

Pentecost 2B 06 June 2021
2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

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

Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. Let's pray:

You lot know I get pretty fired up about social engineering and destructive ideologies in the world. It's because I'm passionate about the dignity and holiness of humanity created in the image of our Creator, God. And I detest sin and Satan spoiling and desecrating what God has made good and beautiful. That's why I leapt on the Epistle reading today, because in it, St Paul speaks about the triumph of faith and the spread of grace despite adversity.

Let's begin with an example. What's this? Yes, it's a torch. What good is it in broad daylight? Pretty much useless. But how good is it when it's pitch black; dark? That's right. The light slices through the darkness like a hot knife through butter!

Our faith is the same. When times are darkest, that's when others notice where your faith is pointing. Faith speaks out. Faith confesses what you believe. Neither trouble, adversity, nor suffering can silence faith. In fact, as your faith continues to shine through your most difficult times, people take note and listen. Faith speaks out through adversity, so my prayer is that the Holy Spirit will give us the confidence to speak out, spreading God's grace to others.

St Paul writes earlier in chapter 4, that the living power of the Gospel of Christ keeps us going no matter what the trouble, adversity, or suffering: 'We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed' (2 Corinthians 4:8,9).

Just as his enemies pursued Jesus to death, so also do they hound those who follow Jesus. But the darker the persecution gets, the brighter the Gospel shines, bringing life to those who hear it. Again, Paul writes, 'For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you' (2 Corinthians 4:11,12). Faith speaks the Gospel in times of adversity, and God's grace spreads to others, bringing life.

Paul extends this theme in today's epistle starting with, 'Just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—"I believed, and so I spoke"—we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. **Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God'** (2 Corinthians 4:13-15).

All that Paul went through, all the suffering, all the adversities, all the persecution, all was for the benefit of others including you and me. God's grace spread to others, and down through the ages to us. And now we too overflow with thanksgiving to God and give him the glory for his grace in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, let your faith speak out through adversity so that God's grace may spread to others. You know God's grace, the grace that took a wretched sinner like you and me and washed us clean through the water and word of baptism. The grace that brings us the words of eternal life so that we believe that Jesus is the Son of God, our only Saviour from sin and death. The grace that strengthens our faith and gives us a foretaste of the heavenly feast, by giving us the body and blood of Jesus in his holy supper. The grace that takes the magnificently imperfect you and I and makes us holy, out of Jesus' unconditional, non-judgemental, non-condemning, forgiving, acceptance and love.

Consider what God's grace has already done for us. The Father gave up his Son for us, while we were dead to him in sin. Now through faith in Jesus, we are his brothers or sisters, God's adopted children. Not even that strong man, that ancient serpent, Satan, can snatch us away from Jesus. Jesus is stronger; he has crushed the serpent's head. Jesus rose from the dead! Not even death can separate us from his love. That's God's power at work for and in us. So, I encourage you to speak out in adversity. Speak out with that faith that puts the spotlight on Jesus and his grace.

How then, do we 'not lose heart' when afflictions assail us? Paul to the rescue again: 'We know that all things work together for good for those who love God' (Romans 8:28). Now that's easier to say than believe. That irritating little voice rattles around in our head asking, "What good is God working for me? Is he training my faith? Is he testing me? Does he want me to lean on him more?" All can be part of God's plan. But maybe the primary good God is working isn't directly for you, but for those around you. As your faith shines out in times of adversity, God's grace spreads to others. Maybe that's the good he is working through your suffering. As you give thanks to God and glorify him even in dark times, others will want to know 'the reason for the hope that is in you' (1 Peter 3:15). Even though it seems contradictory, adversity provides opportunities for faith to speak out and spread God's grace!

But what about when adversity strikes really hard? What does Paul say? 'Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal' (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

This could sound condescending, like when people speaking from a position of privilege trivialise the concerns of others by saying things like, "Oh, come on. Life isn't really that bad. Look on the bright side. Things will get better."

However, this comes from Paul who suffered greatly and reflected deeply on the troubles in his own life. Outwardly, he was wasting away. Five times he received thirty-nine lashes from the Jews. Three times he was beaten with rods. Once he was stoned and left for dead. Three times he was shipwrecked. He experienced sleepless nights, hunger, and cold. He struggled with some persistent affliction that he referred to as his 'thorn in the flesh'. He carried a burden of concern for the fledgling Christian churches. Would they continue in the faith or fall? Despite all this, he refers to his troubles as a 'slight momentary affliction'. Such was his focus on the unseen glory of God. Even through moments of grave peril and nagging impediment, Paul's faith enabled him to proclaim God's grace in Jesus, his Lord and Saviour.

Friends, if Paul could do it, we can do it too. Day by day, we are being inwardly renewed. That's what the Gospel of God's grace in Christ Jesus does for us. It allows us to persevere. It allows us to focus on the unseen glory. It allows us to hold out for what's eternal even while suffering temporal affliction.

God's grace is hidden under the ink and paper of an old book called the Bible. God's grace is hidden under water sprinkled on an infant's head. God's grace is hidden under bread and wine. Still, these humble means reveal God's saving glory. Through the scriptures and the sacraments, the Gospel penetrates our hearts and inwardly renews us day by day, strengthening our faith, reviving our hope, refreshing our joy, increasing our love.

And through these, the Holy Spirit lifts our eyes from our present troubles and points us to the eternal glory, the glory hidden in heaven for we who believe, the glory that will never perish, spoil, or fade.

Until then, dear brothers and sisters, shine through the darkness. Speak out through adversity, spreading God's grace in Christ, so that many others may join us in that unseen, wonderful glory to come. Amen.

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