

The Grace That Has Come

1 Peter 1:10-12

2/7/16

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You've heard the phrase "message in a bottle." The whole idea is that someone puts an important message in a bottle and sets it to sea in hopes that someone will find it and read it. But rarely do you hear the end of that story. So this morning I wanted to share with you—I'm just going to warn you, this is a potentially syrupy, sappy story. But I share that with you not because I want it to be sappy or syrupy, whatever that is, so work with me, if you will. So this isn't a message in a bottle. This is a little bit different. This is message by a lantern.

A man, an author, by the name of Matt Mikalatos. He was going out to the end of his driveway one morning to pick up the paper, and he noticed a large piece of paper over, stuffed to the side of his driveway. He thought for sure it was from one of his neighbor's trashcans. He wasn't sure if he wanted to pick it up. And so as he turns to walk back towards the house, he looks back over his shoulder again and decides, "Okay, fine, I'll go pick it up." So he goes over and he picks up this piece of paper. He unfolds it, and he finds that it's a piece of wax paper that was a part of a lantern that is set to fly and attached by strings to a little piece of flame that allows it to lift by way of science and gravity and however that works. But on this little piece of wax paper is written a message from a young girl to her father, who is no longer alive.

So Matt took this piece of paper, and he took it back into his house, and he couldn't stop thinking about it. He was a writer, so he couldn't help but think about it. He has three young daughters, and so this was clearly from a daughter to her father. And so he sat with his mind and imagination, and he wrote a letter to this young woman. He had no idea who she was. And he posted it on his website. That was then picked up and then posted on Facebook—and, well, you know what happens from there. It went viral. Really viral. Until it would finally reach the eyes of the young woman who had set it in the air somewhere in the southwest, and he lived in the northwest. I won't read to you the whole letter—because you would need a box of tissues, each one of you—but this is how he concludes the letter. He says—her name is Steph:

And, Steph, one more thing. The fact that you love your dad so much is a sure sign of how much he loved you. He's not here now, but accept the love that comes from the people around you. Let them be his sky lantern back to you. Let them share their love, and let that be a reminder of his. No one will ever love you quite the way your father did, but many people will see in you some of the same qualities and beautiful bits that he did.

Love is as strong as death. As inevitable, as powerful, as eternal. It can't be escaped. It can't be avoided. It won't be forgotten. And when death is gone, love will remain.

Sincerely,

Matt

They eventually got to meet. She talked about how that letter, in many ways, spoke to her in a moment that she really needed to hear it but couldn't have imagined how much she needed to hear it. It is a beautiful story. And perhaps I'll post it on the City, and you can see it with your box of tissues. But I kept thinking about that in light of this morning's passage in 1 Peter.

I was thinking about this letter, because it is a marvelous and incredible thing that this young woman could set this lantern into the sky and it land on some guy's driveway who happened to be a writer, very eloquent, and he wrote her back, and it reaches her by way of social media. Incredible thing. You know what would be even more incredible? Is if he wrote that letter to her before she ever even thought about putting that lantern in the sky. Now, of course the answer is, "Why that would be impossible. How can that be?" It would blow our minds. We would say, "Surely, something is up." Because that would really be incredible.

But do you know what's really incredible? That's exactly what we have this morning. From the pen of Peter, we hear of a letter—a message—that has come to you this morning, to you, by way of writers a long time ago that were not merely writing for themselves but for you a message of the Father's grace to you. It is the grace that has come, and it is incredible. Hear now God's Word: 1 Peter 1:10-12.

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Now, Heavenly Father, by the promise of your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, would you send forth your Spirit to move in and through your Word and in the hearts of people—and even, I pray, in the hearts of those who perhaps do not know you, have not known you, and cannot imagine what it would be to know you, but are yet here this morning. And will you work through your Spirit through me, a broken vessel, for your use, to magnify the glories of Christ and the beauty of the grace that has come. Help us, we pray, and help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

You'll see in your outline two rather simple points about this grace that has come. First, we need to look at the grace, and then secondly, longing to look—for there are marvelous things this morning for us to consider. I say marvelous because I have the microphone, and I think they're marvelous. And I have to prove it to you that they are—or perhaps the Spirit of God will reveal that to you. And that is, this grace. When he says, "Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you," he's using salvation and grace synonymously. They are pointing at each other. You can't talk about salvation through the blood and body of Christ on Good Friday and his resurrection on Easter Sunday Morning—you can't talk about salvation without talking about grace. You can't talk about grace without talking about salvation. And so for Peter, they are synonymous.

And so he says this grace "that was to come to you." What is interesting, he says these writers, the prophets, "searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which"—and here we learn the Spirit of Christ was also operating in them in the Old Testament. Perhaps you were raised or have been a part of a church that believes the Holy Spirit is only operative in the New Testament. Indeed, he was not. The Holy Spirit was involved all the way back in Genesis at the creation, and here he was guiding the prophets. And it was guiding them to search intently for how and the time and circumstances to which this grace would come to the people of God. And they were pointing to the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.

This grace that they were pointing to, first and foremost, we must describe as outrageous—as you see it in your outline. Why is it outrageous? It is outrageous because, first and foremost, it is free. It is free. This needs to be repeated and exalted every single day in the corridors of our lives and in the corridors of every church and every worship service. The grace of God is free. Why do we need to repeat this, and why

do we need to continue to renew ourselves in the reality of the freedom of this grace? It is because we are addicted to paying for things.

None of us like being, necessarily, recipients of something we didn't ask for, didn't know we need it. And when we get it, we're like, "Why did I need this, and what did I do to deserve this?" It's almost a subconscious reaction. Because even in our own culture, we still, whether we like the song or not—"Santa Claus is Coming to Town." Making a list and checking it twice, gonna find out who's naughty or nice. Now, as adults we don't sing that very much, unless we have little children who want to sing it. But we don't like singing it very much, because at the heart of it, it's anything but a really good message. Nothing about that song is free. So if you ever think about singing that to your children, please rescue them from that. Don't do that.

Because at the heart of the Christmas idea of God giving his Son to the world is a song that's somehow supposed to train us that that's somehow good news? I don't know about what list other people keep for you, but what about the list you keep for yourself in terms of your performance? Do you fail to meet your own expectations? I do. Do you scan back on your week or even on the morning and you begin to think about the words that you used that were either crassly stated, was short-tempered—oh, you can blame it on your hunger, you can blame it on your mood, you can blame it on whatever, but you know that you responded harshly and without provocation because of something inside you. And you begin to walk away from that conversation going, "Now, why did I respond that way?" And when we think back on moments like that, it's hard for us to think about that.

Why? Because we are addicted to lists, and lists about performance. And we put ourselves on a performance treadmill so often. And so when it comes to grace and when it comes to God, we cannot escape the temptation to put ourselves back on the performance treadmill when it comes to relating to God. Is his grace really free? As one writer said this about our addiction—he says:

There is not a man, woman, or child of us who has ever been immune to the temptation to think that the relationship between God and humanity can be repaired from our side by our efforts, whether those efforts involved creedal correctness, cultic performances, or ethical achievements. And whether they amount to little more than crassly superstitious behavior, we are all at the same, deep level committed to them. If we are not convinced that God can be conned into being favorable to us by a dent of our doctrinal orthodoxy or chicken sacrifices or gritting of our moral teeth, we still have a hard time shaking the belief that stepping over the sidewalk cracks or hanging up the bath towel so that the label won't show will somehow render the ruler of the universe kind-hearted, soft-headed, or both.

In our own ways, we love to hear about the freedom of grace and the beauty of forgiveness. But how easily our hearts creep right back into performance. We believe we need to do for God so that he will keep his end of the bargain. One other writer says this:

When the Lord comes, He will come to the world's sins with no lists to check, no tests to grade, no debts to collect, no scores to settle. He will wipe away the handwriting that was against us and nail it to his cross (Colossians 2:14). He will save, not some minuscule coterie of good little boys and girls with religious money in their piggy banks, but all the stone-broke, deadbeat, overextended children of this world whom He, as the son of man—the Holy Child of God, the ultimate Big Kid, if you please—will set free in the liberation of His death.

The beauty of God's outrageous grace is that it is absolutely free, and it comes to all of us who are broken, who are indebted and overextended, and who are finally ready to realize, it's not about what our hands

have done. It is about the work, the free grace, of Christ. So, friends, God's outrageous grace is that it's free to you, and it cost him everything.

Secondly, it isn't just free, it is antecedent. It's what it says here when it says, "the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you." What was that grace? We heard it this morning already in Isaiah 53 at the beginning of our service. The prophet Isaiah was pointing the free grace of Christ on the cross when he predicted, "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed." By antecedent, I mean, his grace precedes you this morning. It preceded your birth. It preceded your thought about God or Christ. It preceded you before you even knew what one plus one equals two meant. It is antecedent. God has always been at work, before you and before me, to seek you out and to demonstrate how his grace can heal your wounds, your scars, your sin.

This is a little bit of what we get from Jesus when Jesus gives the parable of the lost sheep. When he says in Matthew 18:

What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish. [Matthew 18:12-14]

We are lost sheep, and lost sheep are as good as dead. And yet the Shepherd of the sheep, our Heavenly Father, sent forth the Good Shepherd to seek you and me out before we ever thought we needed to be sought out. His grace is antecedent. It is outrageously free. It comes to us this morning to rescue us from our performance, from thinking that our faith is kept up by our performance, that his grace is operative so long as we keep up our end of the bargain. Thanks be to God, we can exalt in saying the opposite is true.

For we were lost in our transgressions and sins, and Christ had our sins nailed upon the tree and laid in the grave, and on the third day he rose again, resurrected and victorious. Your sins are covered by the blood and resurrection of Christ. This is the outrageous grace to which the prophets looked intently to tell us about—that the Spirit of God, now speaking through me to you—and I don't know where it is you are in relationship to this grace. But I know that in the name of Christ, I can declare to you through the work of the Holy Spirit, are you ready to receive the free grace? Are you ready to be renewed in that free grace this morning? Because he offers it to you.

But more than that, not only does he offer us this outrageous grace, he also tells us of something magnificent—that is, how the angels respond to such things. And how the angels respond, he says, "It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves." That means serving themselves alone. Of course they were speaking to their generation. They were obeying the Lord's calling on their lives as Isaiah and Jeremiah as we walk through the prophets ourselves over the last number of months. They were serving their generation, serving the Lord, but they were also, by God's Spirit, serving you. It says, "When they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things."

It's really interesting when it talks about what's taking place in the heavens. A couple of things that we need to note here. First, that, indeed, it tells us that the angels—who we learned from the New Testament get to gaze at the face of the Father. They worship the Lord. We heard that this morning. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty." So not only are the angels worshipping God in all of his glory—this passage tells us that they have a response to the gospel. And that is this phrase, "Even the angels long to look." This word "longing."

Now, it's this image—and it's perfectly okay, because we're not worshipping the image—but as I've studied this passage and read it a number of times over the years, one image has always come to me. And that is this idea that the angels, with faces, are peering just over the edge of heaven and looking down and seeing. What exactly are they longing to see and enjoying to watch? Because this idea of longing has in this word that we translate as longing—it's not a great word. It means that they are strenuously, with all of their might, looking into such things. So imagine that.

What has captured the gaze of the angels? The glories of the Triune God, but also the glory of grace. And so when they are strenuously wanting to see, what are they wanting to see? It is this. It is the thing that Peter has just talked about—that the one thing that the angels enjoy looking at is watching how the drama of the gospel is unfolding. You see, they're not bound by time like you and me. And so what are they seeing when they look over intently, strenuously looking? What they're seeing is they're seeing the fourfold gospel: the beauty of God's creation, the tragedy and curse of sin and brokenness, the work of Christ's redemption, and the restoration of all things, waiting for the glory of Christ to be revealed at the second coming. What are they looking so strenuously at? The drama of redemption. So they love looking at the face of God, but also what the face of God has done in the world through the work of redemption. Creation, fall, redemption, restoration. The drama of God's grace as it works out.

But here's the rub. If they're longing to look strenuously at the drama of the gospel of grace, there is also built in, inherent within this passage, something of an incredible contrast between you and me and the angels. And it's staring at us in the face. When it says that the angels long to look into these things, it's coming in the context of something else. And here's the contrast—the angels are looking, but they're looking at what we're doing. And what we're doing this morning is receiving.

You see, the angels don't receive the gospel. They can only see its work. We get to see its work and receive the grace. Do you see that? You see, we often think that angels—and oftentimes, when they are—when they appear in the Scriptures, people are tempted to worship. But the angels say, "No, don't worship me." Because the angels are often concerned with the face of God and how the face of God is bringing forth the work of redemption through Christ. So all they can do is watch what we get to receive. So we are a little higher than the angels, because we get to receive directly the gifts of the face of God in Christ, the work of grace—of the cross and of the resurrection.

And if the angels long to look at the face of God and long to look at the drama of redemption, then what implications does that have for you and for me as it relates to this old, old story of the King of glory on the hill of Calvary? Has it become so second-nature that it no longer amazes? If the gospel of grace no longer amazes us, it is because we have forgotten just how broken by sin we are, and just how outrageously free grace is. If we are forgetting to rejoice in how we have received something that even the angels cannot receive, then we have forgotten just how glorious is the gift of the gospel. But we have an opportunity this morning to be renewed in it. C.S. Lewis knew this as he spoke of the idea of glory as it is spoken of here in this passage—the glories that were to come. When he spoke about glory, he says:

[Glory is this] sense that in this universe we are treated as strangers, the longing to be acknowledged, to meet with some response, to bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality, is part of our inconsolable secret. And surely, from this point of view, the promise of glory, in the sense described, becomes highly relevant to our deep desire. For glory meant good report with God, acceptance by God, response, acknowledgment, and welcome into the heart of things. The door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last.

And the grace that has come is God opening the door that we didn't even recognize we were wanting to knock at. But every time we've longed to be loved, longed to be acknowledged, felt the brokenness, tired

of failing at our own expectations and the expectations of others, wanting to have a good report—all of that is a straining and sensing that we want the Lord but didn't have the words to put to it.

But the beauty of the grace that has come is a reminder to us, indeed, this grace has come, and it is outrageously free. It is before we knew it existed, before we knew we needed it. And when we did, we learn that we become recipients of it. And even the angels are straining to look at it this morning. And that is the grace that has come. Have you received it? Do you want to know it? Do you need renewal in it? I know I do, and I want to rejoice in the Spirit of God through the glorious power of his Word. This is the grace of Jesus Christ. Eat of it. Drink of it. All of you. Let's pray.

Now, Heavenly Father, give us hearts, by your Spirit, that rejoice and relish in this grace that has come. Father, we thank you for the beauty of the gospel that you have given us as a gift for us to receive, and the angels long to look at it. So, Lord, we pray that as we prepare our hearts to celebrate the supper of this bread and this juice, that by your Spirit we, too, would be renewed in the amazingly, outrageously, free, antecedent, amazing gospel. Help us, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.