

Because God's Grace is Real 2023
 Zephaniah 3:14-19 Titus 2:11-14, 3:3-7

Zephaniah 3:14-19 (New Revised Standard Version)

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.

Titus 2:11-14, 3:3-7 (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. 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.

While visiting a woman with terminal cancer dying in the hospital,
 she explained, she was feeling fearful, anxious & even panicky,
 and asked, **how could she really know for sure and without a doubt**
 that she could trust with certainty in God's promises,
 the amazing gracious love & assurances I'd described?
"How can I know for sure that I can rely on those promises?"

How can we know for sure?,
 for if we are being totally honest, don't we all grapple
 with such questions and a little doubt from time to time?

Sometimes life is too much and the harsh realities of this world
 can shake us up and cause us to doubt or question our faith,
so we need to re-examine exactly what and why we believe as we do.
 For example, when my parents died, that made it all 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?**

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

I was most helped by the conversation Jesus has with Nicodemus in Jn 3
about being born again and the promise of the Kingdom of Heaven.

As Jesus explained to him, we can't actually see the wind,
but we can hear it and we can see what it does,
and so it is with the spiritual truths of God.

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

I know, because I have seen the effects from when the wind blows,
that things fall & what happens when I turn on the electricity.

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

Several years ago, at a gathering of Presbyterian pastors,
I ran into an old friend I hadn't seen since high school.

It was a delightful surprise & it was quite a shock for both of us
to see & recognize the older and grey-haired version of each other.

We enjoyed reconnecting, and of course,
we started sharing stories and memories of our distant teen years.
But beyond the funny stories and easy events of our youth,
some went a bit deeper and remembering went a bit deeper,
toward embarrassing, painful & harsh experiences,
harmful & hurtful decisions & mistakes of adolescence.

That remembering, seemed to revive memories of my past selfishness,
for like most people, not all of the choices I made in my youth
were always wise and faithful, generous and compassionate.

Over time we all accumulate at least a few old wounds and scars,
harsh memories of regrets and failures, - not entirely resolved,
that can still be quite painful to recall.

But at the same time, remembering that past I'd prefer to forget,
was also **an encouragement, a healing and affirming experience,**
because it demonstrated the fact that I have grown & changed,
for today, I would not still make those same bad choices.

Our mistakes, wounds & regrets are not necessarily all bad news,
but can be recast and transformed into **tokens of hope and promise.**

I found it very hopeful and encouraging
to realize that God had been present, and secretly at work,
transforming me all along.

accomplishing, healing and

I also realized that it was all grace, it was entirely
the Holy Spirit's doing according to God's good purpose,
and definitely not the result or achievement
of my efforts, my good works or my plans to improve,
since for the most part, I hadn't even noticed until
I'd ran into someone who had known me way back then.

That experience of finding hope, and redemption of the past
actually raises a most significant theological inquiry,

**so what is the process of recovering from failure and loss,
of redeeming our past, and how do we get right with God?**

That was the driving issue and question of Martin Luther's life,
and is a particularly appropriate consideration for today,
on this anniversary Sunday of the Protestant Reformation.

At age 21, Martin Luther was a law student,
but the sudden death of a close friend
caused him to rethink more deeply about spiritual concerns---
-- which drove him to become an Augustinian monk.

His was a rigorous life of prayer and spiritual disciplines,
and Luther spend up to 6 hours each day confessing his sins.
**Yet still fear haunted him, that he might forget some sin,
or hadn't done enough to placate God's wrath toward him.**

The medieval church of Martin Luther's time taught that
good deeds, acts of love, obedience & devotion to the church,
made one worthy and deserving of God's mercy and pardon,

but how could he know for sure that his good outweighed his bad?

**He was unable to cleanse and relieve his guilty conscience and sense of regret.
For all his efforts, good deeds, confession and fervent trying,
he still couldn't shake the death-grip and hold of fear & sin.**

As a teenager, during summers I worked at a biological laboratory
where we prepared animal specimens and skeletons
for sale to colleges and schools for science classes.

One hot July, one of the chest-freezers at the lab that was filled
with animal carcasses, was left unplugged for several weeks.
To say the stuff inside rotted would be a gross understatement,
and even wearing a gasmask,
there was a nasty and putrid stench beyond description.

Nothing we tried, not Lysol, bleach or combinations of chemicals
could get rid of that horrible odor of death and decay...
... and in the end, they had to replace the freezer.

Our sin, guilt, regrets and fears are something like that,
**despite our best efforts, our hard work and all that we do,
we cannot overcome the putrid stench of death and decay.
On our own, we cannot make ourselves righteous enough before God.**

That was the consuming issue and struggle of Martin Luther,
because no matter how hard he tried, he could not achieve
or accomplish the assurance of forgiveness that he sought.

In 1515, Martin Luther was appointed to teach a course
on the biblical writings of Paul at the university in Wittenberg,
and in preparation was pushed to study Scripture for himself.

From his studies, he discovered that forgiveness and righteousness,

don't come through our good works or religious observances,
but as God's gift of grace, a **righteousness through Christ**,
accomplished when Jesus died and rose again from the dead.

Righteousness is not earned, but by grace is received through faith.

For Martin Luther,
this was an overwhelming and transforming revelation,
that the institutional church had missed or rejected.

As Luther put it,
"It was as though the gates of heaven were opened to me."

That is the same truth also proclaimed in Titus 3:4-5,

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

That is the message of the Gospel, **God's Good News for sinners**,
and an entirely different picture and understanding of God
than that proclaimed by the medieval church that made
Luther feel so fearful & hopeless about his sin & guilt.

And when we begin to accept and trust that the Good News **is true**,
and we begin to experience that grace for ourselves
and how much God really does love us, even just as we are,
**it becomes the most significant truth of our lives
that can reorient everything about how we live.**

It is not God's intention for our lives
to be defined by guilt and shame, or by fear and regret,
nor for us, through good works and religious observance
to try & earn God's love or make-up for past mistakes.

Consider the gracious God that Zephaniah knows & describes, vs. 17

The Lord is in your midst; you shall fear no more. ... he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.

That isn't about an angry God poised to pounce in fierce judgment,
**but a gracious loving God singing and rejoicing over us,
with loud joy and gladness celebrating that we are his.
It's God pouring out his love like a fountain overflowing with grace.**

But we may have a little trouble believing or accepting all that.
The world and many people around us are often critical,
pointing out our mistakes and failures,
judging us and setting our worth by our accomplishments.

Trained, by that experience of being judged throughout our lives,
no wonder we feel unworthy, and find it hard to believe
that God actually does love us and rejoices over us,
after all, why would God be delighted or want to sing over us?

It's because of the truly remarkable power and work of God's grace,
which is what happens when grace and truth take hold of someone.
I've seen that wonderful & powerful transformation many times

as God's Spirit and grace enter, bless and reshape a human life.

The Greek word that the NT writers use to describe that process
 is μετασκεματισμο which means, to make an internal change
 that then alters or changes the external appearance,
 as in changing someone's schematics, their internal design,
their inner workings which changes their external behavior.

One of the powerful & reassuring ways that I know our God is real,
 and that the Gospel promises of Scripture can be trusted fully,
 is by the power of God's grace to bring healing and hope,
 and transform human lives, attitudes and situations...

... for example, two neighbors, both church members had been
 in conflict over some disputed waterfront property for years,
 and had refused to speak to each other ever since...

... until one of them was deeply moved during a worship service,
 and went to visit his difficult neighbor that same afternoon,
 to make amends and reconcile, try to reach a fair agreement.

Barry explained to me that he was totally stunned and surprised,
 because he was not the sort of man to do such a thing ---
 but clearly God's grace and Holy Spirit worked through him...

... just as we read from Titus, vs. 11-12

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.

Beyond the Lord's gracious promise of eternal salvation,
 God's Spirit and grace in us & with us also brings healing hope
 with power to transform our lives in this present world... vs. 14

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.

This suggests to me that instead of asking, are you saved?,
 a better question to ask might be,
**how is the gracious presence of God's love changing you?,
 and am I being attentive to the power of God's grace?**

If we see the Christian life as something **we have to accomplish**,
 then we are failing to see, recognize and appreciate that
 Christianity is really about **our relationship with God**,
 a relationship of love, grace and joyful gratitude--
-- and it is by that grace that our faith redefines how we live.

**It is in experiencing the power of God's Spirit and gift of grace
 that convinces me that God's word is entirely reliable & true.**

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.

Truly there is grace, hope and good to be found all around us,
if through eyes of faith we're willing to see & receive new life,
for if we will look, then we will see the difference,
the blessing God's grace has been making all along.

I believe that the single most significant task of this church
is to create a caring, faith and hope nurturing environment
where we do faithfully reflect God's gracious love
by welcoming all and being attentive to human needs.

We are called to be a community which helps form Christian character
which means that here, all people should experience God's love.

As the Apostle Paul wrote in **Romans 15:13**

May the God of hope fill us all with such joy and peace in believing, that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.