

GOD'S AMAZING GRACE

Two long-time golfing buddies got to the course and decided they would play the ball wherever it lies, no matter what! On the 14th hole, one of them sliced his drive and it ended up on the cart path against the curb. As he reached down to pick up his ball to get relief, his friend said, "Wait a minute! We agreed that we would not improve our lies! Remember? No matter what!" The first player tried to explain that he was entitled to this relief, that it was in the rules of golf. But the second fellow would not allow it. Throwing up his hands in disgust, the man went to the cart and grabbed a club. As he stood near his ball, he took a few practice swings, each time scraping the club on the pavement and sending out showers of sparks. Finally, he took his shot. The club hit the path again, sparks went flying, but his ball shot straight towards the green, landed and rolled to a stop - two inches from the cup. "Great shot!" his friend exclaimed. "What club did you use?" The man gave him a wry smile, "Your 7 iron!"

That guy made the shot he wanted, but his friend paid for it. Today we are starting a series of messages leading up to Easter, remembering that Jesus paid for our salvation on the cross. I want to talk to you today about grace. It is by God's grace that we are saved and by that same grace that we live and serve Him today.

Ephesians 1:3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. 4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5 he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will-- 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace 8 that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. 9 And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10 to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment--to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

1. God's SAVING Grace – God for us

It is God's grace that saves us. As we head into the Easter season I want us to once again remember that truth. While we were still enemies, Jesus came to die for us.

Eph 1:7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace

John was driving home late one night when he picked up a hitchhiker. As they rode along, he began to be suspicious of his passenger. John checked to see if his wallet was safe in the pocket of his coat that was on the seat between them, but it wasn't there! So he slammed on the brakes, ordered the hitchhiker out, and said, "Hand over the wallet immediately!" The frightened hitchhiker handed over a billfold, and John drove off. When he arrived home, he started to tell his wife about the experience, but she interrupted him, saying, "Before I forget, John, do you know that you left your wallet at home this morning?"

All of us need grace because all of us have blown it at some time in our lives. Despite our best of intentions we have sinned and bear the guilt of that sin. The great news is that Jesus Christ has already paid for your sins. All you have to do is accept it. There is no reason to go around with a bunch of guilt any longer.

In Jesus we are free. Free from what? Free from condemnation, free from guilt, free from worry, free from death. God's saving grace removes my guilt. If you've experienced that you know what real freedom is.

Eph 2:8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith -- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.

Salvation is based on God's mercy not my merit. Salvation is based on God's promise not my performance. You cannot earn it. It is interesting the way some people try to earn their salvation, to prove themselves worthy of God and try to earn His forgiveness.

a. Salvation by Sincerity

Some people think that it does not really matter what you believe as long as you are sincere in that belief. The only problem with that is you can be sincerely wrong. I read about a pilot who sincerely flew into a mountain. You could pick up a glass of poison and drink it thinking that it is milk. It will still kill you! You can be sincerely wrong.

b. Salvation by Subtraction

Some people see religion as a set of rules. If you don't do this, don't do that, stop doing this and that... then maybe God will forgive your sins. If that is true then why do anything. Why not put yourself in a straightjacket and live out the rest of your life gagged. Christianity is not just a set of rules.

c. Salvation by Service

Some people think that the way to heaven is just doing good things. Hug your children. Be nice to people you meet. Go to church. Take the Lord's Supper. Get baptized. Help little old ladies across the street. Unfortunately these things do not save you.

d. Salvation by Similarity

Some people think you get to heaven by being better than the person beside you. It is like the story of the 2 men who met the bear. The one did not have to outrun the bear, just the guy that was with him. You may be better than another person but God does not judge us according to that sort of standard. The Bible says that God Himself is the standard. We all fall short.

That is why Jesus came to die for us. God knew we could not save ourselves. We could not do it on our own. If we could have then Jesus died for nothing. Because of grace we are forgiven

Even though he deserved death he receives mercy and forgiveness. This is what God has done for each one of us. We can't earn it no matter how hard we try. We must simply receive it.

There was a lawyer in a big city that was leaving his firm one night and as he was walking out his car he saw a dirty bum on the sidewalk leaned up against a building. He had pity on the bum and told him that he wanted to help him out. He told him he didn't have any cash on him so he took out his pen and began to write a check for the man. He told him to take that check to the bank listed on the check the next day. He should take the money and get some food, a room to take a hot shower in and sleep in a comfortable bed.

The next evening the lawyer was walking to the car and he saw the same man again. He asked him why he didn't follow his instructions. The vagabond replied by telling the lawyer that he went down to the bank and he saw clean professional people walking around in shirts and ties and he knew there was no way they would cash the check for someone as dirty as him. The lawyer then explained to him that the check would not be cashed based on the way he appeared but based on the name on the check. All he had to do is present the check and all would be well.

2. God's SANCTIFYING Grace – God in us

Our greatest need in life is for forgiveness because our greatest problem in life is sin. When you accepted Christ as Savior then Christ paid for your sin. You have been justified through His sacrifice. However, sin continues to come between us and God. Forgiveness is something that we must daily constantly seek because we daily sin. Our salvation does not depend on it but our intimacy with God does.

1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

A boy who was rebelling against his dad constantly. This boy was destroying his own life by his rebellion, but he refused to heed his father's words. One day, the dad said to the boy, "I want to show you what you're doing to your life. I'm going to put a wooden post in our front yard. Every time you rebel, I will put a nail in this post. Every time you obey, I will pull out one nail." The first thought from the boy was, "I'm going to do everything I can to fill that post with nails." And he did. In two months' time, he filled that post with nails. But he also began to feel the damage he was doing to his own life and to his parents' lives. With true remorse, the boy began to obey his father. One by one, the nails came out. When the last nail came out of the post, the boy broke down in tears. The dad asked, "Son, why are you crying?" And the boy replied, "I got rid of the nails, but I can't get rid of the holes." God the Father saw the nails in our lives and He saw our helplessness against sin. So He sent His Son Jesus to not only take the nails but to also fill the holes so that we could have a restored relationship with God.

Grace helps me to become the person I really want to be, that God wants me to be. It molds me and reshapes me. This is sanctification. God remakes my life. God loves you just the way you are but He loves you too much to let you stay that way. God transforming grace changes us and we become more like Jesus.

I am not what I ought to be. I am not what I want to be. I am not what I hope to be. But still, I am not what I used to be. And by the grace of God, I am what I am. - John Newton

3. God's SUSTAINING Grace – God through us

God's grace not only saves us and sanctifies it also sustains us in the race of faith we are running. There are times when it is easy to grow weary and want to quit. At times like that it is God's presence and his grace that strengthens us to keep going despite our own weaknesses. It is this sustaining grace that gives us the assurance that, no matter what happens to us in life, God is with us and will provide for us everything we need to reach the end of the race.

2 Cor 12:9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

God's grace is enough. It was enough to sustain Paul as he lived with his thorn. It is enough for each one of us as well.

In 1809, Simon Renee Braille and his wife Monique welcomed their fourth child into the world-- a lively boy named Louis. They lived in a small stone house near Paris where Simon was the local harness maker. Leather working tools are dangerous, so the toddler had been instructed not to go into his father's shop alone. But when Louis was still small, he slipped into the shop, and with curiosity started to handle all the fascinating tools. As Louis was inspecting an awl, the sharp tool used to punch holes in leather, he slipped and punctured a part of his eye with the tool. The injured eye became infected. The little boy could not keep his hands from rubbing and scratching the wound, and soon the infection spread to his other eye as well. When Louis was only 4, he became completely blind. Louis was fortunate enough to study at the Royal Institution for Blind Youth in Paris. He excelled as an organist, and at twelve years old began asking the question "How can the blind read?" Over his summer break at home, Louis was determined to find the answer. As He moved and groped around his father's shop in search of the right tool for his task, the awl presented itself as perfect for the job. The awl would make the raised dots he had seen in the French military system of "night writing." And with the very instrument that had blinded him, Louis worked and worked until he had created a system of dots whereby the blind could read and write, work math problems and compose music. What is your awl - The thing that has crippled you, either by your own doing like young Louis, or someone else's? Is it a divorce, the death of someone you love, a lost career? Let God take it, and use it in your life for good - to reshape you or comfort others.

As a pastor, I meet hurting people all the time. You can take two people, put them in the same exact situation and one of them is devastated by it and they become resentful and poisoned by the attitude. The other moves forward and has a sweet hopeful spirit. How is it that some people are overwhelmed by their pain and others under increased pressure that is not even their own fault are able to maintain a sweet spirit? It is possible because those people are relying on the sustaining grace of God.

Years ago when Naomi and I lived on the Doulos we visited Dar es Salaam Tanzania and sailed pas the island of Zanzibar. It is an island with an old city with an unfortunate past. It is filled with ornate architecture, but, for nearly 300 years it was the home of East Africa's largest slave markets. But, something happened in Zanzibar. About 150 years ago a single man walked out of the interior of Africa with a message of liberation and a determination to announce that message to those who were bound by slavery. That man's name was David Livingstone. Even today, the name of David Livingstone commands deep respect in East Africa. Today, in Zanzibar, a Christian Church rises on the very site of the former slave market, and the platform holding up the high altar of the church is the very same platform that for 300 years displayed slaves as they were being auctioned off to Arab slave traders.

This is a picture of how God wants to redeem your life. He will meet you at the very point of bondage in your life. He will meet you at your very point of shame, the very place where Darkness is holding you captive. And, He doesn't hide in embarrassment! He will take that very place and turn it into the very place where His Grace is released into your life, and into your family, and into all your relationships.

There is only one single thing you need to do to get God's grace in your life. The key to receiving God's grace is found in James 4:7 which is a quote of Prov 3:34:

James 4:6 But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

The key to receiving God's grace in your life is to admit that you need it. As long as you are self dependent and think "I can handle it. I don't need anybody to tell me what to do" you will fail. It has been said that the self-made man worships his maker. You can't live life in your own strength. It is only when we recognize that we are weak that God's strength is seen in us. You need God's grace to see it through, to make the changes, to get the forgiveness.

Heb 12:15 See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

Our worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the reach of God's grace. And your best days are never so good that you are beyond the need of God's grace -- Jerry Bridges

The most important question I can ask you today is which of these three kinds of grace do you need most in your life right now?

Some of you need God's SANCTIFYING grace which reshapes your life. You are a Christian but you have gotten off track. You are just not as close to God as you used to be. You know that everything is not all right. Today you need to turn to God and ask Him to help you in your spiritual weakness. He will give you the power to make the changes that are necessary. For some of you, you need to get off the performance treadmill.

You have subtly, unconsciously, replaced your relationship with God for religious duties – going to church, reading your Bible, listening to Christian music. You need to get back to falling in love with the Lord again. Focus on the relationship, not the rituals and rules.

Some of you need God SUSTAINING grace to get you through a tough situation. Maybe you are tired and ready to throw in the towel. You have given up on a relationship, a job, a dream, whatever. God wants to say to you His grace is sufficient and will sustain you.

Maybe there is even someone here today that needs God's SAVING grace. You need to have your guilt removed. Like the guy in the movie you are trying to earn your salvation, dragging your armor behind you and you are tired. Would you like to have a clear conscious? Totally forgiven! It is available. You don't have to go any further. You cannot earn your forgiveness, but God is offering it to you today. Throw yourself on the grace of God and say, "God, I admit it I have blown it and I could never earn my way to heaven. I've done too many things wrong to earn Your forgiveness. But I want to accept Your grace and salvation."

The whole bible can be summed up simply:

Adam failed, Jesus nailed, Grace prevailed

God's grace is available to you right here and right now. That's why He brought you here today. Receive that grace and live in it.

It was 30 years ago in 1987 that all of America stopped to watch a real-life drama unfolded in Midland, Texas. Eighteen month old Jessica McClure fell down an abandoned well and was trapped. Millions of Americans watched the story of Baby Jessica unfold. To the relief of everyone, Jessica came out of the well on October 16, 1987. In case you don't remember the details of the story, let me give you a summary of what happened: "After 55 grueling hours trapped at the bottom of a 22-foot well, eighteen-

month-old Jessica clawed her way out of the bottom of the pit, inch by inch, digging her little toes and fingers into the side of the well. What a hero, that Jessica!”

You may be thinking, “Whoa! That’s not what happened! She didn’t climb out! She was totally helpless down there; she was powerless to save herself. If she hadn’t been rescued by those people she would have perished.” You are exactly right! And you and I were both in exactly the same situation. The Bible says, “At just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.” (Romans 5:6) We deserve no more applause for our salvation than baby Jessica got for being rescued. God alone deserves the credit. There is no act we can perform that deserves the applause of others.

A construction crew was building a new road through a rural area, knocking down trees as it progressed. A superintendent noticed that one tree had a nest of birds who couldn’t yet fly and he marked the tree so that it would not be cut down. Several weeks later the superintendent came back to the tree. He got into a bucket truck and was lifted up so that he could peer into the nest. The fledglings were gone. They had obviously learned to fly. The superintendent ordered the tree cut down. As the tree crashed to the ground, the nest fell clear and some of the material that the birds had gathered to make the nest was scattered about. Part of it was a scrap torn from a Sunday school pamphlet. On the scrap of paper were these words: He careth for you.