

Grace upon grace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one gracious God, now and forever. Amen.

*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.* Let's pray...

"From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." What greater gift could be given? What greater gift could one receive? What greater joy could fill the embattled soul than grace upon grace?

We talk about "grace" all of the time in the Lutheran Church, but it often goes under-appreciated, or misunderstood, I believe, because it's difficult for us to grasp the enormity of God's concern and love for us. How sinners, completely devoid of holiness and with the potential for great evil could be of any interest to God, baffles us. Therefore, we need to be constantly reminded of two things - what grace is and who God is.

Essentially, grace is God's ultimate expression of love for humankind, where we are given what we don't deserve. This is different from mercy, which means not getting what we actually do deserve. We translate the Greek phrase (χάριν ἀντὶ χάριτος – charin anti charitos) as "grace upon grace," or "grace in place of grace." John does his best to express grace as a constant, overflowing gift. As believers, we're constantly inundated with the overflowing grace of God, on behalf of Jesus Christ. God reaches out to us for salvation as John wonderfully declares: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" [3:16,17]. God acted out his love for us by sending Jesus to keep us from dying in our own sins. Beyond that, he continually makes us more and more like him (Romans 8:29; Colossians 3:10). As children of God, we're not only rescued, we're loved, honoured, and transformed. God keeps chipping away, making us more and more like him.

So, God in his wisdom, gives us the opportunity to begin this new year reflecting on the wonder of his saving love and reminding us to cling to his invaluable treasure of salvation through the gift of Jesus Christ. Let's be reminded again of God's beautiful plan of salvation.

Bring to the forefront of your mind the sinner, empty of all holiness, all hope, despairing, and ready to die. Now brighten up this picture by adding God, full of mercy, willing to come and fill the sinner's emptiness, to bring all his communicable attributes, and dwell in that sinner, giving him mercy, which blots out sin, and holiness which lifts him up from his ruined condition.

Next, consider the difficulty that God can't come as part of or half a God. All his attributes must come together. This creates another conundrum. Were the just God to enter this guilty sinner to fill his emptiness, the flame of justice would most certainly destroy him. Our God, who is "a consuming fire," can't come into contact with something sinful without destroying it. What then? Does the sinner remain condemned, and God's fullness remain uncommunicated? Let's unravel the brilliant plan which God in his infinite wisdom has devised!

The Word became flesh, the eternal Son of God became man, the divine nature came in all its fullness and dwelt in Jesus. Jesus was made to suffer the mighty burnings of justice, which caused him agony, but it couldn't consume him, because there was no sin in Jesus. No unholiness. Justice blazed within him, cast him into a bloody sweat, indeed, brought him to the cross and to death, because he stood in the sinner's place. But though this golden vessel was heated, it couldn't be melted; it could contain the divine fire without being destroyed. In Christ Jesus, dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.

The cherry on top of the cake and the genius of God's plan is that the divine nature exists in Christ in such a way that it's able to be transmitted to us. He doesn't make us into Gods, rather, we're "made partakers of the divine nature" in the sense that we receive his character, and become the children of God. That which God couldn't give us directly by reason of our sin in the face of his holiness, he's now brought to us by placing grace in the man Christ Jesus, that we, coming to him, might freely receive it.

After the fullness of God has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ, everyone who comes to him by faith receives his grace. Salvation isn't granted in exchange for what we bring to Christ, but by what we take from him. We receive first, and then through the power of grace, we pass the baton on as rivers of living water flow from us to others. We come empty-handed, possessing nothing but our sin and misery, undeserving, and receive his fullness. This continues all our life long as we receive more and more; grace upon grace. Grace increases our capacity for grace, and that enlarged capacity becomes filled, and so the fullness of God pours into us until we're filled with it, and we rise from grace to glory, being made like God, and fitted to live with him forever.

Grace upon grace. From grace to glory. Now, tell me. Who grew up being told that nothing in life is free, or that there's no such thing as a free lunch, or you've got to work hard for everything you get?

If any of that sounds familiar to you, you undoubtedly wrestle with the idea of receiving free, unearned, unmerited grace. Imagine what your life would be like without that struggle.

Without that struggle, we'd see, experience, and accept a life of "grace upon grace," gift upon gift, with no questions asked. True life, no strings attached. Isn't that what we caught a glimpse of and experienced this past week?

This past week –

- we received the gift of friends;
- we received the gift of family;
- we received the gift of feasting;
- we received the gift of celebration;
- we received the gift of joy;
- we received the gift of faith;
- we received the gift of hope;
- we received the gift of love;
- we received the gift of our life's manger being filled;
- we received the gift of a Saviour born to us;
- we received the gift of the Child;
- we received the gift of his presence.

I could go on and on. This past week we've received gift upon gift. What if that's how we're meant to see and live life? What if that's the lens through which we're to read holy scripture? What if the Bible is a gift catalogue of the Word become flesh?

This Word become flesh is the one who –

- graces our life's water with wine;
- graces our troubled hearts with peace;
- graces our thirst with living water;
- graces our hunger with loaves and fish;
- graces our paralysed legs to stand up and walk;
- graces our blindness with eyes that see;
- graces our grief with comfort;
- graces our struggles with his easy yoke and light burden;
- graces our sins with forgiveness;
- graces our prodigal trips to the distant country with a homecoming party;
- graces the dead parts of our life with new life;
- graces our lives with abundance.

All that and more entered our lives when “the Word became flesh and lived among us.... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” It’s the gift that just keeps on giving from a Source that is inextinguishable. God bless all who will again this year, receive grace upon grace upon grace. Amen.

And the grace and peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in the Word made flesh, Christ Jesus. Amen.