

Christian Life, Active & Lived Well 2023
Ephesians 2:4-10 1 Peter 4:10-14, 5:6-11

Ephesians 2:4-10 (New Revised Standard Version)

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

1 Peter 4:10-14, 5:6-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

I watched a video recently of a troubled and distressed young man,
who is struggling with the aftereffects of Covid isolation & fear,
feeling depressed and discouraged with devastating dread.

He asked, "What can you do when your world comes crashing down on you,
or when you've done nothing but fail and mess up your whole life?
What can you do when your life adds up to nothing,
and there's not a thing that you can do about it?"

That young man has already written off his life as useless and wasted,
devoid of any possibility of joy or optimism, or reason for hope,
however, I would point out the hope & promise of Ephesians 2:4-5, 10

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— ... For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

These verses from Ephesians are about transforming & healing power,

when through the Holy Spirit, God's mercy and love enters our life
and grace through Christ, though entirely unearned & undeserved.

**Surely one of the great unexplainable wonders of the universe
is the endlessly-enduring grace and workings of the Lord God.**

Despite our repeated failure to live a consistently-faithful life,
yet God's abiding love, forgiveness and healing-hope **abound**.

God's gracious desire is to heal, to bless, to restore and save,
and what an incredible truth and promise to know and fully trust,
that even our worst and most horrible **cannot defeat God's love**.

I wish I could explain to that young man in the video,
just how truly wise, grace-giving and merciful our God actually is,
and what a profound difference a relationship with God can make,
or all that the Lord might be able to accomplish in & through us.

It's not that God removes us from the floodwaters or fiery flames
but that the Lord **never** gives up on us, or abandons, or rejects us.

Our hope is in the assurance, power and truth of God's promise,
I created and called you. I love you and I will sustain you, vs. 5:7

Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.

God also promises, I am up to something marvelous and meaningful,
and you, my chosen and beloved ones, you who belong to me,
have been uniquely and particularly created and equipped
to share in the joy, in my life-affirming project
by making a real & positive difference in the world.

In this broken world of trouble, confusion, struggle and strife,
through the Lord's gifts and grace entrusted to each one of us,
**God intends to love, heal, save & bless all of his creation,
by directing that grace to flow freely through each of us...**

... which means that God calls us to stay engaged with and in the world
by participating actively in the world by working toward
God's justice, mercy and transformation of this world,
**by humbly and eagerly seeking opportunities to do good,
by making a difference for the glory and kingdom of God.**

Faithful means letting that grace guide every aspect of our life,
so that God's generosity, goodness and love can flow-out from us,
**which then points to our Creator who equipped & gifted us
to lead lives of faithful and meaningful discipleship.**

Do you remember the movie "Chariots of Fire"?

It was about the life and faith of Eric Liddell,
who served as a missionary in China, 1925 to 1945,

until he died in a Japanese internment camp during WWII.

But perhaps even more than his faithful service as a missionary,
his influence and most powerful proclamation of faith
was during the 1924 Olympics which were held in Paris.

Eric was a fast sprinter and his best event was the 100-meter race.
But he wouldn't run in an Olympic race that was to be held on Sunday,
because on principle, he would not compete on the Sabbath.

He was put under tremendous pressure to compromise his beliefs
by the British Olympic Committee including the Royal family,
but he placed his allegiance to God above all else,
and their best efforts couldn't get him to back down.
He did end up winning a medal in a race held on a different day.

In an earlier scene, his disapproving sister was objecting to
his great love for running and athletics, and that he delayed
rather than immediately serving with her as a missionary in China.

It's a powerful & insightful scene when Eric explains to his sister,
**"I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast,
and when I run, I feel God's pleasure."**

Liddell believed that his athletic ability was a gift from God
to be used according to the purpose, desire and pleasure of God,
which was the way he tried to live his life,
always for the glory and pleasure of the Lord.

The way Eric Liddell lived reflects the message of 1st Peter, vs. 4:10-11

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve ... with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ.

As Christians, most of us already know and understand
that our salvation is entirely a gift of God's grace.

But sometimes we fail to appreciate and fully recognize
our responsibility to respond as stewards of that grace,
and that through God's gifts and blessings given to us,
the Lord intends to love and bless others, **through us**.

Steward is an important word & critical concept for us to understand.

A steward is not the owner, but manages property for the owner,
and trusted with responsibility to use as the owner directs.

The point in 1st Peter is that the gifts and blessings of our lives
are all given and entrusted to us by God, our wise Creator,
for us to use for the purpose, will and pleasure of the Lord.

Our world and culture teach us to ask and demand,

Am I getting all that I want?

The Holy Spirit teaches us to ask and wonder,

Am I giving the best that I can?

The text we read from the letter of 1st Peter emerged
from a very difficult time in the life of the Church.

It was during a period of the most extreme and severe persecution,
that the future of the church itself seemed to be in doubt,
and some were wondering why it was such a struggle for them...

... which was addressed in the 1st Peter passage, vs. 12-13

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.

The point and message of this passage is,

that just as Jesus was at odds with the world & willingly suffered,
for them to be faithful was to be at odds in their broken world...

... and in fact, their struggles were not a sign of defeat or loss,

but a sign of faithfulness, of sharing in the mission of Christ.

Clearly these are indeed difficult, confusing and troubling days.

We did not choose to live in these times or in this circumstance,
but we can trust that God chose for us to live in this world,
& God's intention for us to serve well amid our situation.

The texts we read today assure us that

as we grapple with our changing world, our situation and culture,
the Lord God is not surprised, and not distressed or defeated,
but is still accomplishing according to his good purpose...

... and our call is to remain faithful, trust patiently and serve well,

by staying focused on Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture,
as we can surely rely on God's promises, word and truth
and God's abiding presence among us, the people of God.

So we are called to faithfully live out our Christian life & faith

in whatever environment, whatever circumstance or context
God has chosen to place us, for us to love, live and serve.

These Bible passages are about **our hope and God's promises to us**

as we are called, empowered and equipped
to bear faithful witness to the Gospel word and truth
as the Church, the body of Christ called to serve
as the very real presence of God in the world,

and to use our lives well as precious gifts from God that they are.

True Christian discipleship is about combining all of our gifts
to strengthen and build up the church and to serve our mission-

- where all God's servants are supported, affirmed and appreciated,
as God's generosity, love and grace can then flow through us.

And so with integrity and courage, we need to challenge ourselves,
am I living the life of joy, peace, service and discipleship
to which God graciously called, gifted and intends for me?

Am I using actively & well the gifts & blessings God entrusted to me?

Am I trying to grow deeper in my own walk of faith with Christ
by being consistent in prayer and feeding upon God's word?

Sometimes amid all the distractions and lies of this world,
we forget ... we forget who are, and how very much we are loved,
or all that the Lord might be able to accomplish through us,
or what a profound difference our faithfulness could make.

One night, many decades ago two teenage boys were trying
to attend a revival service but couldn't find any open seats.
As they turned to leave, an usher noticed them,
and making a special effort, he took the time
to search until he found some seats for them.

That night both boys accepted Christ and decided to follow ...
... and as it turned out, one of those boys **was Billy Graham.**

That usher probably never knew the huge difference he made,
and no one knows who that "faithful steward", who that usher was ...
... well except that of course, God knows...
... just as God knows all the contents and details of our lives.

So I ask you, what do you want and expect for our future to be?
What do you really believe can happen through this congregation?

In Sept. 2003, I preached my first sermon here, as your new pastor.
In case you've forgotten or were not here, I said in that sermon:
"Together, let us inquire of the Lord for new dreams,
renewed hope for a refreshed vision of God's mission
as God calls us, equips us and guides us
to become far more than we've ever been before,
and strive to become more than we can imagine.

To fulfill our mission, and to faithfully serve the Lord our God,
we cannot dwell in the illusion of some former golden age,
and we cannot dwell on our past mistakes, losses or fears,
not if we want God's peace, God's mission for us,
and for God's joy & love to be a part of our lives."

Today, we live in a highly polarized and angry culture,
our world is filled with bitterness, frustration and distrust,
with anger & threat, with condemnation of those who disagree.

Our world and our culture, they don't do or practice gentle kindness,
humility, patience, hospitality, listening or love very well,
so perhaps here is **God's gift to the Church:**

- **an opportunity** to be countercultural to the rest of the world,
- **an opportunity** to demonstrate sacrificial love, "αγαπε" love that places the interest of others ahead of oneself.

I believe that there are wonderful and creative ways
that we can be faithful, effective and serve the Lord God well
by loving, serving and caring for other people
with whatever gifts and blessings we have to share.

I am convinced that a primary task of this church and congregation
is to create a caring and faith-nurturing & healing-environment
in which we live out the stories and truths of Scripture,
in ways that reflect God's love, compassion and welcome.

Our call is to intentionally and actively and generously and well
demonstrate God's love and grace in every way we can
by serving as caring dispensers of God's love & grace...

... because in fact, the very essence of our Christian faith,
is that our God, our loving and merciful and wise God,
is the God of infinite and undeserved second chances.

So, as we have been instructed, (1 Pet. 4:10, Eph. 2:10, 4:1-3)

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life... with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.