

Grace for Tumultuous Times
I Peter 5:12-14

When we read a letter, we normally don't pay much attention to the sign-off portion other than to take notice from whom the note comes. Dave Steffen's emails are always signed off, "Best regards." So I no longer pay attention to them, the sign off portion that is! Often this also holds true as a church goes through an exposition of a book of the Bible. The closing of the book is often dropped so that the preacher can move on to the next series of messages. But I want to look at the last three verses of I Peter this morning.

During the three years between our graduation from High School and when we got married, Cheryl and I wrote just about every day. I was going to college in South Carolina and she was in Pennsylvania. I didn't bring any of the letters to read because I don't want to bore you with their contents! Of course I would read them over and over. But I noticed something interesting about those letters. The way Cheryl would sign off, gave me a key to understanding the whole letter. For instance, sometimes it said "loving you." Or it might say, "longing for you." Maybe it would say, "Only eight more days!" If the letter sounded a little bit down, I would not try to read between the lines thinking that something was amiss in our relationship when I read, "longing for you." When Cheryl might bring up something that we disagreed about, I could easily take it in context when I read the closing of the letter, "With all my love." As I read the way she signed off, I knew that whatever the letter talked about didn't supersede our commitment to each other.

In the same way, a really significant key to understanding the letter that Peter wrote comes in the final few verses. Let's read them together.

"Through Silvanus, our faithful brother (for so I regard him), I have written to you briefly, exhorting and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it! She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings, and so does my son, Mark. Greet one another with a kiss of love. Peace be to you all who are in Christ."

In verses 12-14 of I Peter 5, Peter summarizes his purpose in communicating the contents of the letter in this way: Silas and I have written you this short letter to give you an encouraging testimony that *"This is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it!"* Let's think through what Peter was saying in that summary.

This is the true grace of God. Can you define GRACE? "Unmerited favor" is probably the definition that came to your mind. That is a good definition but I'd like to think about it a little more deeply this morning. First of all, notice that grace is favor extended to a person undeserving of it. Merited favor is not grace; it is justice! The moment you feel you deserve God's favor, His favor ceases to be grace. Rather it is just payment, just reward that is deserved. Our perfectly just God pays in full measure both rewards for righteous deeds and judgment for condemnation, just as we deserve. So biblical grace is not tied to justice but rather to something that goes beyond justice!

Notice too that biblical grace is the unmerited favor of a superior being to an inferior being that changes, that elevates the inferior party. We are incapable of extending grace to God but He can and does extend grace to us! He extends grace toward fallen man through Jesus Christ, His Son, who is *"full of grace and truth."* (Jn. 1:14)

Grace in a real sense is what God was free to do and what He chose to do after Jesus died for us! It is as if God's hands were tied in His desire to extend mercy and forgiveness to us. His hands were tied by His own righteousness and justice. God's justice will not allow Him to exercise mercy and forgiveness toward the sinner unless the sin is paid for in full. Jesus Christ did that for us when He died in our place to pay the full penalty for sin, a substitute for you and for me.

The last thing that I want to point out regarding the definition of grace is that grace is not just the initial act of God in providing salvation through Jesus but also the action of God in protecting and maintaining salvation in the believer's life until full salvation from the presence of sin is completed as we enter God's presence in heaven.

So then Peter says, "*This is the true grace of God.*" As we look back at his letter, we see that it is true grace that God has caused us to be born again to a living hope and an imperishable inheritance through Jesus' death and resurrection (1:3-4.) He saw us in our miserable state and in His mercy, caused this new birth leading to hope and a sure future! We were neither the cause nor could we have any part in that birth. It was ALL of God. That's grace!

It is because of His grace that He protects us (1:5) for the completion of our salvation to be revealed when He returns. We have been raised with Christ from death to life and we will be raised from death to life everlasting in His presence. We have been given heaven instead of hell. This is a sure hope that carries us through our trials in this life. This is His grace extended toward us!

It is His grace that allows our faith to come under trial through suffering, the "proof of our faith" being revealed as to its genuineness. (1:6-9). It is a true grace of God that God gives us His Spirit to help us joyfully endure suffering for His sake. It is a true grace of God that God has given us the promise that we will suffer for Him at the right time of His choosing and that we will also share in His glory at the time of His choosing.

It is because God extends His grace toward us that He has sent His prophets to proclaim His salvation made possible through Christ sufferings, yet He also revealed the glory that was to follow. (1:10-12)

It is because of God's grace toward us that we have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, that is through the living and enduring Word of God (1:23-25). There is no way that we could engineer our own birth. It is all God's doing, and He did it for us, those who were dead in their trespasses and sin.

It is a true grace of God that He has called out a people for His name. In His grace He has made us as living stones to be built up into a spiritual house for a royal priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. We are the ones who can proclaim the excellencies of His name. (2:4-10) It's ALL of God.

It is a true Grace of God that He has put into our hearts the ability to submit to human authority just like Christ submitted to the authority of the Father over Him. (2:13-3:12)

It is a true grace of God that He enables us to submit to suffering as a Christian, in His will, joyfully enduring the suffering for His sake! And it is grace when He sends that suffering to purify us so that we are done with sin! (4:1-2) In His grace, He roots out our sin, conforming us to the image of His

Son. It is because of His grace that He doesn't allow us to remain marinating in sin but instead He purifies us through our suffering so that we reflect His glory, mirroring His Son.

It is grace from God that He gives us spiritual gifts to be able to glorify God through our stewardship of those gifts in the body of Christ (4:9-11). It is a true grace of God that He gives us His strength to serve so that Jesus is glorified, so that He is revealed in and through His body.

And it is a true grace of God that *"after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish you."* (5:10)

All this *"is the true grace of God."* And Peter gives the exhortation, *"stand firm in it!"*

What does it look like to stand firm in grace? Just as it was for the recipients of this letter, grace is to be the solid foundation on which we stand in tumultuous times. Because human reason says that once a person has sinned, he is no longer worthy of God's favor, we often hear that the Christian who has fallen into sin has "fallen from grace"!

But the Apostle Paul gives great insight when in Galatians 5:4, he says, *"You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by the Law; you have fallen from grace."* Indeed, the Apostle was pointing out that a person falls from grace when he seeks God's favor through self-effort, through righteous living. If our good behavior, if our righteous living is what we depend on to be in God's favor, we will fall under His justice which views our best efforts, our most righteous deeds just like filthy rags. When we stand on our own effort to fulfill His law to curry favor with Him, we are not standing firm in grace but rather we are standing on works!

But when one recognizes the work of God in Christ, when one acknowledges that salvation is of the Lord alone, then he is standing firmly in grace. When a person realizes that he is incapable of pleasing God on his own, then he is standing firmly in grace. When a person clings only to the person and the work of Jesus, then he is standing firmly in grace.

But there is another aspect of what it looks like to stand firmly in grace that the Apostle Peter brings up in this passage. It is seen in the gracious walk of the one benefiting from God's grace. In the next few verses, Peter gives us two examples. The first is in Christian greetings and the second is in what I'm going to call, the peace-ability of grace.

Verses 13 and 14a say, *"She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings, and so does my son, Mark. Greet one another with a kiss of love."* We don't know who the "she" is to whom Peter referred. The word "she" could refer to a woman or it could refer to a sister church from the province or city of Babylon. Certainly the recipients knew how to interpret Peter's words.

The greetings also came from John Mark, Peter's spiritual son. This was the same Mark who failed on the missionary journey, the one who wasn't tough enough to be a missionary with Paul and Barnabas. Mark and Barnabas broke with Paul and Paul went on the missionary trip with Silas. And now you see Mark working with Silas (Silvanus) and Peter and sending back greetings to these brothers in Christ. Because of his close association to Peter, John Mark was able to write the gospel of Mark with the seal of apostolicity on his gospel. He evidently had learned to stand firm in the true grace of God!

But this graceful, grace-filled greeting was to be characteristic of all those who were standing firmly in God's grace. *"Greet one another with a kiss of love."* What does that mean? When I was a teenager, I found it interesting that we didn't obey this command. My parents weren't pushing me to obey it. What is the kiss of love? Was it long or short? On the cheek or lips? Or maybe in a cultured, French manner, on the hand? Was there an exemption for flu season?

In Romans 16:16 and I Corinthians 16:20, the command is to greet with a holy kiss. Is that the same kiss? It is pretty obvious that a kiss was a customary greeting in New Testament times. Remember that in the house of Simon when the protests came about the woman anointing Jesus' feet with the expensive perfume, Jesus said to Simon, "I came into your house and you didn't even kiss me." It was a customary greeting but it seems somewhat strange to us today because sometimes cultural actions meant to communicate one thing, in another historical/cultural context are misunderstood.

As I was preaching in Africa last Sunday, I saw something that to me was kind of strange. There were two Christian men in the church holding hands. What was that all about? In fact, as they sat together, one put his hand on the leg of the other, his fingers on the inside of his thigh. What was going on there? In the Ugandan context, they are just communicating friendship and regard for the other. No one was uncomfortable, no one found it strange. If that happened in this church, many of us would be very uncomfortable!

The kiss Peter spoke of was meant to communicate a greeting of love, not "eros", but rather "agape" love. It would have been similar to our handshake or maybe a hug. It seems that the form of the greeting Peter refers to is very culturally bound, but the intent behind the greeting knows no cultural bounds! The love that Peter wanted the Christians to show in their greeting went well beyond lip service, 'scuse the pun! After all, when Judas betrayed Jesus, he kissed Him, giving lip service to his allegiance to Jesus.

So Peter was talking about communicating loyalty, warm regard, and delightful affection, much like you might communicate through a warm handshake as you greet someone in church! But Peter's point is that the one benefitting from God's grace should extend favor in a visible way toward every other brother and sister in the church because there are no untouchables in the church! Graciousness is to extend that favor toward every one. *"Greet one another with a kiss of love."* The one giving the greeting should treat everyone graciously, whether they deserve it or not. Remember, if it is deserved, it really is no longer grace.

Peter finishes up the letter saying, *"Peace be to you all who are in Christ."* Those who are "in Christ" are standing firm in grace. They trust God's provision, Jesus Christ, for their righteousness before God. They know that they don't deserve God's favor extended toward them. They live trusting His promises! It is to these that Peter says, *"Peace be to you..."*

You see, the one who is standing firm in God's grace is indeed at peace. He is at peace with God and also with himself and others. The Spirit of God gives him the sense that things are indeed in order because they are under God's sovereign control, and that the Christian can trust God. The person standing firm in grace doesn't have to work things out for himself or struggle to maintain control. Such a person can afford to treat others, even the undeserving, in a gracious manner.

"*This is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it!*" Peter started his letter invoking God's peace and grace upon the readers. "*May grace and peace be yours in fullest measure.*" (1:2) Now at the end of his letter, Peter explains *that* because God extends grace to us in Jesus, we can stand firm in the tumult of life.

Grace for Tumultuous Times

I Peter 5:12-14

Main Idea: Because God extends grace to us in Jesus, we can stand firm in the tumult of life.

Intro: The conclusion to a letter

- This is the true grace of God:
 - Defining grace

 - Review of God's grace in I Peter

- Standing firm grace:
 - Standing in grace

 - The gracious walk of one who has experienced God's grace

 - The peace that grace brings