

The Grace of God



The Epistle of St. Paul to Titus 2:11 "The grace of God has dawned upon the world with healing for all mankind."

John Bradford was an English Reformer in the sixteenth century. He was a priest at Old St. Paul's Cathedral in London, that great Gothic church started by William the Conqueror and destroyed in the Great Fire of London in 1666. Bradford was famous in the city for his preaching and for his humility. When young King Edward VI died, Mary Tudor became Queen of England and began arresting many of the Protestant reformers. While witnessing some of those arrested being led to the scaffold,

Bradford is reputed to have declared, "There but for the grace of God, go I." Not long thereafter, however, he too was imprisoned in the Tower of London for Protestant reforms deemed crimes against Catholic Queen Mary, who was soon nicknamed "Bloody Mary" because of all the Protestant martyrs killed during her reign. Bradford himself was burned at the stake on July 1st, 1555.

His humble and pious declaration that 'there but for the grace of God, go I,' has been well remembered through the succeeding centuries, often repeated in one form or another. If someone almost runs us off the road these days, we are likely to say something like: "it was only by the grace of God that that fool didn't drive us into the ditch!" Indeed, the phrase 'the grace of God' is so familiar and so commonly used by Christians, that if someone asked us to define exactly what it meant, what would we say? What does the 'grace of God' really mean?

Interesting enough, the phrase "the grace of God" is never found in the Old Testament. There are twenty or so times when the Hebrew word "grace" is used on its own: Joseph, for example, 'finds grace' in the eyes of Potiphar, and Esther in the eyes of the Persian King. But on all those occasions, the word 'grace' refers to the attitude of one person to another, and in more recent translations has often been replaced with the English word "favor." Esther, in newer translations is said to have 'won

favor' in the eyes of the Persian King, for example. Never in the Old Testament does the word 'grace' refer, either explicitly or even implicitly, to an attitude or attribute or characteristic of God. Why is there no 'grace of God' in the Old Testament?

For in contrast to the Old Testament, the phrase 'the grace of God' is frequently used in the New Testament, and on scores of other occasions we find variations of it, such as the 'grace from God,' or 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ', or 'of grace which we have received.' And in the New Testament, 'grace' is a very prominent word that is almost always used with a deeply religious significance, and with some reference to God or to Jesus.

You can find that word several times in tonight's New Testament readings, as in the majestic prologue to St. John's Gospel. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth . . . And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace . . . for the law was given by Moses but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." Thus, the writers of the first Christian Scriptures seem to be suggesting that the 'grace of God' was unknown to the world until it came into the world in and through the person of Jesus; when as Paul writes, the grace of God dawned upon the world with healing for all mankind. So

perhaps it is not at all surprising that there are no references to the 'grace of God' in the Old Testament.

And thus, it is all the more important for us as Christians to understand the meaning of 'the grace of God.' But do we? The English word 'grace' can be traced in its original connotation in Sanskrit, the ancient language of India and the root of most modern European languages. The word 'gurtas' in Sanskrit embraces in its meaning, as it does later in Greek, as one thing in two parts: both the something that is welcomed and received, and also, the gladness with which such a thing is accepted. The single word embraces both the desired thing that happens, and also the response that it naturally and inevitably evokes. In modern English, as in Latin, though we have tended to divide this thought into two words; we generally use the word 'grace' as the welcomed thing itself, such as the grace Joseph received from Potiphar or the grace we have received from God. Then we use the word "gratitude," another derivative of the Sanskrit word, for our natural response to the welcomed thing. We feel gratitude for the grace we have received.

But when the writers of our Christian Scriptures use the word 'grace,' they mean both parts at once. They mean both the welcomed thing **and** our response, together, inseparable. One cannot receive the grace without feeling gratitude. For those to whom the grace of God was first disclosed in Jesus found

themselves wholly and 'unspeakably' glad and grateful, and they needed a phrase to describe both the wonder of the thing received, and also the inherent and unexpected gladness in receiving it. In the words of C.S. Lewis, we Christians are 'surprised by joy' in the accepting of Jesus into our lives.

Thus, the writers of the Christian Scriptures did not really try to explain or to clarify what 'the grace of God' meant, which may be why we may find it difficult to define today, because it was so experiential. It wasn't a theological concept to be elucidated or expounded upon. It was a description of our encounter with God in our lives, both the discovery of that thing and the immense joy or gratitude inherent in that discovery. Trying to explain 'the grace of God' would be like trying to explain to a pre-teen, what 'falling in love' means, it is an experience that cannot be comprehended until it has happened to you.

So the phrase 'grace of God' then refers exclusively to this new thing that had happened, this new experience of God incarnate, present in our lives in a different way somehow than before, this new truth, new insight or reality, that new day that St. Paul declares to Titus has now dawned upon us, which is found in and received from our Lord Jesus of Nazareth, in the gladness and overwhelming joy with which this new thing is discovered. We are blessed by Jesus' presence in our lives. We

are glad indeed by the grace or love of God that we have perceived and received thereby, grace we have obtained without merit, without earning it, an unconditional love, which thus overwhelms us in emotion when we acknowledge or accept it. The 'grace of God' refers to this profound religious experience which is at the heart of our lives as Christian believers, and especially at this season of Christmas.

So these very early Christian writers then sought how to describe this wonderful experience to other people who, unlike themselves, had not accepted Jesus into their lives; and so their method was not to make general theological proclamations or to establish creeds, as later Church Fathers would do, nor did they make simple declarations about Jesus' character, about what a wonderful guy he was, or tell the magical story of his life, or expound upon the miracles that occurred in his interaction with others. No, their method was to use this new phrase, 'the grace of God,' to describe their own story of encounter, so far as they were able to put it into words, of what happened in their own lives, of how the presence of Jesus affected them ---- so that we who hear those stories might be able to enter into the full meaning of the words of St. Paul, that with Jesus, 'the grace of God has dawned upon the world with healing for all mankind,' and 'by the grace (of God),' St. Paul continues, 'we too have been saved through faith, and this

is not our own doing; it is an undeserved gift from God --- not the result of our works, so that none of us may boast." In Jesus' own words, 'he came that we might have life, and that we might live it more abundantly.' And there by the grace of God, go each of us. Amen.