

### ***Grace While You Wait***

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, dear friends: Today we begin a new church year. And you may have noticed that in the church, the new year begins with pretty much the same overarching theme with which the last year ended; namely, Christ the Savior is coming. Prepare to receive your King.

There is a difference though. In the season of Advent we focus our attention on Christ's first appearance, his coming in weakness and humility, his coming to offer himself as the sacrifice of atonement to save us from the threatening perils of our sins. For the past several weeks as the last year ended, we concentrated on what God's Word has to say about the Lord's second appearance, when he will come with fearsome awe and great power to judge the living and the dead. And the thing to see is that those who receive him properly as he comes in weakness and humility as he did at first, and indeed as he continues to do now in his Word and Sacraments to free his people from their sins, they are the ones who will be well prepared to receive him when he comes again in glory.

Thus the emphasis we've been hearing for the last several weeks on remaining steadfast in the faith. The repeated warnings have been to hang tough, knuckle down, bear all hardship, keep alert, stay awake, watch and pray, endure to the end, and remain faithful until death – and you too will receive the crown of life. And surely such exhortations are necessary to bolster and encourage us as we push on toward our goal.

And yet ...and yet they cast over us a shadow of doubt as well (and if they don't, they ought to). I mean, the fact that we need to be warned over and over again to remain steadfast implies that there are some who won't. To be sure, even the most casual exposure to the biblical storyline reveals that so many who begin the journey of faith that leads to life do not complete it. This is a major stress of the Exodus. The children of Israel are set free from their slavery in Egypt by God's mighty deliverance. All of them experience the miraculous Red Sea crossing, walking on dry ground between the standing walls of water. They know the power and grace of God. None of them doubt it; at least, not then. But here's the thing: comparatively few of those who made that crossing and started the journey actually entered the Promised Land. Some rebelled and were destroyed. Many more were lost due to doubt and unbelief. There was consistent attrition due to people giving up, wandering off, or wanting to return to Egypt. There were even some Israelites, two and a half tribes' worth no less, who went the whole distance, who arrived at the edge of the Promised Land, who could see the land flowing with milk and honey on the other side of the Jordan; but who said, "You know what? We kind of like it on this side. We'd like to stay and settle here. We'd rather not enter the land and take the inheritance the Lord wants to give us."

Sadly, the same thing happens today. We baptize new members into Christ, we ensure that they are catechized and raised in the faith. They know the power and grace of God who saves them from sin. They stand here before the altar and earnestly confess their faith. They receive Christ's body and blood. But then they rebel. They wander. They get led astray. They fall into sin and unbelief. And it may happen at any time: when they're 18 or 28 or 58 or 88. Yes, some may even go the whole distance and then give up at the very end, loving their lives in this world more than trusting in the inheritance the Lord wants to give them.

We know this happens. We've all seen it. Despite our encouragement, our prayers, our pleading, and our tears, people we know and love fall from the faith and do not make it to the goal. It's heartbreaking when it happens. *And it's unsettling to us.* We know they aren't any different than we are. Each one of us faces the same temptations. We all have a sin nature that drags us down and back. We're all inclined to wander and to stray. So it's got to be there bouncing around in the back of our minds: that nagging question, "How do I know it's not going to happen to me? I started the journey of faith. I believe the Gospel. I'm plugging along, moving forward in Christ; but will I make it to the goal? I do believe *today*. What I want to know is if I'll believe *tomorrow* ... and the next day, and the day after that."

None of us wants to repeat the spectacular mistake Utah wide receiver Kaelin Clay made a few weeks back in a game against Oregon. Perhaps you saw the play. They showed it many times. It's gone viral on the internet. It's third down and five; Utah decides to go deep. Clay's wide open, catches the ball, and runs into the end zone to complete an easy 79 yard touchdown. Or so it seemed. You know how they used to spike the ball in victory. They can't do that anymore. So now they do that casual "Don't need this no mo', I'm too cool to carry the ball" kind of drop. That's what Clay did. Trouble is, he did it a full step before he crossed the goal line. The side line ref is standing right there. While the crowd erupts in glee thinking they've scored, and Clay and his buddies are chest bumping each other in the end zone, the ref's not signaling a touchdown. It's actually a fumble. The ball's still live. The ref stands there waiting to see what will happen. After a few moments a few of the Oregon players who fruitlessly chased Clay to the end zone realize what's going on. One of them grabs the ball and they run it all the way back to their end zone. Touchdown, Oregon – in a rare 180 yard play. Clay's overconfident blunder cost his team a touchdown and ultimately the game. But that was just a ballgame. He'll get over it. Those who do the same thing in the game called life end up in hell. They never get over it – which again raises the question, "How can I be sure that it won't be me?"

In answer, first let me say this: if you're asking the question, it's a good thing. It's a far bigger problem if you're not. To not be concerned smacks of the same overconfidence that got Clay into trouble. Some anxiety in this regard is good. If Clay had had more of it, he would have made sure that he was holding tightly onto the ball. The same is true of us: a little tension, some worried concern will help ensure that we don't let go but rather cling to Christ in faith until the end.

More importantly, beyond this, we find words of comfort and assurance in today's Epistle lesson. It's part of the opening of St. Paul's first letter to the Christian congregation at Corinth. And to fully appreciate what Paul is saying, it will be helpful to know a little about the congregation and the reasons Paul is writing to them. The short version is this: Paul has been hearing some very disturbing reports about what's been going on in this church that he himself was instrumental in planting several years earlier. He had left them (he thought) in good shape. In fact, Paul spent more time with them (18 months) than with all the other congregations he founded on his second mission trip combined. They should have been the best trained and most theologically grounded. You'd think, anyway. And in some ways they were. But there were many problems and misunderstandings. There was vicious infighting among various factions in the church. There was a lack of discipline: they were tolerating all kinds of ungodly behaviors among their members. The way they were practicing the Lord's Supper was absolutely scandalous – they'd completely robbed it of its meaning and purpose. Some of the members were denying basic elements of the faith; things like the resurrection of the dead. And there were others who proudly imagined that they had grown in Christian wisdom far beyond the likes of the Apostle Paul. They were openly contemptuous of him, and were trying to gather

disciples for themselves and their own crazy ideas. Yes, it's safe to say that if there's a problem out there a church *can* have, they had it at Corinth.

So Paul writes the letter we call 1 Corinthians to them in order to address these issues and also to answer a number of questions they'd sent him. It's by far the longest of Paul's letters to a church that he helped start, which again is indicative of the number and magnitude of their errors. But it also reflects the heart of Paul: that despite all their problems and the nasty insults that some of them have hurled at him, he is still very much concerned for their spiritual welfare and their continued growth in Christian faith and life. Thus he begins this letter not in a rush to knock heads together and yell, "What's wrong with you people?" in order to set them straight; but with a more pastoral approach, pointing them to the foundational truths that made them the people of God and that continue to keep them God's own despite all their problems.

Paul begins with the blessed words, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." We Christians hear this sort of thing so often that we don't really listen to what's being said. In our minds we reduce it to a churchy sounding way to say hello. It's so much more than that. In truth, it's Paul's prayer that God would continue to bestow on them his grace and peace: grace being the unmerited favor of God that called them out of their former pagan darkness and from eternal damnation and made them the children of light and salvation; and peace being the reconciliation and forgiveness that sinners have with God through faith in Jesus who bore the sins of the world and atoned for them on the cross. This grace and peace comes from God our Father through Jesus Christ, Paul is telling them. You have it already. I want you to have more. And I'm asking God to give it to you.

He continues, "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace that was given to you in Christ Jesus". This is remarkable. With all that's going on there you'd think Paul would be thinking, "Nuts to these stupid people! I worked so hard among them, and now they've messed everything up. They're even biting the hand that fed them. Well, forget about them. They want to sink back into darkness? Well, let them." But no. Paul makes it a point daily to give thanks for them and the grace God gave them in Christ. It's worth noting that when Paul started his second mission trip, the last place on earth he thought he might end up and plant a church is Corinth: first, because it was much, much farther away than he'd ever planned to travel; and second, because the city had an especially evil reputation. It was the ancient Mediterranean world's sin city – a place respectable people stayed away from. But in retrospect, Paul saw it now: how the Lord had conspired through many unexpected events to bring him there to preach the Gospel. And it wasn't like they were sitting there on the cusp of spiritual enlightenment, hoping that the Lord would send someone to lead them out of their blindness. No, the folks in the church there were the kind of people that earned Corinth its outrageous reputation. But God chose to pour out his grace upon them anyway. They were, in Paul's eyes, a lot like him: the last people to whom God should give grace. He had been an enemy of Christ's Church before his sudden conversion, and they had been the worst type of sinners. But that's what God's grace in Christ is all about: it is undeserved. No one is worthy of it. And God shows this most spectacularly when he gives his grace in Christ to those who are most obviously undeserving. This simple truth never stopped amazing Paul. And it was constant reason for him to give thanks to God – both for himself and for every undeserving sinner who received it, including and perhaps especially his wayward spiritual offspring at Corinth.

Paul then expands a bit about *how* this grace in Christ is shown. He writes, "In every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge ... so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus". He's saying that by God's

grace in Christ, they received the whole Gospel enchilada. The Lord didn't hold anything back. There aren't in God's design spiritually rich churches upon which he lavishes his gifts of grace freely and spiritually poor ones to which he is stingy, withholding certain truths and gifts that might improve their situation. No, God gives all his gifts of grace through Jesus. Where the pure Gospel is proclaimed, where sins are being forgiven in the name and for the sake of Jesus, where Baptisms are being performed, where the Lord's Supper is administered according to Christ's institution, there God is giving his people everything they need to make and keep them believers and recipients of all the gifts of life, forgiveness, and salvation he has to offer. This doesn't mean that the gifts will be used as they should or that everyone will take advantage of them – Paul will address the various abuses later in his letter – but the point is the full treasure of the Gospel is open and available to them. God has given it all to them in Jesus. They have everything they need to remain steadfast and faithful until the day of Christ's return.

And then speaking of Christ and his return Paul continues, “[He] will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.” This is sweet comfort indeed. Despite all the spiritual problems at Corinth, despite their prideful infighting, their ongoing sins, and their attacks on St. Paul, God has not given up on them. He is continuing to pour out his grace upon them in Christ. In fact, Paul's writing to them to correct their errors and build them up in true faith is one of the means God is using to ensure that they remain faithful to Christ and in the correct understanding of his teaching as they await the day of Jesus' return.

But Paul's statement here goes directly to answering that question of nagging doubt we considered earlier: “How do I know for sure that I will remain faithful until the end?” Paul is saying that the work of keeping his people steadfast and faithful to the end belongs to Jesus and not to them. Jesus will sustain you in holy faith. Jesus, by his atoning work, will keep you guiltless in the judgment. He performs all the work that leads to your salvation including keeping you faithful. He will do it. He is the faithful one. So, when you're experiencing those feelings of worry, wondering if you will remain faithful in the future, the answer is not to examine the quality or quantity of your faith. That will always prove to be disappointing. At its best your faith is ever going to be flawed, weak, and imperfect. If you're looking to it to save you, you're going to be led to despair. So don't look at your faith. Look at the object of your faith: Jesus. Look at his work, his promise, his faithfulness to you. That's how you can be sure. And that's where you will find all the grace you need to keep you faithful as you eagerly wait for the Lord's return. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria***