's grace is powerful. And at the same time, it is beautiful.

Well, that's the third and final facet of grace that we want to explore this morning. God's grace is beautiful. Grace, you see, is also about generosity.

And that is the very character of God. Look again with me to verse 5. How is God described? He is rich in mercy.

Someone once described God like this. In this world, a rich person uses his wealth for his own good and comfort.

[25 : 47] Sure, he might give some of it away, but not everything. Just look at the homes of the rich and famous. By contrast, the kind of wealth that God is rich in is not for his own benefit, but ours.

He pours out his entire wealth on us. Unlike this world where you are rich only if you obtain things, God is rich precisely because he gives away things.

He is rich in mercy. Isn't it amazing how the divine economy works? God is rich in mercy and showers us with his grace.

That's who he is. And God wants us to know him this way. Look at verse 7. In order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

You see, in the end, why did God make us alive? Why did God save us? It's not merely to help us escape the horrors of hell, although it is that.

[27 : 07] It's so that he can demonstrate what kind of God he is. It's so that he can help us see that he is a rich God full of goodness and kindness and mercy and compassion.

It's so that we can see that he is beautiful, not just now, but for eternity. And to demonstrate that, he has to help us see that salvation is entirely his work, not our own.

Verse 8, For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.

It's a familiar verse. We are saved by grace alone. That means your recent voluntary act for charity didn't contribute to your salvation.

Your good deed to house those stray animals didn't contribute to your salvation. Your attendance at the preaching workshop didn't contribute to your salvation. Christ alone is responsible for your salvation.

[28 : 18] Christ alone is the one who brought you back from the dead. And Christ alone is how we see our gracious God is beautiful. You see, if the message of Christianity is merely you're so beautiful, that's why God loves you, think about what will happen.

So imagine you're a visitor to a church and for half an hour, the preacher tells you how awesome and amazing and unique you are. Then out of the blue, he suddenly asks you to accept Jesus.

Now, why would you do that? After all, he's just told you you're so beautiful, that's why God loves you. So you don't really need Jesus if that's what Christianity is about, you're already beautiful.

And if so, Jesus becomes just a nice add-on. He's like the McFlurry ice cream at McDonald's. But, if the message of Christianity is, even when you were so ugly, God loves you, then suddenly things change.

If you realize that you are a zombie with no life in you, with no loveliness in you, if you know you're filled with transgressions and you've been doing the devil's work, and then you discover that Christ still gave his life for you, well, what will you think of Jesus now?

[29 : 52] You'll be in awe. You'll be amazed at how full and rich his mercy is. You'll be filled with gratitude that he's given you a totally undeserved gift when you deserve punishment.

You know that he's no add-on but your very life. And that's exactly what it means to be saved by grace alone.

This is the story of every Christian. I hope you can see that the phrase saved by grace, which we use so much, is no cliché.

Understood rightly, it is the most exciting piece of news in the entire world. And it humbles us. Verse 9 makes that clear there's no room for boasting.

How could there be? We did absolutely nothing to gain our position. And because God loves you, he's making you beautiful.

[31 : 01] He's restoring you to your original function. Verse 10 For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

So that means every time you do a good work, whenever you're advocating on behalf of the marginalized, whenever you're performing a simple act of kindness to strangers, even animals, whatever it is, you are putting on display God's beauty.

You're his handiwork. You're his workmanship. every time you do good in Christ, you are showing you are a creature of grace, putting on display his work of transformation in you.

God didn't love you because you were beautiful. Because God loves you, he's making you beautiful. people. And that's the beauty of grace.

So I hope this morning we have come to a richer understanding of grace. Grace is powerful for it brings us from death to life to a seed in the heavenly realms.

[32 : 30] Grace is beautiful for it shows us who God is, the one who loved even the unlovely and rescued us on his own initiative.

And grace is absolutely vital because without it, we remain dead in sin and transgression. Grace is indeed the last best word because it brings us to the very word of God himself, Jesus Christ.

As the band U2 puts it in one of their songs, grace takes the blame, covers the shame. Grace is a thought that changed the world.

And that's where God's power is located. In the exalted Christ, who is so full of grace, he went to the cross for you and me.

So let's go from here, determine to live lives that show his very beauty. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, you are beautiful.

[33 : 54] You are amazing. And Father, we still can't imagine how great you really are, how rich in mercy you really are. But Father, please help us to come to an awareness of what we were like before we found Christ, that we were dead in transgression and sin, that we were enslaved to the powers of this world.

And will you fill us with gratitude because you've rescued us from that. You've made us alive in Christ, and you've given us a seat at your table. You've prepared a feast for us.

And so Father, please would you help us to live as if that was true every day, that every day our lives would shout that Jesus Christ is indeed our very life.

In your Son's name we pray. Amen.