

Soul Refresher: Great Is Thy Faithfulness  
Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost  
October 6, 2019  
World Communion Sunday  
2 Corinthians 12:7-10  
Pastor Dea Sharp, Pikes Peak UMC

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 (NRSV)

<sup>7</sup> even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep<sup>[a]</sup> me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>8</sup> Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, <sup>9</sup> but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power<sup>[c]</sup> is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. <sup>10</sup> Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

St. Augustine once wrapped a powerful thought in vivid imagery when he said, *“God always pours God’s grace into empty hands.”*

No one’s hands could have been emptier than John Newton’s who wrote today’s featured hymn.

Newton’s father commanded a ship and was always at sea.

His mother raised him with Scriptures and hymns, but she died just before his seventeenth birthday and so, John followed his father to the open sea.

A young man, alone in the world, he lost his hold on the things his mother had taught him.

In his own words, John’s “delight and habitual practice was wickedness,” and he “neither feared God nor regarded men.” In short, he was “a slave to doing wickedness and delighted in sinfulness.”

After a short time in England’s wartime navy, John was dishonorably discharged and made his way to Africa where he was hired to work on a slave ship.

Then, in 1748, somewhere in the middle of the North Atlantic, grace arrived. The hand of God rescued a shipwrecked soul.

In the midst of a violent storm, Newton wondered if this was going to be the end of his life and so he began to pray.

And God saved his life.

Soon, he surrendered his life to Jesus and eventually become a pastor and preached the Gospel of God until his death.

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.*

We live in a world that believes you should get what you deserve.

An eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth

But in God's eyes, we'd **all** be in trouble if this were true.

As an extension of God's love, the Lord chooses to show us grace and mercy when we trust in God.

Otherwise, humankind is lost in a sea of sin.

Perhaps you've heard or studied that "grace" is God's unmerited favor.

And while this definition is accurate, if we dig deeper, the word reveals grace as a **gift** that embodies our entire relationship with God.

Everything!

Which is what Paul learned in his time in prison, lamenting the "thorn in his flesh" and about which he wrote to the Corinthians in the verses Rick read for us.

And then, Paul wrote, God told him "my grace is sufficient for you."

Now, we don't know what the "thorn" was.

But, Paul wrote about it.

Wanted to get rid of it.

Ever had a "thorn"?

Oh, boy, haven't we all?

Paul's thorn wasn't a literal "burr."

Some scholars speculate that Paul's "thorn" might have been temptation. Or a physical ailment. Or even opposition to his ministry.

Those things sound "just like" us – we have temptation. We have physical ailments. And surely, there are many ways our personal ministries (yes you have one) are opposed; sometimes self-OPPOSED.

But God told Paul and through those words WE ARE ABLE TO HEAR: "*My grace,*" *God says, "is enough."*

Enough for whatever is *poking* at us.

The worst "thorn" we can have is our sins.

So, imagine staring out into the ocean.

It seems endless – in how deep it is and how far it stretches out.

That's what God's grace is like.

It's limitless and we can't comprehend it, and it's always present.

And just like we can't refill the ocean, we can't earn or pay back grace.

We simply receive it, and do our best to never take it for granted.

Like last Sunday's message about **God's faithfulness** being mentioned from beginning to end of Scripture, **God's grace** is mentioned hundreds of times throughout the Bible from Noah to Paul's words today and beyond.

In Scripture, the word **grace** means "to bend or stoop in kindness to an inferior." God, the One infinitely greater than us, bends down to our level, meeting us where we are in our time of need.

Billy Graham had much to say about the grace of God, the undeserved favor of God. He once wrote, "God's grace sustains us every moment of the day, and without His grace we couldn't even exist. We think we have control of our lives—but if it weren't for God's grace, we wouldn't even be alive."

This week, our Thursday study group discussed the ways Psalm 116 is a thanksgiving psalm of worship. In one verse the thankful writer said, *"I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord."*

Charles Wesley (who was also vital in the development of Methodism) reinterpreted the phrase "cup of salvation" to "the sacred cup of saving grace."

I'm praising God for bringing us this message TODAY, on World Communion Sunday.

Why?

'Cause the "thorns" of sin in our lives separate us from God.

And we can't earn our salvation.

Instead, PRAISE THE LORD, we are saved by God's grace when we have faith in Jesus Christ and our relationship with God is restored.

When we confess that we are sinners...

...and believe that Christ died for our sins....

...when we ask for forgiveness AND TURN AWAY from that sins, God's grace washes over us like the deep ocean waves.

Billy Graham once said, "...we deserve nothing but judgment and death. We've ignored God...and refused to live the way God wants us to. And yet, ...God still loves us and sustains us by God's grace."

Just another tidbit about John Newton. His original title of today's featured hymn was "Faith's Review and Expectation."

That seems, to me, almost as cumbersome as sin is to a believer in Jesus Christ!

Amazing Grace!

Isn't THAT better?

Amen!

Here's a last illustration for today...and it's about Billy Graham himself!

One time Graham was stopped for speeding. He admitted his guilt, but was told he'd have to appear in court.

The judge asked, "Guilty, or not guilty?"

And when Graham pleaded guilty, the judge fined him "Ten dollars, a dollar for every mile you went over the speed limit."

And then, the judge recognized the famous minister.

"You have violated the law," he said. "The fine must be paid, but I am going to pay it for you." The judge took a ten dollar bill from his own wallet, paid the fine AND THEN, took Graham out for a steak dinner!

"That," Billy Graham said, "is how God treats repentant sinners!"

Our fine has been paid!

Maybe we've messed up a time or two or 20.

Satan wants us to believe that we aren't good enough to be forgiven, that we're unlovable because of what we've done.

But hear this Dear Ones, Jesus Christ knows your heart and loves you. God knows your "thorn" and still loves you.

And as the verse from today's reading says, *God's grace is sufficient*. When we are weak, God's power makes us strong.

Wouldn't you agree, that's amazing grace?

I shared with you that Pastor Gene and I worshiped at Lutheran Church of Hope while we were in Iowa. Well, another thing that Pastor Mike packed into his message was that WE – men, women AND children, need to share God with today's world.

With our actions (and if necessary, words,) we need to share with our troubled friends and family (and with people we don't know very well, YET) that God's grace is amazing.

That God's grace IS Jesus Christ who is the Way, the Truth and the Life and is OUR sacred cup of *saving* grace.

Today, as Christians around the world gather to receive Holy Communion, we can be emboldened to share the message from a hymn written over 200 years ago, about God's grace, WHO came over 2000 years ago.

The hymn's final verse, which we'll sing in a few minutes, says:

*We've no less days to sing God's praise, than when we first begun.*

Scripture says, "*Because of God's great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ... it is by grace you have been saved.*"

Let's prepare to come to this Table and lift the "sacred cup of saving grace" that God has provided for us in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Redeemer. And like, Augustine remarked, receive God's grace in our empty hands.

Amen!