

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Living demonstrations of grace: A study of I Peter

Indeed, it is by grace that we have been saved through faith. But grace is not a general principle. Grace is not one of several lenses through which we might choose to read the Scriptures or some universally applied liberty that frees people from the consequences of sin.

Grace is a blood-soaked reality. When we lose sight of the Cross, the moment we fail to feel the weight of the sin Christ bore in His body for us, we cheapen the gift of God's amazing grace.

If we forget our need, if we forget that we were once wretched, lost and blind, we cease to be amazed by grace. Was it grace that taught your heart to fear? Was it grace your fears relieved? Is the grace of God as precious to you now as the hour you first believed?

What are the dangers, toils and snares through which the grace of God has already brought you? Rest assured that the grace which will see you home is the grace of God that comes exclusively through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ, who is the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Him. And no one comes to Him except by grace.

The reality of grace cannot be separated from the need for justification. Further, the need for justification proclaims the reality of a broken relationship. Something precious has been lost; something is broken that can only be restored at a price. The particular relationship in view is that of the personal, holy, Creator and the people made in His image. The once intimate love relationship between a holy God and His people was broken. Man himself became a broken being, a fallen creature. His very nature, in the image of God, once in perfect harmony with the Creator has now become marred, twisted and corrupt. How can the one relationship, which alone makes sense of reality and gives meaning to our existence be restored? The answer is a wooden cross and the Son of God hanging in shame and disgrace, paying the debt He did not owe for those who could not pay. God's answer is grace. Where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more.

God did in Christ what we could not do for ourselves. The penalty was paid. Holiness was satisfied. God reconciled the world to Himself by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, to His own glory alone.

Grace, then, begins and ends in God. It is His to freely give, His to apply, His to seal, and yes, His to withhold.

Grace is free, yes. But only because it costs more than we could ever pay.

Grace is free, yes. But in its application to the life of a sinner, it will cost the sinner everything.

Grace is free, yes. But let us never think of it as cheap.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in *The Cost of Discipleship*, says, "Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate." He then describes true grace, costly grace. "It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of His Son: 'ye were bought at a price,' and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us."¹

As you embark on this study of I Peter, prepare to be newly amazed by God's grace.

¹ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 1959. Touchstone, page 45.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

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Week I: What grace is doing in us

Prayerfully read I Peter 1:1-2:3

The apostle Peter had first-hand knowledge and experience of the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

- Peter who walked on the water but then required rescuing after he sunk in doubt.
- Peter who confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, but then required forgiveness after rebuking Jesus for speaking in advance of His coming death.
- Peter who fell on his face at the glory of the Lord revealed on the Mt. of Transfiguration but then had to be silenced by the Father Himself when Peter suggested that they build Jesus, Moses and Elijah shrines of worship.
- Peter who, having been forgiven all, wanted to know exactly how many times he had to forgive a brother who sinned against him.
- Peter who resisted the Lord's washing his feet at the Last Supper but then wanted his hands and his head bathed as well.
- Peter who fell asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane and then cut off the ear of the servant of the High Priest, resulting in Jesus having to restore the man to wholeness.
- Peter, who having assured the Lord of his faithfulness even unto death, denied Jesus three times.
- Peter, who having seen the risen Lord, returned to his former life of fishing. He was called by Christ again and thrice forgiven for having thrice denied His Lord.

Who knew more about grace than Peter?

It will come as no surprise that the theme of I Peter is grace. Peter calls his fellow Christians to live a life experiencing, receiving, responding to and demonstrating grace.

The book of I Peter is an unfolding narrative of grace. Grace received, grace applied and grace lived. How do you live as a demonstration of the grace you have received?

Peter addresses what it looks like for Christians to demonstrate grace and he begins with a litany of what grace does in the believer's life:

- Grace saves us and gives us cause for rejoicing. (1:3)
- Grace sustains us in suffering. (1:6)
- Grace fills our thoughts with wonder and focuses our minds on ultimate things. (1:10,13)
- Grace sobers our attitude and gives our lives gravity. (1:17)
- Grace tenderizes our hearts toward one another and enriches our relationships. (1:22)
- Grace transforms our appetites from the world to the Word. (2:2)

Reflection/discussion questions:

1. What amazes you about God's grace in Jesus?
2. How are you demonstrably different from those you know who have not experienced God's saving grace?
3. In the first chapter, what are the ways in which Peter expects the life of a Christian to be changed by having experienced grace?

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Week II: What grace is making of us

Prayerfully read I Peter 2:4-12

Consider for a moment that these are words of blessing from our Father who art in heaven to His beloved children, disciples of His Son, a people filled with His Holy Spirit. Whatever anyone else might say, God says to us: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

How does it make you feel to know that you are God’s chosen child? You are a child of the King of kings and the Lord of lords. There is royalty in your blood. Whatever the world may say, whatever sticks and stones or flaming arrows of the evil one may come, you are a chosen, royal, holy, special possession of the one holy eternal God. Will you then come out of the dark shadows of half-truths and into the radiant abundant light of the life God grants by grace in Jesus Christ?

In preaching this passage Easter Sunday, 2004, Gerrit Dawson called to his people, “The risen Jesus, summoned by His Father from the tomb, summons us out of darkness into His marvelous light. He calls us to a new identity and a new purpose. It doesn’t matter whether you have been a Christian 80 years or 8 seconds – we have a common history. The human race has been in bondage to darkness, the darkness of death, the darkness of sin and brokenness, the darkness of separation from our Creator. Jesus has opened the way to the realm of light and life, and He summons us to follow Him.

“He calls us to a new identity. This call means a leaving of the darkness and a coming into the light of Christ. It means a kind of death to one way of life and a rebirth into another way of life. And this call is continuous. As long as we are in this world, the bringing us from darkness into light is a present, immediate work. Throughout this life, even the best of us have to reckon with the sinful nature that still resides within. So now, right now, and every second that it is right now, He calls you and me: Will you come out of the dark into the light, out of sin into holiness, out of death into resurrection, not in your own power, but in reliance on Christ?”

The work of grace is both fully accomplished and is an ongoing, moment-by-moment reality that constitutes the Christian life.

Our role is to actively cooperate with Him. Peter’s statement can also be framed as a question. Are you living as if you’re a chosen people? Are you living as a royal priest? Are you living as a holy vessel? Is your life being actively offered in spiritual sacrifice to God through Jesus Christ?

That is the point of grace: Not our edification so much as God’s glorification. In turn, as God is glorified, His people are edified as they find real life and real joy as God’s glory is extended in the world.

Reflection/discussion questions:

1. Do I see myself as chosen, royal, holy and acceptable to God? If not, have I genuinely received the grace God offers in Jesus Christ?
2. Am I actively participating with the ongoing grace-work of the Holy Spirit in order that God might make of my life a spiritual sacrifice that He finds acceptable?
3. What does it mean to say that the point of grace is God’s glorification, not primarily my edification?

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Week III: Grace as the context and content of our relationships

Possibly the most oft quoted verses of Scripture in reference to grace are Ephesians 2:8-9. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast.” It is grace plus nothing. But we should also read verse 10 which says, “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Grace-filled living is a life of God-ordained good works.

Grace is not only about our personal salvation or “me and Jesus.” People who have genuinely experienced and received the grace of God in Jesus Christ are transformed people. Filled with grace and truth, they exude grace and truth in every situation and especially in every relationship. That is the point that Peter is making in the rest of his epistle. Warning: if your life is not marked by grace these will be very difficult words to hear and impossible principles to apply. Like a rich man passing through the eye of a needle to get to the Kingdom of Heaven, these things are impossible for humans, but by grace, they are possible for God.

Pray for the illumination of the Holy Spirit and the very mind of Christ as you read I Peter 2:11-3:12.

Taking the time to outline the passage, find the topic sentences and frame them as principles for living. It may help us see beyond our 21st century American lens to the message. Seeking to take nothing to the text, but seeking to hear the Lord through His written Word, ask yourself: “What does the text actually say about living out the grace I have received?”

The passage declares that grace affects every relationship. We live and give to others what we have experienced in Christ.

- Grace affects our relationship with the world. (2:11,12)
- Grace transforms our relationship to civil authority (2:13)
- Grace transforms our relationship to those who mistreat us (2:18-19)
- Grace transforms the relationship of wife to husband (3:1)
- Grace transforms the relationship of husband to wife (3:7)

Finally, grace moves believers to be a living demonstration of redemptive reality in all relationships. (3:8)

It is a great challenge to consider being a demonstration of grace in difficult or unjust relationship. But that is precisely the model of the Christ.

Reflection/discussion questions:

1. What words or ideas in this passage are offensive to me and why?
2. How can I be a demonstration of grace in my family, in my workplace, in my church and in my community?
3. What does it mean to be a living demonstration of redemptive reality in the world today?

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Week IV: Grace in the context of suffering

Prayerfully read I Peter 3:13-4:19

Peter was familiar with suffering for Christ's sake. Jesus had warned the disciples on several occasions that they could expect persecution, imprisonment, the hatred of the world and martyrdom. Peter in turn warns his readers about the persecution they can expect to encounter for the sake of Christ, and reinforces the message that grace equips them to endure.

Again, mining the text for topic sentences and the principles that emerge, we learn that:

I Peter 3:13 teaches that *by grace, we can consider ourselves blessed even as we suffer.*

We live in a fallen world. We should expect to suffer the consequences of our own sin and the sin of others. The Lord may miraculously deliver you from persecution, but He may not. If you read John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, you will find countless people who were persecuted and tortured to death because they would not forsake the name of Christ. Visit www.persecution.com to familiarize yourself with the reality of suffering among Christians in the world today.

I Peter 4:1 teaches that *by grace, we can be equipped with the attitude of Christ even as we suffer.*

What was Jesus' attitude toward suffering? Was He surprised by it? Did He resist it? Did He take an accusatory tone toward the Father crying, "Why me?" No. Paul describes the attitude of Christ Jesus in Philippians 2:5-8. "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!" Jesus turned the other cheek. Jesus blessed those who persecuted Him. Jesus asked the Father to forgive those who nailed Him to the cross. By grace alone can we hope to cultivate such an attitude toward suffering in this life.

I Peter 4:7 teaches that *by grace, we become more spiritually aware and are enabled to pray with serious minds.*

Jesus told the disciples time was running short. We know from Mark 13:3 that Peter was personally present when Jesus described the signs of the end of the age and called His disciples to remain alert, be on their guard and prepare in advance for His return. Peter echoes that message to his readers. The authentic Christian life is filled with joy, yes, but also with very sober judgment about eternal realities and the end of the world as we know it.

I Peter 4:12 teaches to *expect trials to come and then, by grace, to respond with rejoicing.*

Christians should never say of persecution, "I never saw it coming." As Peter puts it, "do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you." Instead, we are to do what is counter-intuitive, demonstrating that we see what others do not see, rejoicing in suffering as a way of revealing Christ's glory to others. Peter is not teaching that anything salvific is earned through personal trials. He is saying that Christians are not exempt from the worldly afflictions

and judgments which are the natural consequences of sin.

I Peter 4:16 teaches that *by grace, we understand that everything is for Christ's name's sake.*

As Christians, we bear the name of Christ. Christ who humbled Himself. Christ who was misunderstood, run out of town, falsely accused, mocked, betrayed, denied by His closest friend, abandoned by His followers, stripped, humiliated, beaten, pierced and crucified.

Accepting the grace of God that comes through Jesus Christ means giving our life to Him for His use in the world today. All for His name's sake that others might come to know the name of Jesus.

Reflection/discussion questions:

1. As a Christian, do you expect God to save you from suffering or do you expect to suffer for Christ in the midst of a world that does not operate according to His will?
2. Read Philippians 3:10. What is Paul's perspective on suffering?
3. The word "Christian" is only used three times in the Bible, in verse 4:16 and then in Acts 11:26 and 26:28. It means "little Christ." It was understood as an insult hurled at Christ's followers by unbelievers. What are the various connotations of the word "Christian" in the world today?
4. With the name "Christian" in mind, how might you respond the next time someone asks if you have a namesake?

For further study: Visit www.persecution.com and pray for those experiencing persecution today.

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Week V: Grace as the context of ministry

Prayerfully read 1 Peter 5:1-14.

Several principles emerge as we identify the passage's key verses.

1 Peter 5:1-2 teaches that *having experienced grace, elders are to minister grace.*

The elders of the church are not a board of directors making policy for sheep. Sheep don't respond to policy statements. Sheep respond to good shepherding. There is a nearness implied. Shepherds are a part of the life of the sheep under their care. They guide them to living water and green pastures. They go after them when they stray. They tend them, correct them with the shepherd's staff, and when necessary, they carry them. Shepherds are always on the look-out, guarding the sheep from the various predators to whom witless sheep are prone to fall prey. Elders, be shepherds of God's flock.

1 Peter 5:5 teaches us that *believers are called to embrace an attitude of humility because God responds to humble hearts by grace.*

The next word is to the sheep. Part of the message in verse 7 is that there will be cause for anxiety. The question is "what do you do with it?" Peter's answer is that we should cast all our anxiety on God because ultimately He cares for us more than anyone else. Anxious sheep cry a lot, they fidget and fuss, they resist shepherding and they tend to bite. They do so out of fear. Peter's message is that in the midst of a world that produces a great deal of anxiety, Christians must humbly submit themselves to one another and cast all that anxiety on God who alone can handle it.

1 Peter 5:8 teaches us that *by grace we are equipped to remain alert to spiritual danger.*

As a follower of Christ, you have an enemy. That enemy is even now prowling around looking for an opportunity to eat you alive. Snares and schemes and false teachings and humanistic worldviews and fleshly temptations are his *modus operandi*. Technology, laziness, futile thinking and an entitlement mentality have become his weapons of convenience in our generation. Grace equips you to remain alert. But vigilance is required.

1 Peter 5:10 teaches us that *by grace, God will graciously restore us, make us strong, firm and steadfast, even in the midst of suffering.*

Peter concludes by calling believers to stand fast in the true grace of God. Not grace as a general principle, but grace as a received, applied and lived out reality. Grace that flows from God at Calvary into every environ where a forgiven sinner, equipped with grace, then demonstrates the redemptive reality of life in Christ to others. Let us then go forth to show and to tell the world of God's amazing grace.

Reflection/discussion questions:

1. To the elders among you, do you see the congregation under your care as precious sheep of God's flock? How are you tending, praying and caring for them?
2. Do you see yourselves as their shepherds, under the Chief Shepherd who laid down His life that they might truly live?
3. Church members, are you humbly submitting to the authority of the elders God has placed as overseers of the flock of which you are a part? Are you praying for them?
4. As a body are you cultivating a public witness that is sober-minded and alert, resisting the schemes of the enemy and standing firm in the faith?