

WHEN EVERYTHING SEEMS TO BE COMING APART**TITUS 2:11-14**

Grace. What comes into your mind when you hear that word? Grace. There's an old story about a pastor who asked the same question of a member of his congregation. The answer he got back was a bit startling, "Well, Grace is a blue-eyed blonde lady I know." If you asked a member of my family what comes into our minds first when we hear the word "grace" we might say, "That's our dog – Gracie." You might describe a ballet dancer's movements as having tremendous grace. You might even say some football players run gracefully. You might say to a friend, "You were such a gracious hostess last night!" Grace is a word we use quite a bit both outside and inside the church. It has multiple meanings.

So, what does the Bible mean by the word "grace"? It's hard to come up with just a one word definition. It can refer to God's love or God's mercy. It's a gift that no one here today can ever deserve or earn. It's synonymous with the word "salvation." Grace refers to all of God's blessings. The ultimate source of grace is God. As you study the Bible, you come to see that each member of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – extend grace. Grace is initiated by God the Father. He planned our salvation and sent God the Son into the world to restore our relationship with Him. Jesus, God the Son, is the channel or the way we receive God's grace. The Bible puts it like this, "Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus. Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish!" (Eph 2:7 MSG) And then God the Holy Spirit is described as the "Spirit of grace" in several places in the Bible. The Holy Spirit makes grace a vital, daily reality in our lives.

There is yet another important meaning in the Bible for that word grace. Grace is also a demonstration of God's power. You might already know that the word for power in the language that the New Testament was written in – Greek – is *dunamis*. We get the English words "dynamite" and "dynamo" from *dunamis*. You could say that grace is God's dynamite. It's powerful stuff – it blows up our sins and their guilt. It blows away our anxieties about life and living. The first Christian killed for his faith, Stephen, was described in the Bible as "(Stephen), a man full of God's grace and power...." (Acts 6:8 NLT) Grace and power go together when it comes to God and the things of God. Grace is God's power.

I want us to reflect on one passage of Scripture today that underlines and emphasizes this equation of God's grace with God's power. Before we read it, let me give you a bit of background. Paul, the great Christian leader, had a young friend and colleague in ministry by the name of Titus. Paul had left Titus on the island of Crete in the Mediterranean in order to pastor several brand new churches and provide stable leadership for the new Christians living there. The Cretan people at that day and time had a reputation for being rather difficult – lazy, stubborn, disagreeable. It seems that some of these new believers on Crete were having a hard time deciding to act like Christians or Cretans. It was a very discouraging time for young Titus. Failure loomed on the horizon. Let's read now a portion of what Paul wrote to him.

I, for one, am very glad as we stand on the threshold of a brand new year – 2015 – that God's grace is available to you and me every moment of every day. I'm blessed by the fact that grace is an expression of God's power, because here's what I know. Sometime in the future – perhaps even much sooner than I might think – it will seem like everything is coming apart in my life. And it's right then that I'll need to remember that grace is God's power to fix whatever's been broken - or about to get broken – in my life. On this fourth day of a brand new year, I want to say to you that, first of all ...

GRACE COVERS WHAT CAME APART IN MY PAST.

Right there in v. 11, Paul says, "For the grace of God has been revealed, bringing salvation to all people." (Titus 2:11 NLT) It's another way of saying that God's powerful grace covers what came apart in your past and mine. Let's admit it. All of us have done things, said things, or failed to do good, loving things when we had the opportunity that make us wince when we remember them this morning. We wish we could take back things we said or did. We wish we could make amends. We wish we could have a "do-over." It's been said that you can't change the past. That's true. But here's an even greater truth. In Jesus, God can redeem your past and bring good out of the bad. God's grace is so powerful that it can even reach back into your past and mine. It can cover whatever came apart back then and there and use it for God's glory.

Here's another way to look at it. God's grace is powerful enough to liberate you from the penalty of your past sins. The wages of sin is death, the Bible says, but Jesus died in your place. As a result, you don't have to die for your sins anymore. Jesus took the guilt of your sins upon Himself on the cross. He paid your penalty fully with His own shed blood. But, also, God's grace is powerful enough to liberate you from the power of your past sins. Sin has a way of creating and perpetuating enormous condemnation in your life. Guilt can be like spiritual chains that imprison your soul. Only God's powerful grace can destroy guilt. The Bible says that the devil is always accusing us. He knows our weaknesses, our past failures, and our triggers. He's constantly seeking to undermine your confidence in God. He loves to whisper into your heart and mind, "God could never love someone like you. Look what you said back then. Look what you did back there. Do you think God wants anything to do with you?" But when you confess your sins and turn away from them, God's powerful grace completely forgives all of your past sins and then He breaks the power of guilt so they no longer have power over you.

What's back there in your past? Is it a broken relationship – maybe several broken relationships? Unresolved conflicts? Disappointments? Some great failure that shames you even today when you think about it? Bitterness you can't seem to let go off? God's grace is powerful beyond description. If you're haunted today by something – anything – in your past, you need to know and experience the power of God's grace to cover what came apart back then and ask God to redeem it through Jesus' shed blood.

Have you heard of alchemy? Alchemy is the ancient art of working with basic metals such as iron to try and somehow produce a more valuable metal like gold. It never did work. But what the alchemist tried to do with metal and never accomplished, God has

done in Jesus. He took us – sinful, broken human beings who had no value in and of ourselves – and redeemed us, cleansed us, purged us, and made us as precious as gold. I read somewhere that there’s a church down in Tennessee that’s been built out of broken pieces of waste marble. Bits and pieces of throw away marble – good for nothing – were somehow brought together and built into a beautiful sanctuary. God does that all the time. He takes the broken pieces of our lives – past mistakes, past failures, all of the sins in our past – gathers them up and somehow builds them into a glorious memorial to God and His grace. My Mom and Dad taught in a Bible college for many years. On several occasions they would tell me about a student who had come out of a very broken background, had discovered Jesus as Savior, and was now preparing himself or herself to serve the Lord in some way. My parents would refer to those students as “trophies of grace.” But the fact is that every last one of us is a trophy of God’s grace. Grace is God’s power. It can redeem your past; cover your past; and even use your past for God’s glory in some way. Grace is indeed God’s power to cover what came apart in the past. But, also...

GRACE COVERS WHAT’S COMING PART IN MY PRESENT.

Young Titus must have felt like everything was coming apart. Things weren’t going well among the churches in Crete. He was facing obstacles and opposition. Titus didn’t have the answers. That’s exactly why Paul reminded him of the power of God’s grace here. Grace has the power to transform even the most unpleasant situations around you into opportunities to bring glory to God and to grow spiritually on a personal level. Paul had to learn that himself. He had something in his own life he called “a thorn in the flesh.” What was it? No one is sure. Some have suggested a disease of the eyes, epilepsy, or some kind of strong, unknown temptation. What is very clear, however, is that whatever this thorn happened to be, it created a great deal of inner stress in Paul’s life. Paul tells us in the Bible, “Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, ‘My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.’...” (2 Cor 12:8-9 NLT) God always has more than enough grace for today, but you will need fresh grace for tomorrow. That simple spiritual fact requires us to draw near to God and depend on Him continually. The power of grace is given when you need it and not before. God’s power is available in every conceivable situation in your life – every struggle, every discouragement, and every stress – if you consciously draw near to Him and receive the grace He offers.

It’s a brand new year, but is anything threatening to come apart in your life already? Is your marriage tottering? Is there constant tension in one of your important relationships – maybe with a child, maybe with a parent? Is it endless conflict and stress where you work? Is it the declining health of a loved one or perhaps your own health? Is it financial instability? Is it grief – the sharp pain of having lost someone that you love dearly? Is it a losing battle with some temptation that just seems to own you? Grace is God’s power to cover whatever appears to be coming apart right now in the present. Do you have “a thorn in the flesh” today? Here again what Jesus said to Paul, “... ‘My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.’...” (2 Cor 12:9 NLT) God’s

grace is sufficient. When you draw upon it, you can overcome what's coming apart – or about to come apart – in your life today.

Living out that kind of spiritual reality doesn't just happen naturally for any of us. You have to learn it. Paul got to a point in his own walk with God that he could say, "...I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength." (Ph 4:11-13 NLT) Paul was always ready for the next shock, the next letdown, the next inconvenient change in circumstances, and the next surprise. Talk about being able to roll with the punches! What was it that kept Paul calm, full of joy, and completely yielded to Jesus? The power of God's grace!

American culture preaches the cult of self-reliance. You hear, "I can do all things if I believe in myself enough." There is a healthy kind of self-confidence, but the simple fact is that your own resources and ability will take you only so far. You hear, "I can do all things if I just work hard enough at it." Working hard is a very good thing, but there's only so far hard work will take you. God's grace allows you to accomplish the otherwise impossible. Christians get smacked around by problems, setbacks, and troubles like anyone else. Just because we love Jesus doesn't mean we develop an immunity to disappointments, failures, loneliness, or even getting rejected by others. God's gracious power, however, gives you the ability to rise above it, transcend it, and overcome it. I love this image the Bible presents to us, "But those who wait upon GOD get fresh strength. They spread their wings and soar like eagles, they run and don't get tired, they walk and don't lag behind." (Is 40:31 MSG)

Lewis Smedes, a theologian and author, wrote these compelling words, "Grace does not make everything right.... Grace is God's power, I say, to see life very clearly, admit it is sometimes all wrong, and still know that somehow, in the center of your life, it's all right. This is one reason we call it amazing grace.... Grace is the one word for all that God is for us in the form of Jesus Christ."

Have you ever watched competitive surfing on TV? It's thrilling to see how those expert surfers can turn a huge, overpowering, and dangerous wave of water into a vehicle of excitement and joy. If I tried to do what they did, I'd get battered around at best and drowned at worst. And the bigger the wave, the bigger problem I would have. But those competitive surfers like the big waves. In fact, the bigger the better! That's how they have the chance to win a championship. You might say that God's grace is like a surfboard on the seas of life. God's power can change you from just being a spiritual swimmer into a spiritual surfer – to have the ability to ride out the waves of life and overcome them by God's grace. Instead of getting destroyed by those waves, God's grace can enable us to conquer them. Grace is indeed God's power for what's coming apart in the present. But here's a final thought about God's powerful grace.

GRACE COVERS WHAT WILL COME APART IN MY FUTURE.

Most of us have some kind of fear that involves the future. Will I lose my job? Will my health deteriorate? Will I have to give up my home and move into a care facility? Will someone I love die? Will my marriage keep working? Will my kids turn out OK? Will I continue to follow and love the Lord with my whole heart? I'm blessed to know as we enter a new year that God is keeping watch over each and every one of us. Of course we don't know what 2015 holds for any of us, but we know God. God revealed Himself to Moses in the burning bush as "I Am That I Am." Another possible translation of that phrase or name is "I Shall Be There." The great I Shall Be There goes before you and me into the future and gives us the power of His grace.

Grace is God's power to cover even what will come apart in the future. We're going to face problems and challenges in 2015. That's just life. We understand that it's inevitable that we will feel like everything is coming apart at some point in the days ahead. But that doesn't mean we should fear or dread the future. Paul reminds us in the letter he wrote to Titus that we should live out our lives in a God-glorifying way - "... while we look forward with hope to that wonderful day when the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, will be revealed." (Titus 2:13 NLT)

There's no way of knowing whether every decision you make in life will turn out to be a good or a bad one. But if you are a child of God this morning, you can live confidently because you know God's grace is bigger and more powerful than what might go wrong this year or next. On the one hand, that's not permission to go out there and make foolish or sinful decisions. On the other hand, we know that because we live in a sinful world there's no guarantee that even the most prayed over decision will turn out well. Here's a wonderful promise in God's Word. It says, "And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them." (Rom 8:28 NLT) That's a promise full of both grace and power. It means, child of God, that no matter what happens in your future that feels painful or negative, God is bigger and more powerful. God is working something out of it and through it that will bring glory to Him and eternal good for you. Grace is indeed God's power for what will come apart in your future or mine.

So, how do you get this grace, this power? First of all, ask for it. Each and every day in 2015 come to God consciously and ask Him for His gracious power or His powerful grace to meet every situation in your life. Remember, God's grace and power are always gifts – never earned, never deserved, never achieved, and never merited by good behavior. Second, keep on asking for God's grace and power. Today's grace is always sufficient for today, but never for tomorrow. God wants you to come to Him every day to ask for, to draw upon, and to experience His grace and power. Third, come with humility. That's the one condition for getting God's grace and power. The Bible says, "... 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'" (Jam 4:6 NLT) And yet, sometimes that's the last thing we want to do – really acknowledge our need for God. Don't get brainwashed by the cult of self-reliance. Come with a broken heart, a surrendered mind, and a bowed knee. You will discover that God's grace has the power to cover what came apart in your past, what's coming apart in your present, and even what will come apart in your future. Grace is God's power.

One of the great men of Poland was Ignacy Paderewski – a famous concert pianist who also served as the prime minister of his country briefly. One day, a mother – wishing to encourage her young son’s progress at the piano – bought tickets for a Paderewski performance. When the night arrived, mother and son found their seats near the front of the concert hall. They saw the majestic Steinway piano waiting on stage. The mother found a friend to talk to and the little boy slipped away. Eight o’clock arrived, the spotlights came up, the audience quieted, and only then did everyone notice a boy up on the piano bench innocently picking out “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.” The mother recognized her son up on the stage, and she gasped in horror. But before she could run on the stage and retrieve him, Paderewski appeared and quickly moved to the keyboard.

He whispered to the boy, “Don’t quit – keep playing.” And then leaning over, Paderewski reached around the boy with this left hand and began filling in a bass part. Soon his right arm reached around the boy on the other side – encircling the child – to add a running obbligato. Together, the old master and the young novice held the crowd mesmerized as they played. You and I are a bit like that little boy. We try our best to play the melody of life, but then the Master – Jesus Himself – comes to us, surrounds us with His powerful grace, and whispers into our hearts, “Don’t quit. Keep playing!” And as we do, Jesus augments and supplements our humble efforts until something of amazing and eternal beauty is created.

Will you remember this simple truth as we all begin a new year? Grace is God’s power. Grace is God’s power to cover what came apart in your past, what’s coming apart in your present, and even what’s going to come apart in your future. If you’re a child of God this morning, live your life before God today and throughout 2015 with confidence and joy.