**God’s gracious gift of faith and redirected desire**

Text: Ephesians 2:8

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Ezekiel 37:1-14 Ephesians 2:1-10

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 115, 445, 42, 204, 529

**Series:** Canons of Dort (#12, Articles 3:14-16)

**Theme:** Faith is a gift of God to His undeserving elect and redirects their desires so that they seek Him and His ways.

**Proposition:** Praise and thank the Lord for His gracious gift of faith

**Introduction**

Sometimes in life there can be so much difficulty and distress that you can ask yourself ‘*is this ever going to get better?*’ It can be like that with physical sickness that is chronic and hasn’t responded to treatment. Depression and despair are often part and parcel of long-term illness. Spiritual pain can also be intense and deeply debilitating. David writes in Psalm 22:1-2 “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest*”. The sons of Korah lament in Psalm 42 “*my soul is cast down within me*” (v6)

When Ezekiel prophesied the Word of the Lord, many Israelites were held captive as exiles in Babylon. There by the waters they sat down and wept, when they remembered Zion (Ps 137:1). Life for them had been so much better in the past than it was in the present. Into their grief and despair, the Lord gave Ezekiel a vision of a valley full of dry bones that were the remnants of people long dead. Miraculously the bones came together and were linked with muscles and covered with flesh and skin (Eze 37:8) yet they remained lifeless until God called for life to be breathed into them. He said, “*I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live*” (Eze 37:14).

This was a message of hope for downcast people and revealed the Lord’s promise to revive the ‘dead’ nation of Israel and restore them to their land. God was going to act to make what was dead alive again. This vision may also reveal the coming general resurrection at the end of this age. It also illustrates for us the gospel of salvation, reflecting the truth we heard from Ephesians 2 that human beings are naturally ‘*dead in their trespasses and sins*’ (v1), not merely spiritually sick.

The Canons of Dort contradict the teaching of the Remonstrants (the followers of Jacobus Arminius) who believed that the will of man ‘*had never been corrupted but only hampered by the darkness of the mind and the unruliness of the passions*’ (error 3c.). Today some churches teach that ‘the unregenerate’ person ‘can yet hunger and thirst after righteousness and life’ (error 3d), or to put it another way, a person can choose to be saved if they like, apart from any prior work of God in their heart. It is against these humanly plausible, but false ideas that Canons of Dort Articles 3:14-16 are written.

We are going to explore the content of this pattern of sound words centring our attention on Ephesians 2:8 “*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God*”. Firstly, we see that God’s grace confers the power to believe.

1. **God’s grace confers the power to believe**

Sweet tasting food is more pleasurable than a bitter meal. In a vision, the prophet Ezekiel ate God’s Word and found that ‘*it was in my mouth as sweet as honey*’ (Eze 3:3). Twice in the first eight verses of Ephesians 2, we find what could accurately be described as the sweetest words ever written *“by grace you have been saved”.* These words are simple, profound, unfathomable and life-changing for all who receive them into their heart and mind.

As you may well know, grace has been described as ‘everything for nothing for those who don’t deserve anything’. It is ‘unmerited favour’ from God. When you work a full day and receive a fair day’s pay – that’s a wage. When you compete in a competition and are rewarded for your performance – that’s a prize. When you are recognized for your long service or high achievements – that’s an award. But if you are a person who is incapable of earning a wage, unable to win a prize and undeserving of any award, yet you receive a gift, then that is grace.

The bleak words of Ephesians 2:1-3 make clear that in our naturally spiritually dead state, we are powerless to earn, win or deserve anything good from God. We are utterly helpless apart from the unmerited favour of God. We have no spiritual currency with which to buy or contribute towards our salvation. It is 100% a gift.

Grace is free to the recipient, but costly to the giver. God’s grace cost Him the pain of seeing beloved Son suffer. God’s grace cost Him estrangement from His own Son. God’s grace cost Him the life of His Son.

It’s not easy to believe someone who offers grace. The natural human response is ‘where’s the catch?’, ‘where’s the hidden cost to me?’, ‘It can’t be that simple!’. It is not easy to believe someone who says that he will do something spectacularly and lastingly good for us that we do not deserve. Grace does not sit well with our natural human condition. It is ‘otherworldly’. We are all so very familiar with systems of merit “*Do this and you will be rewarded. Fail to do this and you will be punished*”’ ‘there’s no free lunch’, ‘everybody has to pay their own way’. Knowledge of the Old Testament covenant curses and blessings in Scripture can fuel a merit-based understanding of salvation if taken in isolation from the ‘rest of the story’ about Jesus Christ who perfectly fulfils the Law of God on behalf of others.

Paul writes in verse 8 *“For by grace you have been saved* ***through faith****”.* Notice carefully the word ‘through’. Faith is the **instrument** or **means** by which a person is made right with God. The theological term is ‘justification’. Just as a piano does not produce music by itself, but rather it is the **means** by which the skilled pianist conveys a beautiful sound, so, faith itself does not make a person right with God, but rather is the **means** by which God justly brings lawbreakers like you and me into great favour with Himself. So much that we become His children by adoption – as Paul described at the start of this letter (Eph 1:5).

Now this is not just **any faith**, any belief, but only personal, heartfelt faith in Jesus Christ as crucified Saviour and Risen Lord (Rom 4:23-25; 10:8-13). This is clearly revealed in many places in the Bible, for example: “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him*” (John 3.36). Christ is the **object** of faith; faith is the instrument or means by which the benefits which Christ has won, through His perfect life and death on behalf of others as a truly innocent man, become the gift of God to the believer.

In salvation there is a gracious exchange. Christ gives His gift of righteousness so that the sinner receives divine pardon and full acceptance by God (Gal 2:15; 16; 3:24). The sinner/ lawbreaker gives him/herself in faith to Jesus Christ – fully trusting in the Lord for life now and into the eternal future.

At times, Christians have a reputation in the world as being arrogant, mean, narrow-minded, rude, judgmental and haughty. Some people have asked the question *Why do those who believe that they are saved by grace seem so graceless?* The reformed Christian has the clearest understanding of Biblical and systematic theology. Surely we should logically be the kindest, most gracious, peace-loving, humble and thankful of people. Why? Because we clearly understand that God’s grace has conferred on us to power to believe the gospel. Our faith itself is a gift from God! We also understand, brothers and sisters, that we do not deserve God’s grace. Which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **God’s grace is not deserved by anyone**

Grace stands in opposition to the ideas that most of us have about earning our way in the world, about people getting what they deserve, about “fairness”, “justice” and about the independence of human beings. Grace is the unmerited favour of God shown primarily in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is glorious, abundant, rich, manifold, sufficient grace from the generosity of God and precious lovingkindness of God. “*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast*” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

The church father Augustine once said, “*God gives grace where he finds empty hands*”. Grace is everything for nothing to those who don’t deserve anything. We boast when we have received something that we think we deserve. To boast is to take pride in. Paul writes to the Corinthians “*Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord*” (1:31). We are to boast in the Lord by being thankful. The person who ‘*receives this grace owes and renders eternal thanks to God alone*’ (CofD 3:15).

It has been said that “*law condemns the best man; grace saves the worst man*”. Knowing that we ourselves do not deserve God’s grace should result in us readily and lavishly extending grace to others. An unbalanced focus on doctrinal detail can lead to a critical spirit with grace being replaced by law in the heart. This was a problem with Galatian church to whom Paul writes this warning: “*But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another*” (Gal 5:15).

In some churches today there is no room for mistakes. Yet people do make mistakes! We all do. We all need to show the same grace to each other that Christ shows to us. Christ forgives us freely. We need to be gracious in forgiving. We need to be careful not to keep others out of the church by setting a bar of law which denies the grace of God. Christ was soft, compassionate and forgiving to the weak and humble. Christ was hard, direct and forceful with the proud and strong: For example "*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence*” (Matthew 23:25). Jesus shows his divine character in this, for "*God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble*" (James 4:6).

When we boast in ourselves, we are proud and cannot show grace. *"Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye?* (Matt 7:4). Do you think well of your brothers and sisters in Christ? Is your first thought when you hear them speak or see their behaviour that they spoke and acted from the best spiritual motive? Are they innocent until proven guilty in the court of your mind?

Brothers and sisters think well of each other. Assume the best possible motives for one another’s actions and words. The CofD Art 3:15 puts it this way“*We are to judge and speak in the most favourable way ...about those who outwardly profess their faith and amend their lives; for the inner recesses of the heart are unknown to us*”

Boasting in the Lord shows itself in gracious humility towards others and evidences that a person has received the gift of faith by God’s grace. Receivers of grace want to see others receive grace too. We care for those who are lost within our own families – it pains us. It disrupts our wider family and church life because there is visible division.

What about those around us outside the church who are on the road to eternal punishment in hell? Do we also wish them to receive the grace that we have experienced? Those who know the grace of God, extend grace to others: Those whose lives are a mess; Those who are different to them; To those who don’t readily fit into our culture and traditions. CofD Art 3:15 **“**As for those*who have not yet been called, we should pray for them to God who calls into existence the things that do not exist. But we must by no means act haughtily as if we had distinguished ourselves from them*”.

John Newton boasted in the Lord when he wrote of God’s grace: Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. He also said, “*I am not what I might be, I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I wish to be, I am not what I hope to be; but I thank God I am not what I once was, and I can say with the great apostle, 'By the grace of God I am what I am'*”. God’s grace is amazing in many ways including that man’s will is not taken away, but made alive. This is the topic of CofD Art 3:16 and the subject of our third point.

1. **God’s grace redirects, but does not remove, man’s will**

The vision of the valley of dead dry bones that came to life by God’s sovereign action and through no quality within themselves does illustrate that ‘*even when we were dead in our trespasses, God made us alive together with Christ*’ (Eph 2:5). Yet even the spiritually dead person has a human intellect and a will; they think thoughts and make decisions according to their desires, as we all do. They are physically alive, but their desire is not directed towards the Lord and His will.

God’s grace in giving spiritual life to each of His chosen people is not a mechanical act ‘as if people were blocks and stones’. The person who has been given faith by God does not lose their previous mind, will and affections. Their personality is not radically altered in such a way that they become someone else entirely. Rather God ‘*makes the will spiritually alive, heals it, corrects it, pleasantly and at the same time powerfully bends it*’. God’s grace not only gives faith but continues to grow faith as the Holy Spirit moulds and shapes character in co-operation with the believer. The Apostle Paul writes to the Ephesians about this work of grace in which God redirects the desire of His adopted children: “*God … works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure*” (Phil 2:13). It is the grace of God that enables us to live for Jesus.

You and I can have assurance that we have been saved by grace when we observe the progressive changes to our desires that occur as God continues to heal and correct our will. Some of these changes are listed in 2 Peter 1:5: Faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection and love. It has been my great joy to see these changes in people within our congregation over time as the Lord has graciously redirected the desires of his people here. In some people I have not had the privilege or opportunity to witness this redirection and correcting of their will, but I, like you, need to be careful to speak in the most favourable way, for the inner recesses of the heart are unknown to us.

How can we now respond to the grace of God in granting faith to His undeserving people? We can praise His holy name as we will do shortly, singing: *“Oh, the mercy of God, the glory of grace, that you chose to redeem us to forgive and restore, and you call us your children, chosen in him to be holy and blameless to the glory of God*”. Praise the Lord for His gracious gift of faith and His pleasantly powerful bending of our will so that our desire is first and foremost for Him and His will.

AMEN.