

GALATIANS 1:3-5

GRACE AND PEACE FROM OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.”¹

Imagine a world without Christmas. The holiday regimen would be radically different from what we know today. In our contemporary secular world, we would still have holidays; however, they would be celebrations of work (Labour Day), government (Canada Day) and perhaps holidays simply to have holidays (Family Day). However, we would probably have no celebrations of the more noble qualities of mankind. There would be no celebration of God’s compassion for man, such as we witness with Christmas, or rejoicing in the hope offered for all mankind, such as Easter.

At the heart of the Christmas celebration is the knowledge of God’s compassion. Mankind is fallen. The evidence for this is that death reigns over the race. As I have often stated, the statistics on death are pretty startling: one out of one die. The reason for this is that our first parents sinned and plunged the creation into ruin. From the standpoint of biochemistry, there is no reason for the body to wear out. The repair mechanisms at the cellular level are such that death should not occur. And yet, death comes to each individual.

The Bible states the case succinctly, “Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come” [ROMANS 5:12-14].

However, that is only the dark backdrop that permits God’s grace to shine forth. The Apostle to the Gentiles continues by exulting, “But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man’s trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free gift is not like the result of that one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. If, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ” [ROMANS 5:15-17].

Throughout the pages of the New Testament is found abundant evidence of God’s grace toward fallen mankind. We were not left in our dying state without hope, but God provided His own Son as a Saviour for mankind. It is this provision of Jesus, the Son of God, that we celebrate at Christmas. As he opens the Letter to the churches of Galatia, Paul points his readers to God’s grace and goodness revealed in His Son. In a similar fashion, I point my listeners this day to the grace of God demonstrated in the coming of Jesus the Son of God as we explore those opening words of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

GOD, THE GIVER OF GRACE AND PEACE — Grace and peace are offered to all mankind. I suggest that all mankind consciously or unconsciously longs to have grace and peace. However, the prayer of the Apostle is that the readers of this beautiful letter written to wayward Christians so many years ago will enjoy grace and peace.

Before actually exploring who is offering the grace and peace for which Paul prays and to whom this great gift is offered, let's review what it means to possess grace and peace. The terms are used so frequently and so casually in contemporary Christianity that Christians tend to pay scant attention to what is offered, or worse still, hear the words and fail to understand the significance of what is offered. The definition of grace that is often tossed out in sermons is “unmerited favour.” Though we hear the words, they do not resonate with our soul—the words are sterile and cold.

Grace refers to God's kindness toward His fallen creature. Moreover, it is kindness that is utterly undeserved. By birth, we are rebels to grace. The Bible states categorically that each of us are by birth enemies of God [see **ROMANS 5:10**]. To the Colossian Christians, Paul wrote that mankind is “alienated, hostile in mind, doing evil deeds” [**COLOSSIANS 1:21**]. By birth and by nature we are sinners. As sinners, we are at enmity with God, and Holy God cannot allow sinful man into His presence or He could not be holy. Therefore, whatever kindness we experience from God is undeserved.

Therefore, whether we are speaking of providing material possessions or the capacity to enjoy what we have, or whether we are speaking of the forgiveness of sin, we will know that God's kindness toward us is displayed. We are not treated as we deserve, but instead, we are recipients of grace. In a very real sense, we cannot separate God's goodness in providing material goods from His goodness in forgiving our sin. God is good, and mankind cannot expect that He should show that kindness because we are undeserving of such benevolence.

Again, when Paul speaks of peace, he is not speaking of a condition in which there is an absence of war, though such may indeed reflect the kindness of God, but he speaks of the confidence we can enjoy because we are not in control of our worlds. What I mean is this. God rules over the world despite the supposition that warlike men control what happens. This does not exempt man from responsibility for governing wisely, but it comforts the heart of the child of God to know that appearances do not tell the full story. Consequently, the child of God can say, with the Psalmist:

“I trust in you, O LORD;
I say, ‘You are my God.’
My times are in your hand;
rescue me from the hand of my enemies and
from my persecutors!”

[**PSALM 31:14, 15**]

Many years ago, I heard of a painting that the artist had entitled “Peace.” If you were to view a painting that had been entitled “Peace,” what would you expect the artist to have depicted? The painter of this particular picture had painted a frightful scene in which a storm raged during the darkness of the night. No moon showed and the stars were hidden from view, and the lightning flashed out of angry dark clouds rolling.

In the midst of this dark scene a great waterfall spilled over a mountain cliff. A tree grew out of the cliff and hung over the great cataract. On a barren limb of that tree was a nest, and nestled in the nest was a mother bird sitting on her chicks. Where was the peace the artist intended to portray? Looking intently at the scene, the viewer would note that the mother bird had raised her head to the heavens and was singing. That is peace. In the midst of the storm, to raise one's head to the heavens and sing is peace.

We have come to a day when we imagine that peace is being left undisturbed. We imagine that if we are left alone, free to pass through life with never a problem that we are at peace. However, the peace that God offers is the peace of confidence that comes from knowing that God is in control and that He cares for us. I know that Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you" [JOHN 14:27a]. However, I must never forget that He also cautioned, "In the world you will have trouble and suffering" [JOHN 16:33a NET Bible]. He continued with rich encouragement when He said, "Take heart, I have overcome the world" [JOHN 16:33b]. Because we enjoy the promise of His peace, we also have the encouragement to "Do not let your hearts be distressed nor lacking in courage" [JOHN 14:27b].

Grace, then, is the goodness of God showered on those whom He loves. Peace is the confident walk of one who knows God and who fully rests in Him. What is important to realise is that grace and peace are the heritage of the people of God. God Himself is the source both of grace and of peace. The grace of God appeared in the Person of Jesus Christ our Saviour. His coming has provided salvation for all who receive this free gift [see TITUS 2:11]. This is truly grace for all mankind. Likewise, having "been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" [ROMANS 5:1].

It is important for Christians to understand that grace lies within the purview of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. With increasing frequency, evangelical believers give the impression that grace is the prerogative of government. Churches are careful to curry favour with government leaders, avoiding doing anything to upset the power mongers who sit in the seats of authority. However, we need to remember that government, though instituted by God, was intended to be a servant of the people whom it serves.

Though indeed we should be conscientious in obeying those laws which do not violate biblical moral and ethical standards, government can give nothing to those whom it serves! Government can only operate within boundaries established by God. Government cannot establish freedom; it can only recognise freedoms conferred by God. Government cannot give to the citizenry anything other than what it has appropriated or what has been previously given with the consent of the governed. Therefore, grace cannot proceed from government.

Likewise, though an individual may be gracious and generous, no individual can confer grace upon another member of the race. Individuals are the recipients of divine grace, and therefore, individuals are constrained to give no more than they have received. If an individual has never been received the forgiveness of sin, why would we expect that person to forgive? Likewise, if they know nothing of the grace of God in Christ Jesus the Lord, why would anyone anticipate that they would be capable of showing grace.

Those who are embittered and whose lives are in turmoil reveal that they know nothing either of the grace of God or of the peace of Christ Jesus. As John has testified, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen" [1 JOHN 4:20].

So, the Apostle's prayer for grace and peace is answered in the Person of Jesus the Lord and God the Father. Grace and peace have their genesis in the Father and in the Jesus Christ the Son. One who knows God, who has received the forgiveness of sin by faith in the Son of God, has experienced firsthand the grace of God and also knows the peace of Jesus Christ. Such a person rejoices in the kindness and mercy of God having received the forgiveness of sin and adoption into the Divine Family. Thus redeemed, that individual will therefore reflect the grace and peace that has been divinely given.

THE EVIDENCE OF GRACE AND PEACE — God has not left Himself without witness in the world. All creation testifies to His presence, to His power and to His goodness. Throughout the world, God's goodness is revealed to mankind through His rich provision for all. Jesus taught that God "makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" [MATTHEW 5:45]. Paul testified that God "did good by giving [us] rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying [our hearts with food and gladness]" [ACTS 14:17]. Therefore, in a general sense, God's grace is witnessed through His kindness in providing food and in providing the capacity for human gladness.

However, the evidence Paul presents in the opening words of this letter to the churches of Galatia to support his prayer for grace and peace for those to whom he writes is that Christ Jesus died because of our sin. Paul's words are that, "the Lord Jesus Christ ... gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father." The apostolic testimony takes us back to a time before the world was created.

Urging Christians to be godly in their personal conduct, Peter writes, "If you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for your sake, who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God" [1 PETER 1:17-21].

Did you catch what the Apostle said? Christ was "foreknown before the foundation of the world." In other words, the Triune God anticipated the rebellion of His creature, man, and prepared salvation for those whom He would redeem. Paul testifies that we believers were chosen in Christ "before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before" God [EPHESIANS 1:4]. Consequently, the Father, in love predestined us for adoption [see EPHESIANS 1:5]. Those who are saved were called because of God's own purpose and grace, "which He gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began" [2 TIMOTHY 1:9]. The testimony of the Word is that God prepared our salvation before we were created, that He presented His own Son because of our sinful, fallen condition before time ever began, and that He called us in eternity past.

Who can fathom this knowledge? God created us, knowing that we would rebel and plunge His creation into ruin. Despite our propensity for rebellion, before He ever created us, He presented His Son as a sacrifice for the rebel. Then, He called those whom He had created despite their rebellion, offering them life in the place of death. If I seek evidence of God's grace, it is in this testimony that He provided life for those who were dead and in providing forgiveness for the guilty.

The Good News of Christmas is the Good News that God's own Son was born to give life to those under sentence of death. The Good News of Christmas is the Good News that God's grace extended to all who will receive it. The Good News of Christmas speaks of the forgiveness of sin and of the adoption of redeemed sinners into the Family of God. The Good News of Christmas is that no one need live under fear of condemnation because the Son of God has been revealed as the perfect sacrifice for sin.

I do want to focus on Paul's testimony of the evidence that we have grace and peace. The Christian Faith speaks of confidence and certainty. Unlike false religions that capitalise on uncertainties of divine acceptance through human effort, the Faith of Jesus Christ bespeaks confidence and certainty because He has conquered death and is risen from the dead. So, Paul says that the Lord Jesus Christ has given Himself for our sins "to deliver us from the present evil age," and this is "according to the will of our God and Father." The focus of God's grace is fallen sinners, to whom God offers life and peace.

Christ was delivered up for our sins. To be certain, the purpose of His sacrifice was to redeem us from condemnation and to provide the forgiveness of sin. However, modern religion focuses on the redemption without considering the regeneration. Redemption anticipates regeneration. In other words, we are saved to serve. We are given new life which should be revealed in our present walk.

The Apostle, writing in the Ephesian encyclical, testifies, "By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" [EPHESIANS 2:8-10]. We tend to encourage new believers to memorise VERSES EIGHT AND NINE, but somehow we neglect VERSE TEN. We who are saved were saved for a purpose, and the purpose is that we would do those good works which God prepared beforehand. This goes back to the salvation God planned before the creation of the world.

It was always in the plan of God that we would be a people revealing the praise of His glory through His salvation. That revelation of His glory is not merely an event planned for His return, but it is a revelation of His glory that is witnessed even now as we glorify Him through godly and righteous lives. Paul declares, "In [Christ Jesus the Lord] we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of His glory. In Him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in Him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of His glory" [EPHESIANS 1:11-14].

At His return, our Lord shall be glorified in His saints [see 2 THESSALONIANS 1:10]; however, at this present time we who are saved live out our lives to the praise of His glory. The very presence of a people who are redeemed, forgiven of all sin, accepted in the Beloved Son, and called by the Name of the Risen Lord of Glory, gives continuing evidence of God's grace. All who are outside of the Faith are aware of the goodness of God toward those who are the redeemed. They see His grace in its fullness as we live without fear and without condemnation. When the world, those who are without salvation, witness the freedom with which we live, they are compelled to acknowledge the grace of God that is revealed through us. For this reason, it is vital that we who are twice born people must live holy and godly lives.

Because we have been set free of condemnation and accepted in the Beloved Son, we boldly approach the throne of grace to seek help in time of need. We live without fear because we have peace with God. The Apostle states the case when writing to the Christians in Rome, “Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” [ROMANS 5:1]. Indeed, his prayer for that same congregation was, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope” [ROMANS 15:13].

Jesus our Lord is called the “Prince of Peace” [ISAIAH 9:4] and the “Lord of Peace” [2 THESSALONIANS 3:16]. The Apostle asserts that Christ “is our peace” [EPHESIANS 2:14]. Therefore, we should not wonder that His people are promised peace. Despite hardship and trial, in Christ our Lord we have peace [see JOHN 16:33]. Therefore, the admonition of the Apostle is to “Let the peace of Christ rule in [y]our hearts, to which indeed [we are] called in one Body” [COLOSSIANS 3:15]. This promised peace becomes a reality as we live according to the teaching we have received through the Word of God.

We are taught, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” [PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7].

As we live with joy, demonstrating sweet reasonable in all matters, living in the light of our Saviour’s return, without anxiety, seeking the mind of the Lord, we will enjoy His peace. This is the promise of God. This is the heritage of the people of God. This is the peace for which Paul prays.

Speaking practically, the people of God are expected to live in peace. This does not mean that we will never have conflict, nor even that we will never grow weary as result of the sinful conditions associated with this dying world. As previously stated, when we speak of peace, we do not refer to an undisturbed state that permits us to live without regard for the eternal welfare of others; rather, peace, as presented in the Word of God, bespeaks the manner in which we live reflecting confidence arising from the knowledge that we are accepted in the Son of God and expresses certainty that our times are in His hands. So, as the people of God demonstrate the peace of God through living in harmony with one another while treating each fellow believer with dignity and gentleness, we show that God has delivered us from the present evil age.

Though we are in the world, we are not of the world. Though we live in the midst of evil people, we shine like the brightness of the heavenly expanse as we demonstrate the saving power of God through living so as to express His grace and with His peace. We may either react as do those of the world, striking out and raging against the unfairness of those who are opposed to God and to righteousness, or we can live with confidence that God is on the throne overseeing all that comes into our lives.

I have recently reflected Jesus’ cautionary words: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household” [MATTHEW 10:34-36]. Our closest friends, even the members of our own family, will oppose us when we determine that we will be righteous. However, facing such opposition, we may either reflect divine peace or react as the world reacts to injustice.

At the birth of the Saviour, the angels pronounced the benediction that anticipated the Apostle's prayer recorded in our text. Appearing to the shepherds watching the flocks dedicated for the Passover sacrifice, the heavenly host spoke these words:

“Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”
[LUKE 2:14]

Peace indeed! And the promise of God for all with whom He is pleased is His peace.

GLORY ASCRIBED TO THE ETERNAL GOD — Listen once again to Paul's prayer. “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.” It is God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, who gives grace and peace. This precious gift is not only the heritage of all who know Christ Jesus the Lord, but as recipients of this great gift, we who are believers reveal His power and glorify His Name. Thus, with the Apostle we ascribe to our God and Father glory forever and ever. Amen! Amen, indeed.

When Paul delivers this paean of praise, he is clearly stating that God is eternal. Our God lives forever and ever and thus praise given to Him assumes an eternal quality. Our worship is of more than momentary importance and it has far greater impact than merely making us feel good about ourselves. Worship of the True and Living God takes on eternal significance since it is presented to Him who lives forever and ever. Since glory and honour and praise belong to God, we are exalting Him who has showered us with His grace and given to us His peace. Therefore, the worship we present builds us in the Faith and enables us to understand who God is and what He has done for us.

Have you ever noticed how often the Psalmist emphasised God's eternal nature?

“The LORD sits enthroned forever;
he has established his throne for justice.”
[PSALM 9:7]

“The LORD is king forever and ever.”
[PSALM 10:16]

“Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.
The sceptre of your kingdom is a sceptre of uprightness.”
[PSALM 45:6]

The reason for this emphasis upon God's eternal nature is that because He lives forever, those who know Him and who worship Him will also live forever. Thus, the Psalmist joyfully asserts in the Shepherd's Psalm, “I shall dwell in the House of the Lord forever” [PSALM 23:6]. God is the eternal God, and those who are accepted into His Family share in that eternal nature, even now enjoying eternal life. Eternal life is not mere length of days, but it is a quality of life reflecting the nature of God who saves us and with whom we now share this life.

Therefore, the Psalmist is filled with joy at the knowledge that

“this is God,
our God forever and ever.
He will guide us forever.”

[PSALM 48:14]

In the Letter to the Hebrew Christians is found a most comforting affirmation for those who have received the forgiveness of sin through faith in Jesus the Lord. The writer attests, Christ “is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” [HEBREWS 7:25]. Christ the Saviour came to present Himself as a sacrifice for sin. He was crucified and buried, but He did not stay dead. Scripture testifies that He broke the bonds of death and rose from the grave. This Jesus has conquered death and Hades to bring life and light to all who believe Him.

No wonder there is a pronouncement of peace at Christmastide! Peace is the promise of Him who was born to defeat death, and it is promised to all who receive Him as Master of life. And that is our message to you. If somehow you have yet to believe this message of life, if somehow you are still in your sins without His forgiveness, let this be the day you receive the life He offers. Receiving that life, you will know experientially the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Word of God calls on each of us to believe the message of life. With the Apostle, we call all to “believe in the Lord Jesus” so that you may be saved. In the second Corinthians Letter [2 CORINTHIANS 5:17-6:2], we are assured, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

“Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says,

“In a favourable time I listened to you,
and in a day of salvation I have helped you.”

“Behold, now is the favourable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

Believe this message as we enter this Yuletide Season; receive the gift of God—life in the Beloved Son. The Word of God calls each of us to life, saying, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” That passage concludes by citing the prophet Joel, “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].

Believe and be saved. Have a real reason to celebrate the Season. Make your decision this day. Do it now. Amen.