

The Pillar (Part 4 of 6)

God's Grace is Greater than Your Past

1 Timothy 1:12-14

Mark Vroegop

12 I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, 13 though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, 14 and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

We are not sure if it was John Bunyan (1628-1688), the famous author of Pilgrim's Progress, or if it was John Berridge (1716-1793), the English revivalist and hymn writer, who wrote a profound summary of the relationship between the Law and the Gospel. Whoever wrote it got it right:

Run, John, run the law commands
But gives us neither feet nor hands,

Far greater news the gospel brings:
It bids us fly and gives us wings

Yet another version was penned by Ralph Erskine (1685-1752), a Scottish Presbyterian minister imprisoned for field-preaching and famous for gospel poems. His version sounds like this:

A rigid matter was the law
Demanding brick, denying straw

But when with the gospel tongue it sings,
It bids me fly and gives me wings

In the end, it doesn't matter to me who wrote the poems, and I'm sure none of them would want us to miss the much bigger point regarding what they are trying say. Bunyan, Berridge, and Erskine have summarized the enormously important and gloriously hopeful difference between the Law and the Gospel. This contrast is not just an academic issue; it is a central to the message of Bible and the purpose of Jesus' life. The difference between the law and the gospel is the difference between faith and works, life and death, freedom and bondage, and truth and error.

Paul's message to Timothy in this first pastoral epistle is to "guard the truth that leads to life." And what is the truth? It is the trustworthy saying that "Jesus came into the world to save sinners." This good news is contrasted with the bad news of the Law.

The Wonderfully Hopeless Law

Last week we learned that the problems in the church at Ephesus were due to the misuse of the Law. There were people in the church who were using the Law and combining it with Greek philosophy to create a new code of conduct. We learned that they were using the ministry for themselves, being sloppy with the Scriptures, and neglecting the gospel. We hear this very clearly in 1:6-8:

6 Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, 7 desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions. 8 Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully...

Paul wanted Timothy to know that the Law isn't bad, but one has to use it correctly. We learned that the Law was written with law-breakers not law-keepers in mind. Additionally, I suggested to you that the Law is useful in two ways: 1) by defining what is sinful and 2) by pointing people to Jesus. In this way the Law is a mighty hammer designed to crush the self-righteousness of human beings. In other words, the Law is rigid, demanding, clear, and impossible. It demands that we run when we have no hands or feet. The Law warns, kills, and crushes.

The Law is wonderfully useful by being terribly hopeless.

The Amazing Nature of Grace

The darkness of the law makes the beauty of the grace of the gospel shine brightly. Paul moves from talking about the problems connected with the false teachers and the Law (1:3-11) to talking about the beauty of the gospel. What's more, Paul talks about the personal nature of God's grace in his life. He knows what it is like to have been told to fly and to have been given wings!

This week and next we'll be basking in the beauty of what Paul says about the gospel as we look at verses 12-17. Today we are looking at verses 12-14, and we are going to see how different God's grace is from what the Law does. Paul wants us to see the difference, especially as it relates to our past.

Paul knows by personal experience that God's grace does some amazing things. Let's talk about three of them. Grace does the following:

1. It Produces Gratitude
2. It Creates Worship
3. It Gives Hope

As we talk about this in Paul's life, I'd like for you to think about your own life and your story with God's grace.

Grace Produces Gratitude

The first thing that I want you to note here is where Paul starts as he reflects on the grace of God. Paul begins his reflection on the grace of God with gratitude. This is the over-arching imprint that God's grace makes on a person's life. The Law makes a person realize how bad he or she is, and the gospel makes a person realize how kind and merciful God is.

Paul will lead us through the reasons for his gratitude, but it is where he begins because it is the most obvious and normal response to a right understanding of God's grace. In other words, grace produces gratitude.

Now what is really interesting is the fact that Paul uses the Greek word *charis* to describe how he feels. Every translation appropriately translates the word as "thanks." But the word has a more significant meaning than how we view the word "thanks." The word *charis* is a favorite of Paul's, and he uses it in lots of different contexts. For example, he uses it in greetings ("Grace to you" – Rom. 1:7), as summary for salvation ("the grace of God" – Gal. 2:21), power over sin ("where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" – Rom. 5:20), as the gift of ministry ("by the grace given to me" – Rom. 12:3), and God's act of giving ("graciously give us all things" – Rom. 8:32). So this is an enormously important word that summarizes the gracious activity of God toward people who do not deserve what they have received.

Grace, by definition, implies that something is undeserved, and an expression of "thanks" would be normal and natural. Thanks and grace could be thought of as interchangeable words. And that is why some people might describe the blessing of a meal or the offering of thanks before a meal as "saying grace." To say, "grace" means that you understand "thanks." They go together.

Those who really understand the nature of God's grace and the devastating reality of their unworthiness are filled with life-changing gratitude. They know that everything that they have, they have received (1 Cor. 4:7). So there is a direct relationship between grace and gratitude. For example:

17 But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, 18 and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness (Rom. 6:17-18).

24 Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Rom. 7:23-25).

57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:57).

Therefore, when Paul says "thanks," he is not just expressing gratitude. He is recognizing that everything he has is completely undeserved. Or you could think of it this way: the mark upon his life, the one characteristic of his life, the most life-defining reality of his life is grace. He is a man who has been marked forever by God's kindness and mercy. He is a grace-man.

This grace-saturated perspective is a game-changer. It radically alters how you see everything but especially yourself. Paul has a horrendous past, and I'm sure so do you. While you may not have committed the sins that Paul had, you still have things in your past that are embarrassing, disappointing, and awful. Rather than denying the past, minimizing the past, or justifying the past, Paul does what grace-captivated people do: he views it through the lens of God's amazing grace. The shame of the past is eclipsed with the mercy of God. The past is still there, but the past is not supreme! God, through Christ, rescued you from yourself.

The natural result is gratitude, but not the "I-must-pay-you-back-with-how-thankful-I-am" mentality. That's why you needed God's grace in the first place: you were trying to do it. Gratitude is the effect of God's work, not the basis of ours – both in the past and in the future. John Piper, in his very helpful book *Future Grace*, quotes Andrew Murray who summarized this thought so well:

The idea many Christians have of grace is this: that their conversion and pardon are God's work, but that now, in gratitude to God, it is their work to live as Christians and follow Jesus...No, wandering one, as it was Jesus who drew thee when he spoke "Come," so it is Jesus who keeps thee when He says, "Abide." The past grace to come and the future grace to abide are alike from him alone.¹

Therefore your mantra in life should be something like this:

"I'm an awful sinner."

"God has been and continues to be amazingly merciful to me."

"I am so thankful."

Grace produces gratitude.

Grace Creates Worship

The second thing that we notice here is the beautiful focus on what God did for Paul. This is the basis for his gratitude, and it is important to note how God-centered Paul's words are. The tone of verse 12 highlights the fact that Paul sees himself as the recipient of God's sovereign actions. In other words, God rescued Paul despite his spiritual blindness, resistance, and opposition. God saved Paul from himself. God conquered Paul's heart.

There are three phrases that point us to Paul's God-centered view of his salvation: 1) "who has given me strength," 2) "he judged me faithful," and 3) "appointing me to his service." Each of these points to the awe-inspiring fact that a sovereign God pursued Paul. And this is just what God did with Paul; it is what he does with anyone who comes to faith in Jesus.

As Paul looks back at his life he sees the extent of his waywardness and sinfulness, and he sees that it was Jesus who gave him strength. What is he talking about? Paul is talking about his receiving

¹ John Piper, *Future Grace*, (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 1995), 48

of spiritual empowerment from God. "To be strengthened" means that undergirding Paul's actions was a divinely-given ability. You see, Paul had been very busy in religious pursuits (see Gal. 3:2-11), but while he was busy and alive physically he was dead spiritually. He was a walking dead-man who, ironically, was filling his life with religious activities that were an expression of his rebellion against God. And, tragically, he was fully convinced that he was right. Paul knew by personal experience what he writes in Romans 3:10 – *"None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God."* Did Paul seek God? Yes! But it came as a result of the spiritual strength supplied by Jesus. The Book of Acts gives us another example in Lydia of whom this was said: "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul" (Acts 16:14).

So to be strengthened is not just to have power to do what you are already doing a little bit better; it is the God-given strength to do what you would never do unless God helped you. Don't make this mistake of thinking that you didn't really believe or that after salvation you don't really obey. But don't make the other mistake of thinking that you believed or obey on your own.

Secondly, Paul says that God "judged me faithful." I think that Paul must have been using a bit of a play on words or irony here because he is clearly not faithful. In fact, the next verse highlights that he is anything but faithful. So what does this mean?

God treated Paul in a way that he didn't deserve. The word "judge" is a strengthened form of "to lead." What do you do when you lead? You move toward a place that is distinct from where you are presently. It means to command, to esteem, to suppose, to think or consider. It is the same word that Paul uses in Philippians 3:7 when he says, *"But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ."* In other words, God considered Paul faithful or he treated his as being faithful when he wasn't.

Grace is being given a power that you couldn't muster and being treated in a way that you don't deserve. It is being declared "faithful" when, in fact, you are not.

Finally, we see how Paul views his appointment into the ministry. It is not only remarkable that he has been given spiritual strength and that he has been declared to be faithful, but God does even more: he gives Paul the privilege of serving. Rescuing Paul from his spiritual self-deception would be one thing, but it is just astounding that God has plans and purposes for Paul's life. At his conversion, God sent Ananias to pray for Paul after his encounter with Jesus, and he was a bit nervous about meeting with him. Notice the beauty of what God says about Paul (then Saul):

But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. 14 And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." 15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:13-16).

As Paul looked back at his life, he could see the sovereign plan of God in his life. He could see the marks of grace in so many places – a God-centered plan that triumphed over his sinfulness. In the book of Galatians he says this:

13 For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. 14 And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. 15 But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, 16 was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles... (Gal. 1:13-16).

What you need to know is that this is not just unique to Paul's life. This is true of your life too. There are no coincidences in life. God is working out a plan for your life. I know that by just saying that it raises some questions, and I cannot answer all of them. No one but God can. But don't let that frustrate or anger you because it was this sovereign plan of God that rescued you from yourself in the first place. And if God is worthy to be trusted with how he rescued you from your sin, he is worthy to be trusted with everything in life.

The supremacy of God over all things is meant to humble us, to leave us dumb-founded at God's mercy, and with hand over our mouth as we look to him in worship. It is meant to create these thoughts:

"I'm so underserving"
"I owe you everything"
"I don't understand why"
"I love you!"

Grace produces gratitude. Grace also creates worship. And there is one more.

Grace Gives Hope

Paul now talks specifically about the depth of the darkness of his past. He is honest and straightforward about the kind of person that he was before he met Jesus. He highlights the past not to glory in it, but to glory in the beauty of what he has becoming through Jesus. In other words, when Paul looks back and sees his past, he sees the beautiful thing that God has done. When he thinks about his disappointing past, he is not full of shame. He uses his past to tell his heart something about his Savior, and this leads to hope.

Verse 13 records a difficult list of sin issues. Imagine if this was your record. He calls himself a blasphemer which means that he spoke evil about Jesus Christ who he now knows as Lord. He called Jesus a fraud and a fake. Further, he attempted to force other people to join him in his evil-speaking through persecution.

The book of Acts records Paul's (then called Saul) heinous activities. He was present and approved of Stephen's execution (Acts 8:1), and he attempted to destroy those who followed Jesus:

3 But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. (Acts 8:3). 9 But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the

synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem (Acts 9:1-3).

Underneath this diabolical activity was an arrogant opposition. Paul calls himself “an insolent opponent.” He was violent (NIV) because he was spiritually proud; he was absolutely convinced that he was right.

But there is good news. Despite who Paul was, he was shown mercy. God was immeasurably kind to this blaspheming, arrogant, and violent man. He should have received judgment but he received kindness. There’s more. He also adds two other characteristics of himself. He calls himself ignorant and unbelieving, the two most basic characteristics of a person who is apart from Jesus. He is not offering an excuse here as if his ignorance and unbelief explained his awful conduct. Rather, he is highlighting something to be warned about when we consider the lavishness of God’s grace: that willful rejection of the truth is dangerous and could put a person out of reach of repentance (see Heb. 6:4-6, 10:26-27).

In other words, as you bask in the hopeful grace and mercy of God, don’t presume upon it and treat it lightly. To do so is even more dangerous than ignorant unbelief.

Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? 5 But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed (Rom. 2:4-5).

The passage ends with a beautiful and glorious statement: “and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 1:14). There are few more glorious images than this one. Imagine a vast flood plain filled with gnarly trees, thorns, rocks, and hardened ground. Imagine a rough, impassable, and forsaken land on either side of a river with a steep embankment. But now imagine an enormous storm takes place, dumping so much rain that the river swells, and there is so much water that the river crests the embankment. Imagine a river that spills over so fast and so violently that the dead wood on the ground is cleared, the thorns are knocked down, the rocks are even clear, and the ground is saturated with water. The land on either side of the river, once a mess and difficult, is now clean, fertile, and small plants begin to grow. And before long this desolate land on either side of the river is teeming with beautiful new life. A flood has both cleansed and created new life.

This is what happens in Jesus. Your past is the dark, forsaken land and the flood is overflowing grace of God. What’s more, the new life is described as “the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” In other words, the faith and love that one feels for Jesus are the supernatural products of a life (including your past) that has been flooded with grace of God.

Do you believe in Jesus? Do you love him? Do you know what it means to be forgiven? Are you grateful? Do you trust him? Do you stand in awe of him? They beat in your heart. They are real emotions, real thoughts, and result in real actions. But all of them are the effects of the overflowing flood God’s grace.

Is your past a mess? Are there nasty issues? Are there skeletons? The beauty of God's grace is that he can take the nasty, messed up, shame-filled land of your life, and he can flood it with new life.

If you were to take a visitor to a land that had previously been flooded and is now filled with beauty, your friend might say, "Wow! This is beautiful." What would be your reaction? My guess is that you would say, "Yes it is. But you should have seen it before."

You Should Have Seen Me Before!

Let me tell you: that is the story of anyone who comes to faith in Jesus. They look back on the trajectory of their life – whether young or old – and they cannot believe what Jesus has delivered them from. They don't deny the past. They don't glory in it. They use it!

They use it as a platform to show the beauty of God's grace – a grace that produces gratitude, a grace that creates worship, and a grace that gives hope. Why hope?

Because when you've seen what you've been and what God has made you to be, there is great hope that there is nothing that is impossible for God. "You should have seen me before" is a hopeful statement not only about your past, but also about your future. After all, if he gave you grace in the past, don't you think he'll give you grace in the future?

If you know Jesus, his grace was greater than your past. And that hope becomes your hope as you live the rest of your life. You've been told to fly and given grace-filled wings!

Run, John, run the law commands
But gives us neither feet nor hands,

Far greater news the gospel brings:
It bids us fly and gives us wings

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