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THE PROMISE OF GRACE

Roland E. Miller

If grace were not alive, we would not be here. The rich and selfless grace of God is responsible for every good thing in our life. It is responsible for our present togetherness. It is responsible for our vision of the future. Grace is a dynamic power that actually achieves what it purposes to do. That fact has become clear to us through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who broke the power of sin, death, and the devil. The reality of what grace has already done gives the promise of what is to come. The promise is this: when God presses us toward something, he also grants the power to enable us to reach his goals. The existence of Christ's church on earth -- weak and spiritually untidy though it is -- is the continuing witness to the reality of the promises of God. The grace of God is not in vain. The plan of God will reach its fulfillment in the coming of his kingdom.

Everyone here will have his own personal testimony also to the truth of the power of grace -- spirit-mediated, live, active, surprising, fulfilling grace. When we began our work among Muslims in Malabar (India) in 1953, we had been pre-conditioned by the history of Muslim missions to believe that, though fruits would come, they would not come in one lifetime. Rather, as the intrepid Samuel Zwemer put it, the mission to Muslims must be considered "the glory of the impossible." Or, as the saintly Lilius Trotter of North Africa stated it, "We who are engaged in Muslim work live in a land of blighted promises. That is a fact that none of us who love its people can deny; and the deadly heart-sickness of hope deferred sometimes makes even the most optimistic of us almost despair of seeing abiding fruitage to the work."¹

"Almost despair" is what she said -- but never quite. For hidden in the grace of God is the power of God. That power was working through the means of

1. Quoted in Zwemer, Samuel, *The Glory of the Impossible* (New York: Board of Foreign Missions, Reformed Church in America, 1950), p. 1.

grace among the Mappilas of Kerala -- working much more powerfully than weak faith perceived. Suddenly, during the last three years of our 23 years of service the result of its working became evident; the field, that once seemed so barren, became ripe for the harvest. That most rare of mission events -- baptized Muslims -- became a living reality. I did not believe that I would see a Muslim convert, the son of a Muslim priest, follow Christ, survive the sufferings, go through seminary, and become the first ordained evangelist to his own people. I saw it, and was strengthened in my faith in the power of grace. And when Muslim converts in a group addressed the convention of the Lutheran Church in Kerala for the first time men rose to their feet, praising God and testifying to his power.

Does your life experience verify the promises of grace? Indeed they must; that is the inevitable experience of the children of grace. Neither frustration nor hope-deferred, neither suffering nor almost despair, can annul the solid promise of God. I suggest that the promises of God are not beginning to unfold in new ways for the Lutheran Church in Canada and the eyes of faith will not be blind to the sight. As we experience the reality of God's promises in our personal and in our corporate lives, we realize that it is truly a good time to be working together in his kingdom. In fact, in the kingdom of grace, it is always a good time.

GRACE AND PROMISE

Let us look a little closer at the New Testament link between grace and promise. It parallels the links between grace and apostleship, and grace and unity. The connection between grace and promise becomes very clear in the self-awareness and ministry of St. Paul. He spoke with wonder about the grace of God in Christ that had literally overflowed with the power which enabled him to believe and to live (2 Tim. 1, 12). I suppose that he would call you to the same sense of wonder regarding your Christian faith and life. Neither would he view your being placed in positions of leadership in the church of God as a mere historical accident. Of himself he says: "God in his grace chose me before I was born and called me to serve him" (Gal. 1, 15). So are you chosen and called to serve, deliberately chosen by God in his grace.

What about your special task to see how the Lutheran Church in Canada can work together more effectively to carry out Christ's mission? St. Paul would not be likely to see that special task as something given to you by chance. Of himself he says: "I was made an apostle to the Gentiles . . . and James, Peter and John . . . recognized that God had given me this special grace" (Gal. 2, 8). In any special task we must see a special grace. This fact, when recognized, produces in us the fruits of responsibility and urgency. What about the particular talents you may have to offer to the achievement of the task? St. Paul would not regard those as only happenstance. For of himself he says: "By God's grace I am what I am, and the grace that He gave me was not without effect . . . though it was not really my own doing, but the grace of

God was working in me" (1 Cor. 15, 10f). Without confusing ourselves with apostles, we too can believe and say that we are what we are by the grace of God working in us.

How does grace empower us? As we strive to give thanks for the privilege of grace, as we strive to respond dynamically to the pressures of grace, what are the resources God gives? We know what they are -- his Spirit, his daily presence and care, the means of grace, blessings of body mind and spirit, the comfort of fellow believers. To those spiritually frail, morally weak, and doctrinally erring brothers in Corinth St. Paul wrote, "I always give thanks to my God for you because of the grace he has given you through Jesus Christ. For in union with Christ you have become rich in all things" (1 Cor. 1, 4f). Set down in the midst of the greatest commercial mart and the most vicious centre of vice in the Greek world, the grace of God came to them according to their needs. There is no doubt that what the Corinthian Christians needed first of all was the forgiveness of their sins. The grace of forgiveness came to them, and with it the other gifts needed by this troubled congregation. With these rich resources they were able to survive their rocky beginnings; by the end of the first century the church at Corinth was known as a great and distinguished church. And Christians who arrived from foreign parts could learn of the glorious and steadfast faith of the church which existed there, could marvel at its thoughtful and gentle piety, could proclaim widely the magnificent style of its hospitality and call the mature and perfect Christian knowledge of the Corinthians blessed.²

Grace, then, meets whatever need appears. That is what is implied by "throne of grace"; we can draw near to ask for help in time of need. What grace do you need? Lutheran Church-Canada, what grace do you need at this juncture? The grace of forgiveness? The grace of urgency? The grace to see the vision more clearly? The grace to draw together more closely? The grace to trust fellow Lutherans more truly? The grace to plan more intelligently? The grace to take risks for God? The grace to know what to do next, and then to go ahead? Whatever grace it is you need, the God of all grace will supply it.

For this is part of the good news -- that God gives special power and care to the bearers of his grace. As we take his grace to the world and bear witness together to the resurrected Lord, great grace will be upon us all, even as it was upon the first believers. Stephen, it is said, was full of "grace and power." These worked together so that he was able to do wonders in Jerusalem, and then, finally, to have the courage to offer up his life itself. At Iconium Paul and Barnabas faced severe danger in the midst of a divided city. Nevertheless they remained and spoke up boldly for the Lord, "who proved that their message of grace was true, by giving them the power to work miracles and wonders" (Acts 14, 3).

When Paul and Barnabas returned from Asia Minor to Antioch, "where they had been originally commended to the grace of God for the task which they had now completed" (Acts 14, 26), they told the church that had sent them

2. First Epistle of Clement (1, 2), quoted in Weiss, Johannes, *Earliest Christianity*, Vol. II (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1950), p. 828.

everything that God had done through them, and how he had opened the way for the Gentiles to believe. Maybe some day, not so far off, Lutherans joined together in the Lutheran Church in Canada will commend some men to the grace of God, and they will return to tell what great things God has done with them, and how he has opened the door of faith. Do you doubt that if we strive to respond to the pressures of grace in us that God will give us the power to do miracles and wonders in this our own age?

What about the physical resources required to carry out God's work? That too is a need which is met by grace. If the Lutheran Church in Canada has the serious intention of taking up its mission to this land with greater determination and has the equally serious intention to assume responsibility for extra-territorial missions, there is no question that God will not provide the needed physical blessings. That also is part of the promise of grace. Therefore St. Paul encouraged the Corinthians, as he spoke up for the needs of Jerusalem, "God is able to provide you with more grace than you need so that you may in turn provide in abundance for every good work" (2 Cor. 9, 8). It is time, too, that we recognize more clearly our already abundant resources. Our weaknesses, on which we tend to dwell, may be more apparent to us than they would be to many other Christians in lesser circumstances. Clearly, we are highly favoured people -- a solid section of one of the most blessed nations in the world. We are well positioned by God, not only to expect great things from him, but also to attempt great things for him.

THE PROTECTION OF GRACE

Both the power and the resources of grace will be present in abundance for a church united in mission. So also will be the protection of grace. This is important to know, for a witnessing church is a suffering church. The promise of grace in the New Testament becomes very specific when it has reference to the suffering people of grace. Grace will be there for a physically suffering church. I have personally been part of a physically suffering church and have seen men and women physically hurt for their faith in Christ. Most of you, thank God!, have not, and I pray to God you never will. But who can say that emotional, mental and psychological suffering is not, in a sense, as great a burden to bear as physical suffering, if not greater. In that sense at least the witnessing church in Canada has suffered, and will suffer more. But grace comes, grace sufficient, for individuals and churches who are willing to go all out for God. "My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12, 9). It is the strength of One Who Himself has gone through it, and knows how to strengthen his brethren. "If you endure suffering even when you have done right, God will grace you . . . for Christ himself suffered for you and left you an example, so that you could follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2, 19).

Remember, you are not alone; and in all the world your fellow believers are going through the same kind of suffering, or worse. "But after you have

suffered for awhile, the God of all grace . . . will himself perfect you” (1 Peter 5, 9). Above all, knowing this -- knowing that over all the passing events in the world and undergirding all the efforts of God’s people is the same mighty hand of grace -- “Have your minds ready for action, keep alert, and set your hope completely on the grace which will be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Peter 1, 3). So St. Peter lifts up our eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh our help.

As we look up to God and his lamb we behold that he is truly love-in-motion, that grace is ever flowing, all-sufficient, and unconquerable. So let us heed the admonition of that man of God who learned that truth out of his own profound experience and then died for it. How St. Peter must have clung to the promise of the grace of God as he hung head-down on the cruel cross at Rome. In imagination I can hear him shouting at us these words, “I want to encourage you and give you my testimony that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it!” (1 Peter 5, 12). Is there anything more important for the Lutheran Church, or for any Christian in the world, than the grace of God? Stand firm in it!

Standing firm in the grace of God means first of all not rejecting it for any reason whatsoever (Gal. 2, 21). It means not allowing godless people to slip in and distort its clear message (Jude 4). It means holding fast to the grace of God (Acts 13, 43). Or, as another translation puts it, to “keep on living in the grace of God.” Therefore it also means “continuing to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3, 18). And it means having “thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col. 3, 16), using “our different gifts in accordance with the grace that God has given us” (Rom. 12, 6), and together working the works of him that sent us before the night comes when no man can work.

CONCLUSION

In summary, I have tried to say to you that to have the grace of God is a privilege, a privilege not only to be enjoyed, but to be enjoyed and shared. I have tried to say that the grace of God is a mighty pressure in us that carries us forward on the paths of mission and unity. I have tried to say that the grace of God has in it the promise of power -- promise that stems from the heart of God and is sure, as sure as his love for us in Jesus Christ. I take leave to suggest that all this may have something to do with what you decide and how you go ahead . . . something to do with you who are the *sola gratia* love-in-motion people of God.

Whatever we do, let it be gracious -- grace-inspired and grace-bearing. And so I conclude, with a little apology to St. Peter, paraphrasing his words: “To you, God’s scattered people, who lodge for a while in Mississauga -- chosen of old in the purpose of God the Father, hallowed to his service by the Spirit, and consecrated with the sprinkled blood of Jesus, GRACE AND PEACE BE WITH YOU, MORE AND MORE!” (1 Peter 1, 2).