

Feb. 17, 2019

St. John's College

Sola Gratia

...when we were dead...

## WELCOME

Good evening. Welcome to tonight's service. My name is Yuri Hooker. This is the third in a series of worship services that seek to explore what are known as the five Solas--catalytic principles that propelled the Protestant Reformation and transformed the world--using historic modes of expression: art music, hymns, and preaching that seeks to explain the concepts by examining specific Bible passages in detail.

Our first service, in October, focused on Sola Scriptura, Scripture Alone, and we looked at how the Bible is God's trustworthy revelation

to us, and is thus absolutely essential to acquiring a clear view of reality.

In December, we celebrated the season of Advent with an emphasis on Sola Fide, or Faith Alone, in which we learned that we can only be saved by putting our trusting in the God who not only gave us his Word, but came to us himself, taking on human flesh, living and suffering alongside us and ultimately dying for us.

Tonight we examine Sola Gratia, or Grace Alone. And we are going to do things a little bit differently. Instead of starting with music, we are going to get right to it and head straight to our text for the evening. It's printed in your program. Will you please stand, and read aloud with me from the book of Ephesians, chapter two, verses 1-10:

**Read Eph 2:1-10 together**

**Pray**

You can be seated.

Before we go any further, I'll start with a heads up. This evening is likely going to be the most challenging of our vespers services. You may find it taxing to your concentration. As a reminder, our website: [solasvespers.org](http://solasvespers.org) will have the sermon posted this week if you want to go back and refer to it.

That said, this service contains many elements that are most precious and literally life-giving to me, some of which I have waited years to share. And if you stay with us to the end, you will at least hear what I believe to be a message of hope, the only plausible message

of hope, through the grace that is found only in Christ.

You'd think that Sola Gratia, or Grace Alone, would be the easy one, the gimme. Who doesn't want to hear about grace? Offer up some comforting pleasantries...play some soothing music...and you're done.

"Grace" conjures up images of softness, of politeness, or elegance. But this kind of benign "niceness" simply isn't what grace, at least grace in the biblical sense, grace in the Sola Gratia sense, means. Nor, contrary to popular misconception, is grace merely an aid to a good self-image, a license to love ourselves because God thinks we're perfect just the way we are.

No, "grace", at least in the biblical sense, is a specifically Christian use of the Greek word

*charis* which means *kindness*, or *favour*, of a sort that is not *deserved*--that is, we can't do anything to make ourselves worthy of it--nor is it *obligated*--that is, it is kindness which is never owed to us. It is the idea of God spontaneously inclining himself toward us, extending his goodness in our direction. He does this for all of us in all sorts of ways, which all of us take for granted--in theological terms we call this *common grace*. *Common grace* is the divine, universally bestowed kindness which makes life possible and bearable. But even this, though it is one of the biblical senses of the word, is not what is meant by *Sola Gratia*.

When we say, *grace alone*, it is shorthand for *by grace alone we have been saved*. This implies that we are saved *from* something. But not only that, we have also been saved *to* something. We have been taken *from* a

precarious situation *to* one of safety, *from* darkness *to* light, *from* drifting with the current, wherever it might lead, *to* swimming upstream, *from* death *to* life.

Thus, grace--God's "unmerited favour"--has both a negative aspect (saved *from*) and a positive aspect (saved *to*). In the negative sense, it is clemency. It is pardon. It assumes wrongdoing in the first place. Our wrongdoing. My wrongdoing. In the positive sense, it is a renewed sense of identity, a sense of being united with God and adopting his perspective--his purposes and priorities--in a way that precludes us remaining what we thought we were.

So grace--*Sola Gratia* grace--raises all kinds of uncomfortable and personal questions that tend to bother us far more than questions of the Bible's authority, or even of notional trust

in an all-powerful deity. *Sola Gratia* insists that there is something *wrong* with you, that there is something wrong with me, something that even merits punishment.

Thus, grace in fact *offends*.

First, it offends my self-image. “I’m a decent person”, I say, “I’ve never murdered anyone--I’ve never so much as *hurt* anyone. What do you mean I’m not good enough for God? What does he want from me? Perfection?”

Grace offends my sense of autonomy. I want to believe the illusion that I am in control, that I am the “monarch of all I survey” (Cowper: *Selkirk*). Grace leaves me no option but to acknowledge my impotence.

Grace thus also offends our dignity. Even if you are one of the few people who accepts that we are all, each one of us, deeply flawed, and deserving of punishment, grace--as pardon, which we are, by definition, unable to bestow on ourselves--does not allow us the option of “making up” for our mistakes. We want to be able to say: “Well, maybe I screwed up but...at least I made things right.” But how could we possibly know if we have done enough?

Finally, grace offends our sense of fairness. “If only some are saved,” we ask, “why them? Why not all?” This seems to me to be the greatest obstacle to belief for many. But remember, if we were able to do something to make us somehow more deserving, by definition grace would no longer be grace.

The trouble is that there is no getting out of the quandary. If everyone's in the same boat--that is, if there is no God and everyone shares the same destiny of merely ceasing to exist, or conversely if there is a God and everyone shares the same heavenly destiny--there can be no ultimate justice in the universe.

It's a joke. We can all do what we want because there are no real consequences for our actions. So God's grace may offend us, but it is the only way to reconcile the tension between two equally important impulses: the desire for meaningful justice in the universe and the hope of mercy for ourselves.

Still, the depth of personal affront that grace implies makes *Sola Gratia* the hardest of the Solas, both to speak about and to accept. I cannot convince anyone of their need for grace, much as that pains me.

Given the difficulty of the subject, the thought occurred to me that perhaps I should try a different approach to this sermon. I decided to break it up into smaller pieces, each of which I hope will be compelling, and alternate them with interludes of instrumental music and singing, to provide sonic spaces/vehicles to encourage worship and facilitate contemplation.

Instead of a straightforward exposition of the text, I have chosen to present to you portraits of five people. In between these snapshots, we will hear movements from Bach's d minor Partita for solo violin, which I am looking forward to hearing played beautifully by my friend Elation Pauls. I hope that the music of Bach will offer a non-linear access point to the concepts you will be hearing about, a launching pad at a tangent to the lineup of characters I've selected for my exposition, one of whom is me.

We are a rogue's gallery. Which is to say, we have recognized that we are rebels--rebels by nature and by choice--and thus completely unable to redeem ourselves. We acknowledge that we are sinners, in fact we stagger at the fathomless depth of our sin, knowing that the result of sin, or the "wages" of sin, as the Bible puts it, "is death" (Rom 3:23). Yet, we also know that we have been made alive, and given a new identity and purpose. Some, like me, are with you in the here and now, yet have come to acknowledge that we are "dead". Others are no longer with us, yet are now more alive than ever.

This brings us back to our text for the evening, the text which I will be seeking to illustrate through the life and work of the people in these snapshots, or maybe I should call them "mugshots". I'll be focusing on the highlighted portion of the passage we read together from the book of Ephesians:

*But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus... (Eph 2:4-6)*

### **Bach: Allemande**

ME--DEAD?

By God's grace I am alive, and though I can't tell you when I started living, I can tell you I have been dead my whole life long.

For about three minutes 6½ years ago, I was dead. My heart went haywire and then stopped beating. A kind stranger performed CPR until help arrived, then slipped away into the crowd.

After the paramedics shocked my heart back to life, doctors induced a death-like state for three days to minimize the chance of brain damage. I don't remember any of it.

I woke up groggy and in pain from the chest compressions. Still, amidst all that uncertainty, and the anxiety that my family experienced, I am convinced that I had never been so alive. This was not primarily a feeling, but a firm, rational conviction. To put it a different way: by God's grace I am alive, and though I can't tell you when I started living, I can tell you I have been dead my whole life long.

What do I mean?

Let's take a look at our passage from Ephesians. The central message it contains is that God "made us alive". It also expresses the unlikeliness of this action, given that "we were dead".

That is: "even when [we] were dead...God made us alive". More fully, we were previously "dead in our trespasses". That is, it summarizes the *reason* for our being dead: the fact that we were "in our trespasses", that we are sinners. As sinners, we all experience the effects of sin, and the Bible says that the effects of sin are death, as I mentioned earlier tonight.

The passage also tells us something of God's *motivation* for making us alive: his "great love for us", and his *character*: that he is "rich in mercy". It also tells us the *means* by which we were "made alive": we were "made alive" *with Christ*. We were "raised together with him". It also gives us a glimpse of the glorious implications of what it means to have been raised with Christ: that we are "seated with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus".

Finally, it *characterizes* the entire operation as salvation, and the *condition* through which it occurs, as grace--we don't deserve it, and are powerless to manufacture it: "by grace you have been saved".

In short:

The one doing the action: God.

The ones being acted upon: us.

His character: mercy.

His motivation: love.

Our state: dead.

The reason for our state: our sin.

His action: to make us alive.

His means: Christ's resurrection.

The result: our position--"in" Christ Jesus (not our trespasses)

Christ's position: in heavenly places.

The whole thing: salvation.

The condition: grace alone--sola gratia.

The rest of the evening is intended to flesh out what all this means. In so doing we will learn what Sola Gratia is. In so doing, my prayer is that you will uncover grace and receive it, perhaps for the first time.

Let's back up to me waking up in the hospital. I knew that I had never been more alive, because I knew that God had "made me alive with Christ". Or, as I've put it more cryptically: By God's grace I am alive, and though I can't tell you when I started living, I can tell you I have been dead my whole life long.

That is, throughout my life, I have been "dead in my trespasses"--I still sin, and I continue to suffer some of the consequences of my sin. As Paul freely confesses in Romans 7: *I do not understand my own actions. For I do*



*not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...*

*“I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing...when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand...Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Rom 7:15-25)*

But--I am also alive! And though, unlike some people, I can't tell you a date or a time when I started truly living, that is, when God's grace became operative, I can say that even as I get older and my body deteriorates, I become more and more alive. In other words, though I am now closer to death, I am more alive than I was 6½ years ago!

Paul put it this way in his second letter to the Corinthian church: *Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light, momentary affliction*

*is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison... (2 Cor 4:16-17)*

## **Hymn: Amazing Grace**

HITCHENS: TWICE DEAD

One of the popular misconceptions of the Bible is that it is simply a rulebook, a compendium of do's and don't's. As I hope I was able to demonstrate in our Sola Scriptura service, such a conception of the Bible is so woefully inadequate that to believe that is to entirely miss the point.

That said, one of the many things that the Bible does is to reveal the likely consequences of our actions. It does this on a variety of levels ranging from the immediate--that is, the personal, temporal, observable consequences which do not always happen to everyone--to

the eternal--encompassing both the personal and corporate and which apply to every human being without exception.

Also, since eternal consequences span the entirety of space, time and beyond, they are not observable by anyone other than God, so we can only know about them if he reveals them to us.

At the first, immediate, level--about which every part of the Bible teaches either by setting forth principles or illustrating in stories--we find the kinds of common consequences that tend to happen to us when we make sinful choices--everything from bruised feelings to ruined reputations, broken bodies, and broken families. Our sins have consequences, not only to ourselves but to everyone around us. Still, at this immediate level, we see all around us many exceptions which make us indignant: humility, generosity,

and love rewarded with privation and pain; proud cruelty seemingly vindicated by lives of ease and luxury.

Nevertheless, statistically speaking, as the Bible teaches, those who live lives of selfless devotion tend to be happier. And we all--poor, rich, cruel, kind--die.

At the intermediate level, we find the Bible predicting the consequences of corporate sin: slavery, environmental degradation, poverty, famine, and war. While our cleverness has seen us increasingly stave off the personal consequences of our sin, both biblical and extra-biblical history teach us that eventually, inevitably, whole civilizations crumble into the dust.

This tended to be the preoccupation of the Old Testament prophets, who repeatedly warned their contemporaries against idolatry, pride, greed, and hardheartedness towards

the vulnerable. Their predictions of dire consequences seemed to their contemporaries to be completely over the top, yet we know that ancient Israel's cultural collapse through siege and exile happened precisely as they said it would.

These types of consequences, both the immediate consequences of personal pain and physical death, and the intermediate consequences of cultural collapse, are manifestations of what Paul calls being "dead in our trespasses". Pointing them out is never welcome. It is often responded to with irritation, if not outright hostility.

Yet that discomfort is nothing compared to the visceral reaction of anger and even revulsion that most people experience when confronted with the possibility of eternal consequences. This aspect of being "dead" is what the Bible in the book of Revelation calls

"the second death" (Rev 20:14), using the imagery of a "lake of fire that burns with sulphur" (Rev 19:20, 21:8).

This is the place that all, without exception, deserve to remain for eternity, those of us whom Revelation lists: the "cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, ...murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars..." (Rev 21:8). That includes me, and it includes you, too. To put it bluntly: I deserve hell. So do we all.

But recipients of the grace of God--of his pardon, his clemency--those whose "names are written in the book of life from the foundation of the world" (Rev 13:8, 17:8, cf. 20:12) will not experience this second death, but will dwell with God forever: "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more" (Rev 21:3-4).

You may be experiencing right at this moment some of the anger and revulsion that I spoke of. You may coolly conclude with the sophisticated scholar I read, that hell is an “ideological construct” of the “post-apostolic ecclesiastical church”, a “polemical or apologetic move” that may have been a reaction to “conflict with Judaism and...the Roman imperial cult and...various schismatic” Christian groups. Or you may, like the blogger I read this week, scoff that the concept of hell was invented “to instill fear and manipulate people”.

But the time lines such assertions presuppose are simply not supported by the evidence. This is because the person in the Bible who speaks most frequently about hell is Jesus himself. It was Jesus who compared hell with Gehenna, a place outside Jerusalem where garbage was burned in a perpetual inferno. Indeed, in the Gospels, Jesus uses the

imagery of fire to describe hell more than 20 times. Of course, both heaven and hell occupy planes of existence that are entirely outside our frame of reference--so using images from the world we know is unavoidable.

Jesus, who most people are surprised to discover actually spoke more about hell than about heaven, associated it not only with fire “that is not quenched”, but also with “a worm that does not die” (a phrase he quotes from the end of the book of Isaiah), and with “outer darkness”, and “weeping”, and “gnashing of teeth”.

The great 20th century Anglican theologian J.I. Packer surmises that “fire” is an image of “the agonizing awareness of God’s displeasure”, the undying maggot as “the endless dissolution of the personality by a condemning conscience”, outer darkness as “the knowledge of the loss, not merely of God, but of all good and of everything that made

life seem worth living”, and gnashing of teeth for “self-condemnation, and self-loathing” (*Knowing God*, 153). Others see in the gnashing of teeth an indissoluble “rage against God”.

Peter Hitchens, in his book of that title, describes his journey from atheism to faith. Peter Hitchens is the younger brother of Christopher, who was a prominent proponent of what is popularly known as the “New Atheism” along with Richard Dawkins and others. Both brothers were journalists. Both turned their backs on their Anglican upbringing as teenagers.

Peter describes the burning of his Bible at the age of 15 as an “anticlimax”, a “disagreeable, half-charred mess” (17). Nevertheless, he became a proud Marxist and Trotskyite. He writes that his life was “devoted largely to pleasure and ambition” and that for about twenty years he rarely had knowing

contact with anyone religious, experiencing what he calls “physical disgust if any acquaintance turned out to believe in God” (100).

But the grace of God broke into his life in an unexpected way when he was on vacation in France with his girlfriend. Always interested in architecture and art, they decided to visit an old hospital in Beaune where--their guidebook promised--there was an interesting 15th century painting of the *The Last Judgement* (for pics and quote see: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BtrBEGRjz9i/> ). I’ll let him recount what happened there: (read excerpts from 102-104)

**Bach: Corrente**

AUSTEN: ALL DEAD

I have to admit to being a late addition to the Jane Austen fan club. I've always assumed that her books were nothing more than doilies and drawing room intrigue. It was only in the past few months that I became aware how delightfully subtle, devastatingly insightful, and dangerously compelling her novels can be. As I was browsing the public library for a book on William Cowper, the next sinner in our lineup, I stumbled across a new book entitled: *Jane Austen: Secret Radical*. While I've since concluded that the author's title is wildly overstated, her discussion of Austen's masterpiece *Mansfield Park* intrigued me, initially because of the connection she draws between Austen and Cowper due to their shared horror of the slave trade, which is one of the intriguing subplots lying under the surface of this, Austen's most complex, novel, which she described as concerning "ordination".

Certainly ordination plays a key role in the book, but she uses her fish out of water story to delicately raise all sorts of uncomfortable questions about where England was headed at the time. Tellingly, despite its being released in 1815, the year after *Pride and Prejudice*, it is the only one of her novels that was largely ignored by the press at the time--and she was later slyly lumped together by a critic with other "fanatical"--that is, evangelical--female authors.

Whether or not Austen considered herself an Evangelical is an open question. She does not seem to have run in the same circles. Nevertheless, we do know--it is obvious from her novels--that she shared many of the same priorities and she was committed to the great tenets of Protestant Christianity, including the doctrine of original sin, which holds that all

are sinners because of Adam's sin, as Paul states in Romans 5:12 "sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned."

This historical doctrine is the great leveler, and I believe that it was her rich understanding of it that enabled her to see with such clarity the mundane, everyday sins of her characters: pride, vanity, spitefulness, hypocrisy, greed, and yet not to despise them, but rather to treat even the most distasteful of them winningly and with great tenderness, knowing that she herself was a sinner, indeed that she herself exhibited the same flaws.

She understood, along with Hannah Arendt, about the "banality of evil" and would have agreed with Solzhenitsyn that "the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being." She knew herself, that though she was outwardly respectable, a

dutiful parson's daughter, that she was "dead in her trespasses", deserving of eternal punishment, yet made alive together with Christ, raised with him and seated with him in heavenly places. She was saved *sola gratia*, by the grace of God alone.

To offer only a few words of Austen's prose would not do this great novelist justice. I encourage you to go out and find a copy of *Mansfield Park* and read it. And, if you're like me and struggle with the language, find a good audiobook version of it, such as the one in the WPL. In the meantime, won't you bow with me as I offer a prayer that Austen herself penned and likely used in her own household?

*Give us grace, Almighty Father, so to pray, as to deserve to be heard, to address thee with our hearts, as with our lips. Thou art every where present, from thee no secret can be hid.*

*May the knowledge of this, teach us to fix our thoughts on thee, with reverence and devotion that we pray not in vain.*

*Look with mercy on the sins we have this day committed, and in mercy make us feel them deeply, that our repentance may be sincere, & our resolutions steadfast of endeavouring against the commission of such in future. Teach us to understand the sinfulness of our own hearts, and bring to our knowledge every fault of temper and every evil habit in which we have indulged to the discomfort of our fellow-creatures, and the danger of our own souls.*

*May we now, and on each return of night, consider how the past day has been spent by us, what have been our prevailing thoughts, words, and actions during it, and how far we can acquit ourselves of evil. Have we thought irreverently of Thee, have we disobeyed thy*

*commandments, have we neglected any known duty, or willingly given pain to any human being? Incline us to ask our hearts these questions, Oh! God, and save us from deceiving ourselves by pride or vanity.*

*Above all other blessings Oh! God, for ourselves, and our fellow-creatures, we implore thee to quicken our sense of thy mercy in the redemption of the world, of the value of that holy religion in which we have been brought up, that we may not, by our own neglect, throw away the salvation thou hast given us, nor be Christians only in name. Hear us Almighty God, for his sake who has redeemed us. Amen.*

<https://www.crossway.org/articles/the-christian-faith-of-jane-austen/>

**Bach: Sarabanda**



## COWPER: LIVING DEAD

*I was a stricken deer that left the herd  
Long since; with many an arrow deep infixt  
My panting side was charged, when I  
withdrew  
To seek a tranquil death in distant shades.  
There was I found by one who had himself  
Been hurt by the archers. In his side he bore,  
And in his hands and feet, the cruel scars.  
With gentle force soliciting the darts  
He drew them forth, and healed and bade me  
live.*

(The Task, Book III, The Garden)

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3698/3698-h/3698-h.htm>

So far we have spoken a great deal about what it means to be dead in our trespasses, but not much about being made alive.

In the passage I just recited, William Cowper poetically describes this process as it occurred in his life. It is from *The Task*, a hugely influential masterpiece of verse which is largely forgotten today, but was a favourite of many great writers after its publication in 1785, including Jane Austen, who seems to have derived special inspiration from it as she wrote *Mansfield Park*.

More prosaically, in one of his two sets of memoirs Cowper describes how he, to borrow Peter Hitchens' words, had pursued "pleasure and ambition" in his younger years, only to find himself brought up short by mental illness, what seems to have been what we now know as bi-polar disorder. After having staved it off in his early twenties with what he calls "a continued circle of diversion and indulgence of appetite" (Memoirs, 20

<https://books.google.ca/books?id=uco9AAAAY>

[AAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://AAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false) ), in his 32nd year he found himself in an asylum, having made a number of attempts to end his life.

He had wrestled with the possibility of faith for most of his adult life, vacillating between belief and self-indulgence, hope and despair. At times he felt he could hope to love and serve God, and at other times, he hated him and rejected him with every fibre of his being, and was absolutely certain that he was damned.

Friends and family had tried to share the Gospel with him, but, as with so many, the notion of grace was the stumbling block. For the first 8 months while he was in the asylum, he refused to read the Scriptures. Finally, on a whim, he opened a Bible and the first verse he happened across was Rom 3:25, which speaks of receiving in faith the redemptive, atoning

sacrifice of Christ, of believing on his blood, blood shed for his sins.

Despite having heard the message countless times before, he writes that at that moment he “received strength to believe, and the full beams of the Sun of Righteousness fell upon” him. He continues: “I saw the sufficiency of the atonement he had made, my pardon sealed in his blood, and all the fulness and completeness of his justification.” (Memoirs, 57)

That is, he had been “made” alive--notice the forms of the verbs from our passage--“made” alive, “raised”, “seated”. Who did the making, the raising, the seating? God, rich in mercy and love. The work had already been done--signed, sealed and delivered--the punishment Cowper deserved had already been borne by Christ, who was

perfect. And Christ's perfection was substituted for his intractable sin.

No longer "in" his trespasses, Cowper was now "in" Christ Jesus. All that had been lacking, to use Cowper's phrase, was "the strength to believe" it. And even that strength, the ability to believe, was not something he found in himself but something which was bestowed upon him by grace alone.

From this moment Cowper's life was both spiritually and materially transformed. His realization of his position in Christ prompted him in thankfulness to reevaluate his priorities. Knowing all too well the temptations which the city held for him, and having blown any inheritance he once had, he retired to what seems to have been a quiet life of genteel poverty in the country and surrounded himself with a few close friends, a new family of believers who loved him and

supported him through the many storms that would come. And come they did.

After a few contented years of respite, he suffered from periodic, violent attacks of melancholy and despair and an unshakeable sense of doom for the last 27 years of his life. Since there was at the time little to no understanding or remedy for his disease, on a number of occasions his friends were all that stood between him and suicide.

Still, in his estimation, the conditions his illness imposed were what drove him to write. As he wrote in a letter to a friend: "...encompassed in the midnight of absolute despair, and a thousand times filled with unspeakable horror, I first commenced--an author. Distress drove me to it...it is plain that I have not chosen or prescribed to myself my own way, but have been...compelled and scourged into it...I can say it as truly as it was

ever spoken--Here I am. Let him do with me as seemeth him good.”

And his work as a poet was to have enormous impact. He has been called THE poet of the abolition of slavery. The work I read from earlier, *The Task*, written in the midst of those years, just over 15 years before his death in 1800, was a sharp, fearless critique of Enlightenment English values, pointedly exposing the flaws of his society from top to bottom.

He influenced countless English to re-evaluate their rapidly changing world: the increasingly godless, greedy, grasping world of the industrial revolution characterized by rapid urbanization, the exploitation and neglect of the poor and of the natural world, all fueled by the offshore trade in slaves.

One of Cowper's closest friends, John Newton, had been employed as a young man

aboard trading and slaving ships. Newton is better known to us than Cowper, as he wrote *Amazing Grace*. Newton famously repented of his evil life, becoming a beloved pastor. He met Cowper when he moved to the town of Olney where Cowper lived to serve as pastor of the local church, and they became nearly inseparable.

Much has been written about Cowper's theology--particularly, that the depth of his belief that we are saved by grace alone exacerbated his illness. Surely, it is argued, if Cowper hadn't been afflicted with Calvin's notions of predestination (or better yet, if he didn't even believe in hell at all), his despair would not have acquired the same fevered intensity!

On the contrary, though his outlook undoubtedly gave shape to the specific anxieties he dealt with, irrational hopelessness and guilt--the conviction that one is

doomed--is a common feature of bi-polar disorder, regardless of any sufferer's worldview. The reality of the knowledge that he was saved by grace alone, and especially the assurance that came from his clear decision for Christ, enabled him to change, to make a break from the poor choices of his earlier life.

It drove him to find an occupation that made a difference, ameliorating both the conditions of his illness and the conditions of the lives of many of those around him. It fueled his determination to persevere even in the frequent moments that his mind did not allow him to see his situation clearly.

At Cowper's funeral John Newton compared Cowper to Moses' burning bush: *He was indeed a bush in flames for 27 years but he was not consumed. And why? Because the Lord was there...The Lord had set his seal*

*upon him and though he [Cowper] had not seen him [God] he [Cowper] had grace to love him...He has often said that the Lord had not a child who loved him with a more simple heart than he did.*

*...He was one of those who came out of great tribulation. He suffered much here...but eternity is long enough to make amends for all. For what is all he endured in this life, when compared with that rest which remaineth for the children of God?*

[https://www.johnnewton.org/Groups/251893/The John Newton/new\\_menus/Sermons/Exodus/Exodus.aspx](https://www.johnnewton.org/Groups/251893/The%20John%20Newton/new_menus/Sermons/Exodus/Exodus.aspx)

To my mind, Cowper's affliction was in some ways a more extreme version of our common experience. Don't we all struggle in some measure with despair? With being able to see our situation clearly?

Cowper offers us the hope that because grace means that God has done everything for us, offering himself, scourged and bleeding, receiving our punishment, his own blood sufficient for all our sins--his grace is operative even when we are unable to perceive it.

### **HYMN: *There is a Fountain Filled With Blood***

Cowper was no longer “in” his trespasses, but was placed “in” Christ. And that is precisely what happens when we put our faith in Jesus. By the power of his Spirit, our soul is united with his. We’re saved *from* the punishment we deserve as rebels against God and fugitives from his love. We are saved *to* an identity with Christ, to a literal joining of our life with his. “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” Gal 2:20. As he lives in us, we find our true life, a life that never ends, that becomes more and more alive, even as our bodies

waste away, a Life that will ultimately restore our bodies and make all things new.

We see this in our text in the repeated use of the preposition “with”. This insistent little word signals the reality of our transformation, the union of our dying souls to the divine life which exploded from the grave--Christ, through whom we have been saved. God “made us alive together *with* Christ...raised us up *with* him...seated us *with* him in the heavenly places”.

In Greek, this union is even more explicit. What we use 4 or five words to express--*made us alive together with*--is united in three glorious conjunctions smashing together preposition and pronoun and verb: **with**-made alive-us; **with**-raised up-us; **with**-seated-us. With ... with ... with ... Christ. Thus the unmerited favour of God, Sola Gratia grace, doesn’t end with pardon--pardon is only possible through union with Christ

and Christ alone, and union with Christ means partaking of his life. “Our life,” we read in Colossians, “is hidden with Christ in God!” (3:3)

## **BACH: Giga**

### BACH: DEATH DEAD

In 1720, J.S. Bach was 35 years old. He was in the prime of life: happily employed as a valued court composer, happily married to his wife of 13 years, Maria Barbara, happily the father of 4 children--Catherine: who was 12 years old, Wilhelm: who was 10, Karl: 6, and Johann: 5. That summer his employer, the young Prince Leopold, requested that Bach accompany him for 3 months to the famous spa at Karlsbad. It was not the sort of request one could turn down. So he left his young

family in the care of his healthy, hard-working, beloved, and faithful wife.

Upon his return home, he was shocked to discover that his wife had passed away and had been buried the week before. He hadn't even known she had become ill.

Bach knew death intimately, and not only in this moment. His own mother died when he was 9--his father when he was 10. While his first two children Catherine and Wilhelm were still under the age of 5, in one year he and Maria Barbara suffered the heartache of losing two babies during childbirth, the namesakes of their parents, a tiny Johann and a precious little Maria. And only one year before Maria Barbara died, their seventh child, a baby boy named after his godfather Prince Leopold, passed away after only one year of life.

With the passage of time, it's tempting to overlook all this death as a mere footnote. Death was certainly common. But we can't

imagine it was common*place*--something that became less painful the more you experienced it. Being orphaned at 10 and widowed at 35, and losing 3 children in the intervening years--not to mention the 8 other children he would eventually have to bury--would have been just as painful to Bach as it would be to us.

And yet, through all this, Bach knew: *by grace he had been saved, that God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ...and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus...*

**Hymn: In Death's Strong Grasp**

**Hymn: Jesus, Priceless Treasure**

You have heard tonight from a number of writers: an amateur preacher, a journalist, a novelist and a poet. People who try to communicate the reality of God's grace through words. Bach, too, was a writer, though not a wordsmith. While he clearly valued language, and his own heavily annotated Bible testifies that he was a devout, conservative Lutheran

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/30/arts/music/bach-religion-music.html>) , his own gift was to communicate in sound, using the syntax of harmony, melody and rhythm, a different kind of logic that accesses the heart more directly, the seat of our will and emotions.

Shortly after Maria Barbara died in 1720, he wrote a work to complete his new *d minor Partita* for solo violin. It was unlike any other



work written before or since, a monumental work, practically eternal in scope, a Chaconne, a kind of theme and variations that repeats a harmonic progression over and over, with only the composer's imagination to limit the possibilities. *The Chaconne* has been a favourite of violinists and audiences for centuries. It expresses so exquisitely emotions of pain and exaltation.

But no one thought too hard about what might have prompted Bach to write such a massive work unprompted. A few decades ago, a German musicologist named Helga Thoene noticed that the Chaconne exhibited some unusual, not immediately obvious, characteristics.

Bach, who enjoyed number games and puzzles, and is known to have done this sort of thing pretty regularly, seemed to have encoded the name "Maria Barbara" into the composition. Then she noticed that the

skeleton of a lot of the melodic lines corresponded to well known, Lutheran hymn tunes that make reference to death and the comfort of Christ's resurrection and of our union with him. Some of these you heard the *Voices of SOLAS* sing during the Prelude to our service. Two of them we have just sung together!

Whether or not these tunes were running through Bach's head as he wrote his Chaconne, they and the texts with which they are associated nevertheless illuminate for us the framework through which Bach would have processed his grief. They highlight the mind of one who found his identity in Christ: whose life was united to the risen Christ. And thus redeemed, his art, his very heart, was bound up and set at liberty, transformed by grace alone.

Bach and I, along with Peter Hitchens, Jane Austen, and William Cowper offer you a

challenge: ask God to save you *from* the worst consequences of your sin, to save you *to* union with Christ; ask him to show you how to see your lives, regardless of circumstance, from the perspective of divine favour, though you have no claim to it; of being shown kindness, though you don't deserve it, the perspective of grace.

If this is your heart's desire, in a moment I will ask you to pray a prayer with me, and then to please tell someone about it. This may not be where you are tonight, but maybe you have questions. In either case, please stay afterwards for our coffee time and Q&A, and talk with me, or email me, or talk with a pastor or a friend. A big part of union with Christ is community, interacting with other members of his body, the Church.

But if this grace *is* something you wish to know tonight, please pray these words along with me silently in your heart.

Lord,

I am a desperate sinner, deserving of an eternity apart from you...*But God, you are rich in mercy, and you will raise me up with Christ.*

I experience pain, I am often afflicted with illness, my body is wasting away... *But God, even though I am dead you will make me alive with Christ...*

I am caught up in despair. I cannot see my way forward... *But God, you have loved me with a great love, and you will seat me in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus...*

All you require is that I ask.

Lord, I ask it of you. Save me from being dead  
in my sins and place me in Christ. Unite me  
with my Saviour. Amen.

**Bach: Chaconne**