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Living the Jesus Life: Back to Grace!

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TEXT: Philippians 4:21-23 (NRSV)

Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The friends who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor's household.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound..."

We began this series on Philippians with a sermon entitled "Living the Jesus Life Begins with Grace," because Paul begins the letter to the Philippians with the greeting, "Grace to you." That's where living the Jesus life begins: with grace. And throughout the letter, the apostle Paul then goes on to bless us through his Holy Spirit-inspired words, with complete handbook, so to speak, that teaches us all about living life with Jesus and for Jesus. Now we're at his closing. Not only does he send greetings from others in Rome, but he also reminds us again, just like in the opening, of who we are. We are saints in Christ, which means we've been set apart for Christ's work.

But it's the very last words of this letter I want to focus on today as we end our sermon series. We see Paul going a full circle back to that word: grace. It's a short but sweet benediction and blessing upon all believers in Christ Jesus. "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit." Paul knows from experience that it is all the follower of Jesus needs to spiritually grow and to carry on and advance the gospel of Christ. All we need is the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ with us in all circumstances. As we look at the

statement, grace means undeserved favor; a gift. And as Grace is used here, we see that it's the undeserved favor of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Even the titles in the name are filled with meanings that we don't want to miss. "The Lord," that tells us Jesus is God. Someone once wrote "Jesus is God, spelling itself out in language that men can understand." Jesus Himself once said, "If you've seen me, you've seen the father." That name, Jesus, means, "He saves," or, "God saves." He is the savior of the world, not from political oppression or economic poverty, but something far greater. The angel told Joseph before the birth of Jesus, "You shall name him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." Sin is humankind's greatest problem, and Jesus is our savior who saves us from our sin through His dying on the cross and rising again. Salvation comes only through Him. Then Paul calls him "Christ." This is not the last name, it's a royal title. Jesus is King, the Messiah, the anointed one of God who delivers his people. He rules over us. He has been exalted by God and reigns. Like the hymn says, He is our "Beautiful savior, King of creation."

So when we put it all together, we have the undeserved favor of God Himself who saves and rules overall, be with your spirit, your person, be with you. These are reassuring words that Paul speaks to us. Jesus, with His grace, will be present alongside of us. He is with us already since His resurrection, and on that great resurrection day, at the end of this story, we will see Him again face to face when He graciously reappears in power to take all believers to Himself.

But in the meantime, as we wait for that grand finale, facing life's up and downs, I find this benediction very reassuring for myself. If you have placed your trust in Jesus, you are never alone; never on your own. And that is a very good thing, isn't it? Because the truth is you and I need him, don't we? It's like the hymn says, "I need thee every hour. I need thee, oh, I need thee every hour, I need thee. Oh, bless me now, my savior, I come to thee." The grace of his presence with me, you see, can conquer my fears. And we all have some fears in this life. Sometimes we have fears over our standing with God. We find ourselves stumbling in our obedience to God's commands, and that can sometimes cause us to wonder, "Does God still love me? Am I still His? I mean, I really blew it this time. I'm sure I'm over my limit by now. I'm afraid His patience with me has run out."

We see a bit of this fear addressed in Romans 8. Paul writes: "For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption as

sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. And if children, then heirs." The spirit of the living Christ witnesses to our spirits with a reassuring reminder that we are no longer slaves to sin and death, but we are adopted children of God, heirs of God's promises. Yes, we do continue to sin in our brokenness. We're saints and sinners, as Martin Luther calls all Christians. But as we turn to God and confess our sins, God forgives us and cleanses us of all our unrighteousness and calls us His own because of what Jesus has accomplished once and for all on our behalf at the cross. That's assurance. It takes away my fear.

We also have fears some days that no one cares about us, like we're just another number in the phone book. We feel like that little saying: "Nobody likes me, everybody hates me. Guess I'll go eat worms." But as we open the gospels, the word of God, Jesus comes alongside us and whispers in our ear:

That's not true. I care. Look at the incarnation, my birth. I left Heaven and came into this world because I care about you. Look at the cross of redemption: I took your sins upon myself and the punishment that you deserved because I care. You can trust in my compassion and care for you. You can bring your worries to me and call out my name in prayer, instead of moping around that no one cares about you. I care. And as you draw near to me, you will find that I will draw near to you.

Reassuring words.

We sometimes have fears of being alone and on our own, which bring on great anxiety and worry in our lives. And that risen Jesus comes to us in His word and gently reminds us, "You don't need to worry about that. Remember my promise to my own? I said, 'I won't leave you as orphans. I will come to you.' Or those last words I spoke in Matthew's gospel: 'Lo, I am with you always to the end of the age.' Trust my promises." I have personally found that claiming those words for myself gives me great peace and strength in every life circumstance. He's with me.

Finally, many of us get a bit uneasy about death, don't we? We watch our loved ones pass away or we are reminded of a daily on the social media. We feel our bodies wearing out and our mortality confronts us. And some moments... well, death makes us shiver a bit. But the grace of the risen Lord Jesus Christ points us to an empty tomb as we read that Easter story. And He points us to His resurrection appearances and promises, and He tells us:

Remember Easter, though no one expected this surprise, I was raised again. It's the first fruits of the resurrection to be with you now and forever. I've taken away the sting of death over you. It's conquered because I live, you shall live also. You're mine forever, no matter what happens to you. Believe this, nothing can separate us.

I came across this statement that Joni Eareckson Tada, in *Christianity Today*, wrote that I really like because I think it sums his benediction up quite nicely. She writes,

Just think: every promise God has ever made finds its fulfillment in Jesus. God doesn't just give us grace. He gives us Jesus, the Lord of Grace. If it's peace, it's only found in Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Even life itself is found in Jesus, the resurrection and the life. Christianity isn't all that complicated. It's Jesus.

And how true that is. Christianity really isn't all that complicated. It's simply Jesus; living the Jesus life with Him. It begins, continues, and ends with the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ with us. We are not on this expedition called life alone.

So that's what Paul sends us off with today. There are so many uncertainties in the world today with all that's going on with the pandemic and the economy and the mean way people can sometimes act towards one another. The truth is, though, uncertainties in this broken world of ours have always been around in some degree or another. But in spite of all these things, there's one certainty that remains and keeps the follower of Jesus going and growing: the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ with us.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound." That's our good news if you are connected to Jesus through faith in Him, and I hope you are. To anyone who's listening today, if you're living without that relationship with Jesus, He wants to enter your life and have you as His own, and that can begin right now. I found this old clipping in my files that I'd like to have you consider regarding having Jesus in your life. I can't remember the author's name who wrote this, but I think his words are compelling to those looking in and considering Jesus. Here goes:

As long as Jesus is merely a figure in a book to us, he remains outside of us. But when we invite Him to enter our hearts, we can feed upon His life and be sustained by the very source of life. Biblical commentator William Barclay makes a compelling comparison in one of his commentaries. "Think of it this way," Barclay writes, "here in a bookcase is a book which a man has never read. It may be the glory and wonder of the tragedies of Shakespeare. But so long as it

remains unread upon his bookshelf, it is external to him. But one day he takes it down and reads it. He's thrilled and fascinated and moved. The story sticks to him and the great lines remain in his memory. Now, when he wants to, he can take that wonder out from inside himself and remember it and think about it and feed his mind and his heart upon it. Once the book was outside him; now it's inside him and he can feed upon it.

And then our writer concludes with this appeal:

If you've never taken Jesus into your life, assimilated His being into you, then He is outside your life. As with a child whose nose is pressed upon a bakery store window, it doesn't matter how close you are to the bread or how sweet or fresh you think its smell is. If you don't reach out and take Him as the bread of life, then He is forever encased on the shelf while you're forever on the street, hungry.

Friend, that relationship can begin right now if you'd like. It's simply a matter of bowing your head and asking Him to come in. Tell Him you've sinned and you need His forgiveness. Tell Him you want his friendship and leadership in your life, and He promises He will come in, and you will receive His grace every day.

Now, for those of you who are living the Jesus life already, Paul's hope and my hope as well is that this benediction will be a reassuring reminder for you in the days ahead that you're not alone. Jesus is with you always. Here's a story that expresses that truth, that makes me smile. You've heard the old saying "out of the mouths of babes"? Well, listen to this. In the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, back in January 1998, Judy Zmerold wrote:

Three-year-old Katie was taken to her pediatrician during a recent bout with the flu. As the doctor examined her ears, he asked, "Will I find Big Bird in here?"

Apprehensively, Katie replied, "No."

Then, before examining her throat, he asked, "Will I find Cookie Monster in here?"

And again, she said, "No."

Finally listening to her heart, he asked, "Will I find Barney the dinosaur in here?"

With innocent conviction, she looked at him directly in the eye and said, "Oh, no. Jesus is in my heart. Barney is on my underwear."

Enough said. What a promising future lies ahead of us as we live the Jesus life. It's a future filled with His grace. The final word for today? The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, be with your spirit.

Amen.