

The God Of Grace

Let's face it folks: 2020 was a lousy year. Between the virus and our economic woes and political tribalism and mob rioting, things seem to be going rapidly downhill. Just about every older person i talk to says the same thing: "I'm not worried about the future for my own sake, but I sure feel sorry for my children and grandchildren." A little over a hundred years ago, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats looked into the future with the same sense of foreboding and described it this way: "mere anarchy will be loosed upon the world; the blood-dimmed tide will be loosed and everywhere the ceremony of innocence will be drowned. The best will lack all conviction, while the worst will be full of passionate intensity" And Yeats' prophetic words were fulfilled. During the following century, two world wars brought millions of deaths. Meanwhile, intentionally atheistic governments in Germany, Russia, China and Southeast Asia were directly responsible for the deaths of over one hundred million of their own people. And now we live under the threat of terrorists who blow up buildings, gut cities and even use biological warfare to pursue their agenda. Man has an almost limitless capacity to visit horrors upon himself. Still, we go merrily along our way, trying to make silk purses out of sows' ears and dreaming of building utopia. But if history is any measure of the future, the future is bleak indeed. When father Adam made the fatal decision to rebel against god he convicted us all of sin, and the wages of sin is death. Our only hope is with God, for God alone has set us free from sin if we will only take him at his word. The Psalmist wrote: "*when we were overwhelmed by sins, you forgave our transgressions. Blessed are those you choose and bring near to live in your courts. We are filled with the good things of your house, of your Holy temple.*" (ps. 65:3-4). God chooses us, he forgives our sins, he draws close to us and fills us with good things. He does it all because he loves us—not because we're loveable, but because he is a God of love—a God of grace. Other religions don't worship a god of grace: they worship a bully-god who sells favors to those who can pay his price. Buddha teaches that if you spend enough time meditating on him, he will give you wisdom. The pantheon of Hindu gods teach that if you live a virtuous life you will be reincarnated at a higher level in the great chain of being and if you don't, you will be reincarnated as something lower—maybe a bug or a snake. Nature gods teach that if you offer sacrifices to them they will make the forces of nature conform to your will. Nature gods are what led Canaanites, Mayans and Aztecs to practice human sacrifice in order to secure their blessings. These are all *quid pro quo* gods, pagan gods who promise to give us what we want **if** we give them what they want. Men created them out of their imaginations because they figured that if you get what you pay for in this world, it must work the same way with the gods. But the God of grace doesn't do things that way. He gives us blessings without asking for anything in return.

Instead of waiting for us to do good deeds so that He can reward us, He changes us into people who want to do good deeds. Instead of waiting for us to repent of our sins, He forgave all of our sins on the cross. Instead of requiring sacrifices **from** us; He offered himself as a sacrifice **for** us. The God of the Bible, the Creator and Lord of heaven and earth doesn't wait for us to ask for things: He gives us things that we need—even when we don't know that we need them. So when father Adam sentenced us all to sin and death, God didn't abandon us; He put into motion a plan to save us from the consequences of Adam's sin. His plan was to take the responsibility for all our sins onto Himself and pay for them with his life. So Jesus Christ—Immanuel, God-with-us—entered this world where He suffered and died to pay the penalty for all of our sins. If God had waited for us to ask, He would still be waiting because when we are dead in our sins we don't have enough sense to ask for anything except our next meal. Our eyes are blinded and our hearts are hardened and we don't even realize that we have a problem, let alone that there is a solution to it. We began worshipping created things rather than the creator of all things. And so God acted without being asked. As Paul writes in his *Letter To The Romans*: "...while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (*Romans 5:8*) In the words of the Psalmist: "when we were overwhelmed by sins, you forgave our transgressions." (*Psalm 65:4*) God did it because He is a God of grace. So when the Holy Spirit swept into an upper room in Jerusalem where the apostles were cowering in fear and carried them out into the streets of Jerusalem and from there to the ends of the earth to preach the Gospel of salvation—it wasn't in response to a distress signal from mankind. There was no distress signal; we were happily sleeping the sleep of the dead. But the Holy Spirit came to wake us up because God, "...takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but would have all men turn from their sinful ways and live." It was just God being God—acting without being asked. And what happened in Jerusalem happens in the life of every believer, because God loves each one of us as if there were only one of us to love. He called each one of us by name before we were conceived. He created each one of us, knit us together in our mother's womb and delivered us into the arms of parents he created to take care of us. We didn't ask him to; He just did it. Before we were born He set us free from all our sins. We didn't ask Him to: we weren't even there when He did it. Then He arranged for us to be born again of water and the spirit. We didn't ask for that either, any more than we asked to be born the first time. He just did it. He sent his Holy Spirit into our hearts to show us our sins, bless us with faith in Jesus Christ, and welcome us into eternal life. He didn't do this in response to our invitation any more than the wind blows one way or the other because we invited it to. He did it because He wanted to and He wanted to because He is a God of grace. As the Psalmist says, we didn't choose Him, He chose us and brought us into His courts so that He might fill us with good things that He has in store for us. But even though our God is a God of grace, we have a tendency to treat Him like a pagan god, a god we can do business with.

“I’ll do this for you, God, if you’ll only do that for me.” “Give me that promotion and I promise to go to church every Sunday for the next three months.” Or we pick the layaway plan: “I’ll go to church every Sunday for the next three months if you’ll give me that promotion.” Can you believe it? At one point in my business career I prayed every morning as I was driving to work that they’d give me a bigger office. The fact is, we’re more comfortable with a pagan god we can trade with than we are with a God of grace because down deep we’re bargain-hunters who are looking to get a little more out of God than we’re currently getting. But God doesn’t barter! He doesn’t need for us to give Him anything because there’s nothing we can give Him that He doesn’t already own. We don’t add anything to God by offering him our money or our possessions. We don’t add anything to God by worshipping Him because we don’t serve Him in worship—He serves us. All we have to offer God is our sins, and that is exactly what He wants us to give Him. “When I kept silent about my sins my body wasted away with groaning all day long and my strength was sapped as in the fever heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sins. I said: I will confess my transgressions to the lord and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.” God has already given us the greatest gift we could ever receive: the forgiveness of our sins. Still, there’s something in us that would rather pay for our sins than receive forgiveness as a gift. That “something” is called *pride*. We like the thought of earning our own keep and paying our own way. Unconditional love doesn’t really make sense to us because we all know that there’s no free lunch, that you only get what you pay for. We like to think that we can make it on our own. We even dream that if we all get together and work hard enough and long enough we can build utopia—a heaven on earth where peace will reign and we can all hold hands and sing “kumbayah.” But that’s all *σκυβαλον!* There were a bunch of men who tried to do that once: it was called the Tower of Babel and it didn’t turn out according to their plan. Instead of uniting them in a common purpose that lifted them up to heaven, it collapsed on them and divided them into factions which became tribes and nations that make war upon each other to this very day. Our problem is sin and we’re all part of the problem. The only solution to the problem is grace—to receive freely and to give freely with no thought of recompense. And God sends his grace into the world every single day. He blesses us with His gifts whether we ignore them or not. He isn’t selling his grace: He’s only giving it away. It’s not for sale, and we couldn’t pay for it if it were because all we have to offer God is our sin. But thanks be to God, he wants to take our sins because He is a God of grace. The last words of Martin Luther before he died were: “we are all beggars, that’s for sure.” And beggars can’t pay for anything. All they can do is say thanks— and share the gift. Amen.