

Gripped by the Gospel of Grace Pt 1 -- The Grace Filled Life

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[0 : 00] Please sit down. And if you'll turn over to 1 Peter chapter 1, that'd be great. It was just read for us by Geordie.

On page 1014. 1 Peter. As you do that, one of the fairly well-kept secrets at St John's is that we do in fact have a vision statement.

And we don't look to the vision statement to drive things forward or to plans, but we hold all our plans and vision with an open hand.

And we try and hold on to Christ and his gospel with a closed hand because he holds on to us. Is it Woody Allen who said, if you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.

However, this is a very important time for us as a church. We've experienced extraordinary change in the last few years, not just because of COVID. And so it's good for us to ask, where are we going?

[1 : 04] Who are we? Where do we see God taking us together? And St John's vision will magically appear behind me on the screen. And I have been convinced that we should say this together.

So if you are happy to do this, that would be just great. This is our vision. Say it with me. St John's is a community of contrast, gripped by the gospel of grace, sharing Christ with our city.

Thank you. Just hold it up there for a moment. These are three parts of the vision, but they're not three equal parts. At the heart of the vision is the middle one, the grace of God.

It is the radioactive core that creates and empowers the other two parts. It's by the gospel of grace that God makes us a community of contrast.

It's through the gospel of grace we share Christ with our city. And these three priorities, if you will, you find in Jesus' teaching, in the Apostle Paul's teaching, in John's teaching, and through almost every New Testament letter.

[2 : 14] Thank you. We can swish it off now. And we're going to take six weeks. We're going to take two weeks on each of the parts of this vision. And we are not preaching the vision, but we're going to look at 1 Peter, because each of these parts of the vision comes to focus in 1 Peter.

In fact, the book of 1 Peter is written around these three priorities. Let me show you what I mean. Just take the first part of the statement, a community of contrast.

And you may be asking, what on earth does that be? In contrast to what? Well, take a look at the first verse, the very first verse of Peter. He's writing to people who've never seen Jesus, who live in these places, Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, Bithynia, like Turkey, Iran, and Syria now.

And the main way that he refers to these new believers, and the main way through the letter he refers to believers, is as exiles. Foreigners.

Strangers. They're not literal exiles. They were born and bred in these places. They've grown up in these places. They're entirely at home in these places, but the grace of God has come upon them.

[3 : 28] In the gospel of Jesus Christ, it's made a drastic change. They have a new spiritual passport. They have a new home, a new identity, a new compass, a completely new moral compass.

And they're not completely in step with the old ways of living of the culture around about them. They have a new loyalty to Jesus Christ.

And those of you who've become Christians in the last while will know that when you develop a new loyalty to Christ, you are quickly under suspicion by those who don't share your loyalty to Christ.

It's like you've had a transfer of citizenship. And this word comes back in chapter 1 again and then chapter 2. And then in chapter 5, Peter refers to the church at Babylon, which is a reference to the Old Testament exile.

So, what happens when we're gripped by the gospel of grace? It brings you into a new relationship with God the Father and with the society in which you live, the city in which you live.

[4 : 32] You and I have a different world view. We're no longer held captive by the ideas that are around us. We have a different source for what's most important. We are a community of contrast.

And I think this brilliantly captures where we are now today. So, I was looking back at the statistics. And in 1946 in Canada, on any given Sunday, 67% of people attended church weekly.

In 2001, that number went down to 20%. In Vancouver in 2010, the number is 3%. So, what it means to live as an exile, it means that we're different.

It means we're relatively powerless. It means if we live out our faith and identity today, we're not going to find necessarily a supportive group of people around us.

In fact, our Christian beliefs are all contested. They're no longer self-evident. You'll find this in class. God's just not very interesting to most people today, one way or another.

[5 : 41] And Christian moral choices are all contested. And some of our moral choices are regarded by many people as immoral. And this creates all sorts of difficulty.

And it's created two kinds of grief. One is for those who are older, and I'm thinking 40 plus. For those of us who are older, we feel the loss of once was.

We struggle to see the hand of God in the process. And we feel marginalized and vexed that not more people come to church because of how brilliant Jesus is.

You'll find that in the older generation. We feel like we are ones who've traveled into exile. And I think it's good to be honest about it. But for those of you who are 30 and under, there is a different grief.

See if I've got this right. You grow up navigating and negotiating your beliefs in almost every context in a contested world. You do not experience the trauma of change like the older ones.

[6 : 50] Instead, there's the constant challenge of expressing your views from a position of weakness, from the margins. That's what it is to be a Christian today. This week, I've been reading Rebecca McLaughlin.

Not Sarah McLaughlin. She's a very good artist, but not a Christian book writer. Rebecca McLaughlin's little book called *The Secular Creed*, engaging five contemporary claims.

She said 18 months ago, she walked around her neighborhood and there were five signs, people that hammered into their lawns. They were Black Lives Matter. Love is love.

Gay rights are civil rights. Women's rights are human rights. Transgender women are women. And this book explains that as Christians, we often make things much worse for ourselves by not listening.

And the book is a lovely, grace-filled and gentle call to have a Christian compass with humility and clarity in these issues. And I've got to say, it just amazes me.

[7 : 55] I've heard stories this week. It amazes me how some of you younger ones are navigating this course, even this week, without resentment, not playing the victim card, even when you're ridiculed and treated unfairly.

And it's really important in the letter of 1 Peter that this has implications for our mission, which is the third part of our statement. Because it's not enough to be a community of contrast.

We have to be like Daniel. Remember Daniel who came to Babylon? He lived in Babylon. He did not hate Babylon. He served in Babylon, but his heart belonged somewhere else.

So every morning he opened his windows and he prayed toward the God of Jerusalem. So we don't resent what's going on in our culture. We don't have dreams of conquering Babylon.

We're not passive aggressive with those around us. But being exiles means that we share Christ from a position of weakness.

[9 : 00] And we're going to look at this in two weeks' time. And I think it means being committed to doing good and doing things that are excellent, no matter if you're misunderstood, so that whether you're treated unfairly, people will see the goodness and they'll glorify God on the day of Christ's visitation, because that's how grace works.

So the gospel of grace will be shown as we're a community of contrast and as we are a share Christ with the city. And I want to spend the rest of our time tonight on that middle thing, on what it means to be grasped, gripped by the gospel of grace.

Because the purpose of this letter is to these exiles that they would be established deeply in the grace of God. So if you look at the end of verse 2, Peter says, May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

May it flood and overflow and keep going, because God's grace is always rich and lavish and unrestrained. And if you look over at chapter 5, in verse 12, By Silvanus, he's the guy who's writing it, The faithful brother I regard him, I've written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God.

Stand firm in it. So this is the burden of the letter of 1 Peter. The true grace of God. And Peter wants us to be gripped by the gospel of grace, the spontaneous free grace of God.

[10 : 29] Philip Yancey is a Christian journalist, and a couple of years ago he wrote a book called, What's So Amazing About Grace? And he says, If you don't see grace, if you don't see God's grace as completely scandalous, you haven't begun to understand it.

You know, that sense of, God, what have you done by giving your son to die for me? Utterly free and undeserved. And people all around us crave grace.

And it's the one thing that we as a church can offer that can be found nowhere else, because it comes from God, through Christ alone. That's why these verses from 3 down to 9 are a eulogy.

They're a spontaneous act of praise, glorifying God. And the mood is one of shock, of wonder, and surprise, which is what it means to be gripped by God's grace.

Now, let me just say, this is why we say, this is why our vision is to be gripped by the gospel of grace, because you can know the doctrine of grace and not be gripped.

[11 : 42] You can be a highly moral person and not be gripped. You can even be a very religious person and not be gripped by the gospel of grace.

And I know that because I was one. I grew up in a very Christian home. My father was an Anglican minister, a missionary, a bishop.

I mean, we were so religious, we went to church on holidays. And we talked about the Bible around the evening meal and read it together. And even after I began working in youth ministry, I was not gripped by the gospel of God's grace.

It was more about my performance in doing what was expected of me. And I was trying hard to live the Christian life without the power of grace, but I just didn't believe that his grace was sufficient for me.

And it was excruciating, I can tell you, because I could never do enough. I could never be really sure that God loved me for me. And I was plagued with doubt about the reality of my Christian faith.

[12 : 53] And I know, like so many others who grew up in Christian families, I was incredibly conscious of my own sins. And I got married and I went into seminary.

And it was in second year in seminary that the penny dropped for me. The penny dropped. I don't know if you've been to the airport to pick up friends and family coming in on planes.

You know when you drive into the parking lot, you get a little green token. And then when you welcome your friends and family and you come out, you pay near the parking lot. Then you take the token, you drive out to the exit, and there's a machine there.

And you have to put the token in. And it has to drop for the arm to lift and get you out. How many people have had the experience of it not dropping? I have, many times.

And what happens is you push all the buttons and nothing happens. And then you push for the attendant. The attendant comes. And if they're in really good mood, they'll let you go. But when the token drops, everything works.

[13 : 55] Well, the coin of God's grace dropped for me in seminary. Can you believe it? I was in an Old Testament lecture. And the lecturer said these words. What's really important in Bible faith is not what we do for God, but what God does for us.

And that was it. That's all it took. And my whole Christian world was turned completely upside down. And my love for God and my performance were not as important as God's love for me and God's performance.

And although I've wobbled and gone backwards and forwards and up and down and struggled with sin, from that moment, basically, I've been gripped by the grace of God.

This is the central place of resting for my own heart. It's the free grace of God in Jesus Christ. And I know it is for many of us here. So let's have a look at this first passage quickly.

What does it look like to be gripped by grace? Paul gives us two signs. Are you with me so far? Is it too hot? We turn the temperature down a bit. Up? Okay.

[15 : 06] So there are two signs of the grip of grace. One is a living hope and the other is a loving joy. So firstly, the living hope. Let's look at verse 3 together. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, according to his great mercy, great mercy.

He's caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, unfading, kept in heaven for you.

Now this whole, the idea of being born again has been amputated from its original meaning. Being born again does not mean that you've had a dramatic conversion experience or that you vote a particular way or that you just add something to your life.

Born again is receiving a completely new life directly from God from the outside. It's starting again as a baby. It's receiving a new identity as a child of God and an exile in the world.

And it's the most profound and radical change. And it's where we come to know the greatness of God's mercy and his kindness to us. It's grace that unlocks the door into the Christian life and it's so radical it's called a new birth.

[16 : 25] And the energising power for the new birth is the living hope through the resurrection of Christ from the dead. So we're all completely shaped by our understanding of the future.

So if you're on a desert island, you believe you're going to be rescued tomorrow, everything's good. If you're on a desert island, you think you're going to die tomorrow, everything's not good. In Peter's day, there was no hope of an afterlife.

Do you know the Greek philosophers said that this life is despair and it's followed by the unending dark of night. Here's Sophocles meditating on Oedipus. He says, the best is not to be born at all.

The second best is to die at birth. Cheery, aren't they? These are the Greek philosophers. Andrew de Blanco, he wrote *The Real American Dream*.

He meditated on hope. He says, the heart of any culture, what makes it different from other cultures is its hope. And in North America, he says this, I quote, hope is the way we overcome the lurking suspicion that all our getting and spending amounts to nothing more than fidgeting while we wait for death.

[17 : 38] Devastating, isn't it? I think he's probably right. And the cultural narrative right now says you've got to hope in yourself. But the living hope is not putting hope in ourselves.

It's not being positive and sunny and optimistic. It's a completely new hope from the outside. And our hope is in an inheritance that will never spoil. And even though our social status as Christians may be more fragile than it was maybe 30 years ago, our inheritance in Christ cannot be changed.

It's imperishable. It's undefiled. It's unfading. It's immortal. It's pure. It's full of beauty. It's death-proof. It's sin and evil-proof.

It's time-proof. And in verse 5, he says that you and I are guarded by God's power through faith for that salvation that's ready to be revealed.

And I've got to say, it doesn't always feel like it. But faith doesn't put faith in my grip on God, but it puts faith in God's grip on us.

[18 : 45] Because I know on my own, I don't have it in me to make it to the end. And the fact that some of us have lasted this long is a complete miracle. You should do a study sometimes and look at the power of God in the New Testament.

The power of God is almost always attached to people persevering, Christians persevering through the long haul. But being gripped by the gospel of God's grace is a great rescue for us.

It means we don't have to be hyper-spiritual and have all of heaven now. And it doesn't mean we have to be spiritual depressives and pretending we have nothing now. Here it is.

This is from a guy called Jürgen Moltmann. He says, The living hope, it's not a conviction or a feeling. It invades our lives so deeply. As the Holy Spirit makes the reality of the resurrection personal, eternity reaches into time and new life begins.

There's the living hope. And secondly, and even more briefly, the loving joy. Pick up the joy here in verse 6. In this, all this, you rejoice.

[19 : 52] Though now for a little while, if necessary, you're grieved by various trials. It's wonderful, really. The Bible is never trite or fatalistic or unrealistic about suffering.

But for the Christians, suffering is never accidental. It's never just bad luck. It's never blind fate. God always has a purpose in it. Although we don't know the purpose always with our suffering, one thing we do know is that God, to God, our faith is worth more than all the money in the world.

And as we go through various trials, we show the true value of our faith, sometimes to ourselves, by how we trust God as he burns away everything that's fake and everything that's superficial.

That's why the last word in verses 8 and 9 is love. And I think these are some of the most beautiful words in the whole Bible. Just remember, this is Peter who walked with Jesus for three years.

And even after seeing every miracle of Jesus, he didn't believe in a lot of them. And he's writing to Christians like you and me who have never seen Jesus. But they've come to trust him through hearing the gospel.

[21 : 07] They're in the same relation as we are to him. Verse 8. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.

Obtaining now, getting now, the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. Here is the taste of heaven before heaven.

When we place our trust in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit spreads his love in our hearts. And as you come to see how this life is not about how good you are or how bad you are or about how much potential you have, but about his love for me, everything changes.

He loves me when I am unlovely. In Christ, he binds himself to me forever, without obligation. He was not obligated to do this.

It was not his duty to do it. He's given us what we don't deserve, life and forgiveness and hope. And his promise is simply that he will draw us and bring us into his presence where we'll see him face to face forevermore.

[22 : 22] Where death will be no more and evil will be no more and weeping will be no more. And you can see how deeply personal God's grace is because of the language of love.

Such a wild and crazy faith we have that God would send his son to die. And the joy that we receive from that is literally inexpressible. It's not like any other human experience.

It's touched with the glory of heaven, the glory of Christ even now. Many of you will know the story, the short story that Karen Blixen wrote called Babette's Feast.

It's been made into a movie in the late 80s in Denmark. It's the story of a very religious fishing village where all the very religious people avoid all pleasure for religious reasons.

And there's two sisters who live in the village who take Babette in who is a refugee from Paris. And although they can't pay her, she becomes their housekeeper for free.

[23 : 25] And she serves them for 14 years without payment. But they only allow her to make food that's boring and tasteless and bland in case there's too much pleasure in it.

And after years, Babette wins the lottery. And she spends the entire thing on delicious food, bringing in food that she can make for a delicious meal.

And in an act of incredible self-sacrifice, she makes this astonishing feast for the entire village and more, which they only agree to eat on condition they don't enjoy it too much.

But the gift of the feast breaks down the silliness and the bitterness in the village. And one of the guests recognises Babette as a world-famous chef from Paris.

And I think it's a brilliant picture of God's grace. How God delights in us at the cost of his own life. We're hungry for grace. And the gospel says to us, there's nothing I can do that can make God love me more.

[24 : 30] There's nothing I can do that can make God love me less. And even though I may deserve the opposite, I'm invited to his table. And I have a place there.

And later in the service, as we celebrate the Lord's Supper together, why don't you come and say, thank you for that grace, Father. I take my place at your table.

Let's kneel for prayer.