

The God of all Grace

1 Peter 5:6-11

John Breon

At the beginning of this chapter, Peter has instructions for both the older and younger people in the churches, those with greater responsibility and those with less. Then he says, "*All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another*" (5). He's not saying humiliate yourself or let yourself be humiliated, but humble yourself. And, to support this, he quotes Proverbs 3:34, "God opposes the proud but gives *grace* to the humble." He closes this section promising that the *God of all grace* who calls us will strengthen us.

The God of all grace. Every favor, blessing, good gift, show of generosity and any other experience of grace comes from God. Where we find grace, God is there. Wherever God is, there's grace. Grace shows up in all kinds of places and shines through all kinds of people.

Fred Craddock tells about doing a seminar in a distant city. His flight home didn't leave until Sunday afternoon, so on Sunday morning he found a church that he could walk to from his motel.

It was a small building, modestly built, one that looked like the men of the church helped build it, because they seem to love it so much. A little while after he arrived, the sanctuary was full. There were about 120 people. When it was time for the service to start, the choir came in, followed by the pastor.

Fred was shocked at the pastor's appearance. He was very tall and very large. He walked with a stumbling, lumbering gait. He was awkward, almost falling, and his long useless arms hung at his sides. His head was misshapen and his hair was wild. He stumbled up the three or four steps to get to the pulpit. When he turned to face the congregation, Fred could see that he wore thick glasses and had a milky film over his eyes. When he read, he held the book near his nose. He seemed to struggle to get words out as he spoke. But Fred quit noticing all that after a while. The pastor read 1 Corinthians 13 and preached on "But the greatest of these is love." Fred was a preaching professor and if he'd had a printed copy of the sermon he

would have given it a "C." But it was a pastoral sermon, warm and full of love and affection. It was firm and had exhortation in it. But the relationship between those people, the love that he extended as he preached, and the love that came back from the people was captivating. Fred thought, "Who is this? How could this man be so full of love?"

Fred wanted to get acquainted with this extraordinary preacher, so he lingered at the door hoping to invite him to lunch. He couldn't go, but Fred stood at the door and watched the greetings and hellos and little words of pastoral care, comfort, and respect between him and the members. One woman shook the pastor's hand and said, "I wish I could know your mother." Fred thought she was having the same trouble he was. She didn't understand the source of this and thought maybe, "I wish I knew your mother." The pastor said, "My mother's name is Grace."

After everybody left, Fred and the pastor visited for a few minutes. Fred said, "That was an unusual response you gave that woman, 'My mother's name is Grace.'"

He said, "It is? When I was born, I was put up for adoption at the Department of Family Services. But as you can see, nobody wanted to adopt me. So I went from foster home to foster home, and when I was about sixteen or seventeen, I saw some young people go into a church. I wanted to be with young people, so I went in, and there I met grace—the grace of God" (*Craddock Stories* 49-50).

"Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time." Grace comes to the humble. We receive grace, not when we're full of ourselves, but when we are empty. We receive grace, not when we stand confident in our own ability, but when we stoop down. And the God of all grace lifts us up. God lifts us up again and again so we are full and we can stand with confidence in God's grace. And someday, God will lift us up into eternal glory when Jesus returns.

Humble yourselves by casting all your anxiety on God because God cares for you. See, it's not humiliation. It's admitting our need and trusting that God knows us and cares about us. We can give God our cares and anxieties. And not just hand them over, but cast them, throw them. Can you picture your anxieties and cares? Now, can you see yourself throwing them

on God? Jesus took our sins in his body on the cross. Now God is willing to take our worries and cares upon himself. Throwing our cares on God is like what Peter said earlier about entrusting ourselves to our faithful Creator (4:19). Because God cares for us. We matter to God. The people and things we care about matter to God. Will we be humble enough to believe God cares for us, to give him our cares and receive his grace?

We humble ourselves as we cast our cares on God. *We also need to be alert and clearheaded because there is an enemy on the prowl who wants to devour us.* This enemy is the devil or Satan. Early in the Old Testament, *the satan* was an accuser, almost a prosecuting attorney in God's heavenly court. By the latter part of the OT, and especially the time between the Old and New Testaments, Satan had become a name for this one who accuses God's people. The devil is an accuser, slanderer, adversary and enemy who resists God and wants to destroy God's people. Peter's reference to the enemy here puts the persecution and other suffering of his readers in a different perspective. They are not just facing human rejection and oppression. There's a spiritual power behind it.

We deal with this enemy by being alert, thinking clearly, resisting the devil and standing firm in faith (both the faith of the church and our personal trust in God). We are not alone in this struggle, but we're part of a brotherhood, a family of believers all over the world who suffer for doing God's will. Living as God's people in this world requires that we be awake and alert.

The summer after my freshman year of college, I served as a children's and youth director for some churches in southeast Kansas. There were nine small churches in a cooperative parish. One weekend, we did a youth retreat at one of the churches. On Saturday night, we stayed up very late. We had worship on Sunday morning, then a big lunch. Later that afternoon, I was to preach at a nursing home service in one of the other towns. I was driving my little 1976 Ford Maverick from one town to the other. I started getting sleepy. I remember thinking I ought to stop for a little bit. The next thing I knew I woke up as the car was bouncing off the road, scraping a light pole and knocking down a little tree. My immediate reaction was "Aaaaaaaa!" I finally got the car stopped in an open area. Since

then, especially if I'm driving some distance, I pray to stay awake and alert. Spiritually awake and alert is how we need to be all the time.

There's an interesting account of some Christian martyrs in the late Second Century. A woman named Biblis had denied the faith. The devil supposed that he had already devoured her. But the enemy also wanted her slander to help condemn more Christians, so he brought her to punishment to compel her to speak against the Christians and their faith. "She however, regained her senses under the torture and awoke, so to speak, out of a deep sleep, when the passing retribution recalled to her mind the *eternal punishment* in hell; and she directly contradicted the slanderers." She became awake and alert. Then she confessed that she was a Christian and "joined the inheritance of the martyrs" ("The Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne," in *A New Eusebius*, ed., J. Stevenson, p. 34).

Suffering and struggle are part of life in this fallen and broken world. There's mystery about why and how we fell and suffering entered in. But God is redeeming the world. The God of all grace keeps giving grace to renew and transform us and, ultimately, all of creation. In the meantime, God can use the struggles to refine our faith, shape our character and help us be more like Jesus.

I read once about the codfish business in the northeastern United States. There's a market for eastern cod all over, especially in sections farthest away from the northeast. But the public demand posed a problem for the shippers. At first they froze the cod, then shipped them out, but the freeze took away much of the flavor. So they experimented with shipping them alive, in tanks of seawater, but that proved even worse. Not only was it more expensive, but the cod still lost its flavor and also became soft and mushy.

Finally, some creative person solved the problem in a most innovative way. The codfish were placed in the tank of water along with their natural enemy—the catfish. From the time the cod left the East Coast until it arrived at its western destination, the catfish chased the cod all over the tank. And when the cod arrived at the market, they were as fresh as when they were caught. There was no loss of flavor and the texture was not affected. It may have been better than before.

Each of us is in a tank of particular and inescapable circumstances. It can be painful to stay in the tank. In addition, there are “catfish” in here with us. Some would say that God sends the catfish—and maybe he does provide some of them. But I’m more comfortable saying that the catfish are just part of life here. Either way, they bring tension that keeps us alive, alert, fresh and growing. God uses them to shape our character so we will be more like Jesus. The catfish in your tank can be part of God’s working to produce character in your life (*Illustrations Unlimited* 14).

The struggle and suffering are temporary. That’s not always a big comfort. Some years ago, a friend of mine was going through a very difficult time. I wrote to him and quoted 1 Peter 5:10 about God’s restoring us after we suffer “for a little while.” He wrote back and said that the “little while” was dragging on and on. It can feel that way, can’t it? Like it will never end. But the suffering and struggle really are temporary. God’s purpose and character are eternal. God can help us see our suffering in light of his eternal glory. We can have something of God’s perspective on our struggles. And that helps us endure.

As we live in this world of struggle and pain, we hear this promise: “And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself [God cares about us and gets personally involved with us] restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.”