

Sunday 13th June 2021
Acts 18:24-28 & Ephesians 2:1-5
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Let us come to God in prayer let us pray:

Come Holy Spirit, soften our hearts to the word of God.

Come Holy Spirit, impart to us wisdom and revelation.

Come Holy Spirit with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus name Amen.

We're now in our penultimate week on our sermon series on Grace and previously we've seen that God's grace can refer to the spiritual gifts that God gives us, or to His power to sustain us in the most difficult of times, then, last week, we saw how grace so shaped the early church that they were sacrificial in everything and how they lived, their lives and the lives they shared together, and their sharing of money and possessions. They, in this way, mirrored Jesus and His sacrificial giving.

Yet, today, when we read our passage in Acts none of these meanings applies to what we read about grace and so we find another meaning of grace. We read "When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia the brothers and sisters encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. When he arrived, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed."

Now, it's noteworthy here, that we don't read that those that Apollos went to were people who had believed in God's grace nor are they people who believed in the God of grace rather, instead, we see that they are people who by grace had believed, and that's an important difference because it suggests that these disciples, maybe all disciples, are helped by grace to, and that's not something we often think about, I think, or talk about. Maybe because it points an uncomfortable truth, a truth that's picked up in Ephesians, our reading today, in that passage we read "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world, all of us also lived among them at one time gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest we were, by nature, deserving of wrath."

I'm sure as you read those once again even more questions are coming to mind than they did the first time. Like "WHO is Paul talking about here? WHO's he talking about?"

Well, he says "as for you" and then "all of us" and then "like the rest." You, us, and the rest. So, whatever he's talking about here apparently applies to everyone. Everyone, before they put their faith in Jesus, and it's not just for some people long ago or one bit of society or for the people we don't like or we think are a bit dodgy, it's for everybody.

So, the next question you might ask then is "Well WHAT is the issue, Paul?" and he says "you were dead". He's saying that before these Christians had put their faith in, in fact, before any Christian had put their faith in Jesus, apparently, they're dead.

So, I guess, we might then be saying "Well, WHAT kind of death, Paul? Because, come on, these people are living that you're writing to, were living before we were, before we were a Christian so what kind of death are you talking about because they were living."

Well, he's talking about a spiritual kind of death. We might talk about a walking dead or, to use a more modern phrase we know from tv, the waking dead. Of course that maybe raises another question "HOW can Paul claim that? How how can he claim that you and I, anyone, is spiritually dead before we put our faith in Jesus? How can he have the nerve to claim that?"

Well, we see, he says, in the next bit hopefully "You were dead in your transgressions and sins" and by saying transgressions and sins he's basically using a bit of a catch-all phrase meaning both the sins that we choose to do and the sins we end up doing because we choose not to do other things - commission and omission - and that leads Paul to conclude that we are spiritually dead because of what he knows in the Old Testament in the Old Testament. He knows that it said "Your iniquities have separated you from your God. Your sins have hidden his face from you so that he will not hear" and then Jesus said this, he said "Now this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." So, Jesus is saying, to have spiritual life, to be spiritually alive, to have eternal life, is to know God but Isaiah is saying, because of our sins our relationship with God is broken. There's distance between us and it's that that leads Paul to conclude we are spiritually dead.

So maybe we then wonder "Well, WHERE is this deadness, saint Paul? Because if it's real, come on, it has to be seen somewhere." And again, Paul would take you to the Old Testament, he would take you to verses he used in Romans where he writes "There is no one righteous, not even one, there is no one who understands, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away. They have together become worthless."

There is no one who does good, not even one. Where is this deadness seen? It's seen in the ways we turn from God's, ways it is seen in our apathy towards God, it is seen in our mistakes, the choices we choose to do that we know are wrong, and the choices we choose not to do which would be good. As Paul says in Ephesians "each of us follows the ways of the world."

So often and we gratify what's in our hearts and in our minds, the flesh so that we follow its desires and its thoughts. Where is this sin? It is seen in the brokenness of our world and that we all contribute to that, me included, because, inherent to being human, inherent to being human, is a nature that is marred. We have an intellect, we have emotions, we have hearts, we have motives we have goals, which are not pure. None of it is truly good and sometimes we do stuff and we do it because we think it's good, but we maybe do it for false motives.

Paul is not saying here that we don't have potential, that we can't do some good, and he's not saying that God doesn't value you, because he knows that the Old Testament teachers were made in the image of God but, nonetheless, his point here is simply that our nature, the image of God in us, is broken, it's tainted, we have a darkness to us, our spiritual death is seen every day in our lives and in the brokenness of our world, and that's what leads Paul to say we're spiritually dead, that we are separated from God. As he said in Romans, and because of that spiritual deadness we don't even seek God, we

don't even seek Him if left to ourselves, we're so trapped by sin that we don't actually seek reconciliation with God off our own back. That's our predicament, that's our predicament, and it affects every one of us.

So, what's to be done, what's to be done? Is God just like sitting up there having a big huff, or is it in a rage, and he's ready just to smite us, because Paul talks about some wrath in there, probably made us a bit uncomfortable. Is He just waiting to come with His wrath, well, No, no, because in the same passage we read these words: "but because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. It is by grace you have been saved."

Despite us being a bunch of rebels and mostly most of the time, telling God to take a hike, He still loves us, His mercy is still so great that He will not wait, he will not stand off and so, just as Jesus was raised from physical death, anyone who puts their faith in Jesus will be raised from spiritual death to new life, made a new creation, given life eternally, by faith in Jesus, by becoming reconciled to God, and He does it because He loves you, God loves you enough to die for you, and so that's why we read in our passage in Acts today "Apollos was a great help to those who by grace had believed."

The grace of God helped them to turn to Him, His grace helped them to respond and to repent. Other parts of scripture also teach the same truth so for example we can read "One of those listening to the disciples was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message." Or we could see what Jesus says "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them." And then Paul, to the church in Corinth said "For God who said let light shine out of darkness made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the person of Christ." We need God's grace, we need His help, we need His intervention if we are to respond to the good news, if we are to come to Jesus in faith, and so, then, have His light shine in our darkness and bring that new life. Grace must come alongside us and work in us before we can respond in faith, and so, sometimes it's called prevenient grace, the grace which comes before God gives that grace so that we can respond freely to in faith or to reject his invitation.

Christianity, friends, is not about becoming a nicer person, it's not about becoming religious and having a religious routine, or ticking the box 'you went to church', Christianity is about becoming a new person, a new creation, becoming spiritually alive by His grace, enabling you to respond to His invitation so that His life might be in us and raise us from spiritual death. So, if you claim to be a Christian, then God's grace came first, God's great grace came first. So, there's no boasting, there's no right to achievement or reward, because His grace came first.

God did not stand off, He did not simply wait in wrath until it was too late, He came close, He gave grace so that you might seek Him, so that you might seek Him so that you might turn to Jesus and find new life, that His light might shine and bring that in your

heart and your life and restore you, and He did all that because He loves you, He loves you.

And so then, we might wonder What's our response today if you're a Christian? Just humbly thank God for His grace, thank God for His grace that He so worked in your life.

One way somehow that that you responded that His grace came, because if that grace hadn't come you wouldn't be here, you wouldn't be claiming faith in Jesus. Secondly, you might want to be praying for that grace to be working in others' lives, but thirdly, listen to what scripture says about the importance of sharing the good news "How then can they call on the one they have not believed in and how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard" Faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word about Christ. As we share the good news, faith can arise, is what Paul's saying here in Romans, but we know from what we've just seen, that faith can only come when there's grace, and so it seems that in the act of sharing the good news God pours out his grace so that people can respond in faith. Now there's an even greater motivation to be evangelistic, that as we share the good news, grace is given and people then have the choice to respond in faith or not!

Now what if some of us here today, are watching at home, would claim not to follow Jesus, what if that's you, what if in your heart you know that Jesus is not your Lord and Savior, you'd rather be anywhere other than here in church or watching this at home, and that might include both adults and young people, and you might have attended church for years, you might have got married in church, you might have been brought up in church all your life, but you know inside the reality is, you're spiritually dead, and you can tell that because Jesus is a bit dull to you, he does not seem glorious, you can tell it because you're deaf to the voice of the Holy Spirit, you can tell it because, in your heart, there's no love for God, there's no confidence that that He is your Abba Father, there's no awareness of His personal presence day by day with you, all this and more besides points to the reality that inside you might come to church, you might even have had tons of sermons, but you're spiritually dead, your spirits are dead until you come to faith in Jesus.

And, if that's you, and if it bothers you, and if you want to know God and know His forgiveness and so no new life through Jesus, maybe today God is stirring up your heart, maybe God is pouring grace upon your heart so that you're in a position to respond. Maybe today is the day to do that because we should not think there will be another opportunity, that I can just put it off to another day, we shouldn't think that, we shouldn't assume because Hebrews warns us "See to it that none of you has a sinful unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."

You can become so hard of heart that you might hear the gospel but you will not choose to respond and you will not choose salvation through Jesus.

Don't leave it too late because, who knows when you flip into that point where it becomes so hard that you will not respond, that can happen, that can happen.

And so, will you respond today? Will you respond and seek reconciliation with God and be made spiritually alive by putting your faith in Jesus? Because, in a moment, I'm going to lead us in a prayer, I'm going to give us that opportunity to respond and invite you to repeat the words after me - you can speak them out quietly if you want, you can speak them quietly in your heart, it doesn't matter, God hears but sometimes speaking them out can just articulate it but, there's no pressure because today is, remember today that you've to respond, today is maybe the day you put your faith in Jesus and become spiritually alive. So, don't put it off if you're feeling tugging at your heart today let's pray:

Lord Jesus, thank you that I am here today and hear you tugging at my heart. I'm sorry Lord Jesus, for the things I've done wrong and, in the stillness, just now I name anything for which I'm sorry

please forgive me Lord Jesus.

And now turn from everything I know to be wrong and submit to you as Lord. Have your way and my life.

Thank-you that You died on the cross for me so that I could be forgiven and set free and find new life.

Thank-you that You offer me forgiveness and the gift of Your spirit to indwell me. I now receive these gifts. Please come into my life by your Holy Spirit, to be with me forever. Thank-you Lord Jesus.

And I wonder, for the rest of us, what do you need to take home today? Have you grown a bit lukewarm in faith? Have you grown away but lukewarm to the fact that you've been given grace? And without that grace you wouldn't be here and you wouldn't believe? Or are there people that you need to be praying for, or even sharing the gospel with come walk me because how will they believe and turn to Jesus if you don't share it?

Lord God, lead us in Your ways, give us a holy boldness where we need that, and may Your grace abound in this place, in this parish, across the Braes, Lord, that many would turn to You and find new life spiritual, life eternal, life which begins now by knowing You today and every day.

For in Your name we pray and for Your glory we ask it. Amen.