

How Can I Know for Sure? 2022
 Titus 2:11-14, 3:1-7
 Hebrews 12:28-29, 13:1-5, 16, 20-21, 25

Titus 2:11-14, 3:1-7 (New Revised Standard Version)

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarrelling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone. For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. But when the goodness and loving-kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Hebrews 12:28-29, 13:1-5, 16, 20-21, 25 (New Revised Standard Version)

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire. Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen. Grace be with all of you.

I once knew a man who sat with his wife every week during worship.

With strong voice and gusto he's sing the great hymns of our faith,
 join in with the congregation saying the words of the liturgy,
 and sometimes even comment on the Scripture or my sermon.

One time, at a men's breakfast,

he told me that he enjoyed participating with worship with his wife,
 but that it wasn't relevant or making any difference in his life.

He had a complacent cynicism of just going through the motions,
 without allowing the truth to penetrate past or affect his heart.

But at least he came, so I didn't try to argue with him,
 trusting that eventually God would work it out with him.

Sometime later he left a message for me to please call,

and said that it was extremely urgent and important.

It seems that his doctor had used the word, terminal,
and suddenly the words and music of worship mattered a great deal.

Now it was very relevant and critical to know,
can I really trust and count on what I've heard in worship,
and are the hopes and promises proclaimed in worship true?

I've had more than a few conversations with someone near death
wanting to talk about their questions, doubts, concerns & fear.

My practice is to explain carefully what the Bible has to say
about God's promises and love, our Christian hope
concerning eternal life and the Kingdom of Heaven,
and make it clear, that's where I've set my anchor and foundation.

Often I'll hear about feelings of anxiety, unresolved guilt & regret,
and seeking some assurance of God gracious mercy and forgiveness,
asking **how can they really know for sure, and without a doubt**
truly trust with real certainty in God's promises and grace?

It is a privilege to comfort and reassure those confronting death,
for at such times we do need to hear hope & confident assurance,
that the promises of the gospel are real, true & trustworthy.

That moment, we want an answer to one life's most critical questions,
How can I know for sure that I can rely on those promises?
And I suspect that if we are honest with ourselves,
we all grapple with such questions from time to time,
and need to re-examine exactly what & why we believe as we do.

My experience is that those questions & faith-struggles with doubt
can be an important part of the process of God's grace
that can help our faith to grow deeper & more authentic.

For example, when my parents died that question became very personal.
I needed some comfort and reassurance that I'd see them again,
for I wanted to believe, **but how could I know for sure?**

With my science background, I tried to reason and think it through,
searching for a pattern of logic or some tangible evidence
upon which I could confidently hang my hope, faith & trust.

I was most helped by **John 3**, where Jesus tries to explain to Nicodemus
about being born again and the promise of the Kingdom of God.
As Jesus explained to him, we can't actually see the wind,
but we can hear it and we can see what the wind does,
and so it is with the spiritual truths of God.

Now I have never actually seen gravity, electricity or the wind,
yet I have no doubt that all three do physically and truly exist.

I know, because I have seen what happens when the wind blows,
I have experienced the force of gravity when I've drop something,
and I'm grateful
that electricity makes something happen when I plug it in.

**So too, we can see and recognize the effects of God's grace
when the Holy Spirit blows into and through a human life.**

I first met Pam as a reporter from the TV station in Wilmington,
and she noticed a banner hanging in front of our church in NC,
“**All are welcome, come as you are**” and so the next Sunday she did.

She had no previous church experience or religious background,
but seeing all of the devastation from a recent hurricane
dredged up some terrible and painful childhood memories
and she desperately hoped and wanted to find resolution...
... and needing help, she came, **for she didn't know where else to turn.**

She was made to feel welcome that Sunday, and on the way out,
asked if she could come by, she had some questions for me.

And for the next several months she attended our worship services,
and then later during the week she would come by with her list
of questions to ask about our worship service and my sermon.

It was a treat to help her explore her spiritual & biblical questions,
since she had no idea or experience about grace or a life of faith.

I didn't try to nudge her or press her to make a decision,
but simply answered her questions about grace and faith,
explaining my reasoning & beliefs, and what was working for me.

Then one day, in a most amazing and powerful moment of God's grace,
she asked to pray, to receive Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior.

**She wasn't a Christian, and then some moments later, she was,
and so she began her journey of faith and living into God's grace,**
and it was all God's grace --- hope, joy & promise of a new life.

It was truly remarkable to observe as God's grace overflowed,
dramatically moving her toward new life, healing and change...

... which is what can happen when grace and truth take hold of someone,
as the process is described in Titus 3:7,

**This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by
his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.**

I've seen that wonderful & powerful transformation many times
as God's Spirit and grace enters and reshapes a human life.

Perhaps the best part of being a pastor
is the joy and delight of God's grace flowing into someone,
and then seeing the change as it spills over and spreads,
transforming what they say and do, their whole perspective.

The Greek word that New Test. writers use to describe that process
is 'meta skematzo', which is where we get the word, schematics.
Meta skematzo describes the process of making an internal change
that results in an external or outward noticeable change.

For example, a change in attitude that leads to a change in behavior.

God's grace and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit,
these have power to change our internal schematics,
which leads to joy, healing & hope, to transformed lives...

... such as in the life of that young woman loved and called by God,

**since that first remarkable afternoon in my office
when she invited Jesus into her life to be her Lord and Savior.**

Or as described in Hebrews 12:28-29

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that **cannot be shaken**, let us **give thanks**, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

Several years ago on a mission trip with our youth group,
some of them were helping me prepare the elements for Communion.

One of the youth couldn't eat anything with any wheat in it,
so I had them add a slice of gluten-free bread for him.

One of the other youth broke off a piece to try it,
and making a face, she complained that it tasted awful.

It disturbed them that only Michael would be eating it,
so they all insisted that if Michael had to have gluten-free,
then they were all going to have gluten-free, a sign of unity.

It turned out to be a most amazing lesson toward love for one another,
and a most meaningful and memorable Communion celebration,

exemplifying our reading from Titus 2:11-14

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a **people of his own who are zealous for good deeds**.

The same giver of grace who assures us of eternal salvation,
also deepens our faith and transforms our present life
into living lives that more and more reflect God's grace...

... as the Holy Spirit works in and through our lives.

But as Christians of the American and Presbyterian flavor,
we like to do for ourselves and we like to feel in control.

So the challenge for many of us is,

that having received the free gift of God's grace,
we may still feel a need to earn or be worthy of God's favor,
as if that gift of grace only applied to our salvation,
and God, some harsh - divine employer or task-master
now demands our service **as a duty and debt repayment...**

...which shifts the focus toward our own good works and performance,
rather than all the glory & honor focused on God & his gracious love.

If we view the Christian life as something that **we do or accomplish**,
then we are failing to recognize and fully appreciate that
Christianity is really about our relationship with God,
a relationship of grace and joyful gratitude,

which has the power, if we will allow it,
to redefine our lives and how we treat others.

My life and all that it contains is **God's gift to me**,
and what I choose to do with it, how I live that life,
isn't that really **my gift back to God**?

It is in that sense of the power of God's Spirit and gift of grace
continuing to transform us and guide how we live,
that the author of Hebrews gives specific examples
of how receiving grace can change how we live, 13:1-3, 5, 16

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have... Do not neglect to do good and to **share what you have**, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

As the Holy Spirit's presence and God's grace transforms us,
our lives become clear evidence of God's truth and promises.

Here's the challenge ---
by the way we live and interact with other people,
should reflect the amazing God to whom we belong,
and cause them to say, "I want what you've got!"

It is a simple and wonderful truth **that as we draw nearer to God,**
it allows God's presence and grace to reform more of our lives...

... and because I see the evidence of that in my own life
and in the lives and situations of other people,
I know and can proclaim with bold certainty and
absolute assurance that in life or in death:

1st That we are loved and precious to our infinitely patient God,
and regardless of whatever came before in our lives
or whatever we have ever said or done, **we are loved.** ^{2x}

2nd That surely God is with us, will not reject or give up on us,
is always working toward our benefit in order to bless us,
and can transform even our mistakes, faults and failures
into something meaningful, useful & somehow beneficial.

3rd That the Lord does want us to know him, to love and enjoy him,
which calls us to look for the grace & hope, for God's purpose
in all situations, even in our troubles of life and living.

As I have said frequently since Covid began, we are each one of us
exactly where & when God has intentionally placed us & equipped us
to grow in grace, to serve usefully and to make a real difference.

4th That our faith journey is an open pathway for Jesus to change us,
a life-long process of spiritual development and discernment,
and since God is sovereign we're called to trust God's wisdom & power
to fully complete the working of God's grace, will & saving purpose.

The truth of these affirmations provides all the confidence I need

to withstand and endure whatever comes my way with hope and trust,
and to assure even those facing death and their loved ones
that God's love is real, powerful and certain,
so that we can rely on God's grace, promises & presence.

And even better, if we will look, then we will see
the difference God's grace has been making all along.

Truly there is grace, hope & good to be found **all around us**,
if through eyes of faith we're willing to see & receive new life,
the power of God's love to cleanse, heal, save & bring us home.

As we heard Janet read earlier:

Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen. Grace be with all of you. (Hebrews 13:20-21, 25)