

Grace to You

The word “benediction” comes from two Latin words: “bene” means “good” and “diction” means “saying”. So a benediction is a “good saying”. The opposite of benediction is malediction or a “bad saying”. Our language is full of both. A malediction might be “curse you” or “damn you”; a benediction could be “good-bye”, “farewell” or “God bless you”.

Both benedictions and maledictions are based on an underlying assumption that words have power. And obviously that is true! Think of the power that several contrasting sets of words have in your life: “I love you” or “I hate you”; “You are beautiful” or “You are ugly”; “Have a great day” or “Get lost.” You can make or break a person’s life by looking him in the eye and speaking either a malediction or a benediction.

The Bible is a book of many benedictions and some maledictions, as well. But of all the benedictions in the Bible, there is one that leads the pack in number and in frequency throughout the Bible. It is “grace to you”. Let’s explore that benediction by looking first at Romans 1:1-7:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him and for his name’s sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Next, in I Corinthians 1:1-3:

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes.

To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours;

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The book of I Corinthians begins and ends in the same way. All of I Corinthians up to I Corinthians 16:21 had been written down for the Apostle Paul by a secretary. But at this point he picks up his pen and writes:

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.

If anyone does not love the Lord—a curse be on him. Come, O Lord!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.

My love to all of you in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Next he writes in II Corinthians 1:1-2,

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

To the church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout Achaia:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

II Corinthians also ends as it began. In verse 14 of the last chapter it says, “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

Galatians is the next book. Galatians 1:3 reads, “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The last verse of the book says, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.”

The book following Galatians is Ephesians. In verse 2 of the first chapter it says, “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” And at the

end of Ephesians in Ephesians 6:24 it says, “Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love.”

We read in Philippians 1:2, “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” And at the end of Philippians, the last verse says, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.”

When he wrote the book of Colossians, the Apostle Paul was in prison. In Colossians 1:1-2 he wrote:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

To the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse:

Grace and peace to you from God our Fa-

***Grace is God's goodness
for life's badness.***

ther.

In the last verse of Colossians he says, “I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.”

As we move on to I Thessalonians 1:1 we read:

Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you.

The last verse of I Thessalonians says, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.”

II Thessalonians 1:2 tells us, “Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” And the end of II Thessalonians, verse 18, says, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.”

Now that ends Paul’s letters to churches. But let’s look at the letters he writes to individuals. In I Timothy 1:1 he writes:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope,

To Timothy my true child in the faith:

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

As he begins I Timothy, he also ends I Timothy: “Grace be with you.”

He starts again in II Timothy:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

To Timothy, my dear son:

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

II Timothy ends in 4:22 with, “The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you.”

He then he writes in Titus 1:4:

To Titus, my true son in our common faith:

Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

And at the end of that book in verse 15, “Everyone with me sends you greetings. Greet those who love us in the faith. Grace be with you all.”

And then he writes to Philemon one of the shortest books of the entire New Testament. This book has only one chapter, but he writes it twice: In verse 3, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” And then again in verse 25, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.”

There are other New Testament authors who wrote the same benediction. The book of Hebrews doesn’t start that way, but it ends that way. Hebrews 13:24-25 says:

Greet all your leaders and all God’s people.

Those from Italy send you their greetings.

Grace be with all of you.

It is Peter who writes in I Peter 1:1-2:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To God’s elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood:

Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

II Peter starts the same way in 1:2, “Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.” It ends in II Peter 3:18, “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.”

The little book of II John, one of the smallest of the New Testament books, also has no chapter divisions, but verse 3 says, “Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father’s Son, will be with us in truth and love.”

And in the very last verse of the Bible, Revelation 22:21, John writes, “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen.”

Grace to you! God’s grace is for you to hear. Grace is God’s goodness for life’s badness. We all need encouragement. We need hope. We need grace.

A number of years ago, a lady once told me after a church service, “When I come to church I like to hear a sermon that walks all over me.” She is the exception. Most of us feel trampled on all week long and desperately need a word of encouragement. While it’s true that our sins must be confronted, most of us know all too well that we are sinners. While it’s true that we ought not think too highly of ourselves, for most of us that’s not a problem at all.

Do you hear what I’m saying? People are hurting, discouraged, disappointed, frightened and desperate. We need to hear the word of grace!

Grace to you! In difficulty God gives grace to endure. In fear God gives the grace of comfort. In pain God gives the grace to endure. In desperation God gives the grace of hope.

Listen to his grace! The Bible says God loves you “with an everlasting love.” Our God is the God of the resurrection—he brings the dead back to life! Not just dead bodies but dead marriages, dead businesses, dead relationships, dead dreams.

He is the God whose grace is always sufficient. There is absolutely nothing in your life or mine that he cannot handle. True, it doesn’t always seem that

way. Sometimes it seems that our problems are so big, our diseases so serious, our debts so great and our depressions so deep that there is nothing sufficient for them. Yet God says, “. . . my grace is sufficient for you!”

The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah lived through one of the bleakest periods in Israel’s history. Sin was rampant. The nation was in political shambles. Jerusalem was devastated. Jeremiah was a broken man. He took pen in hand and translated his tears into laments over the circumstances of his day, over the sin all around him and particularly over the City of Jerusalem. We call his book Lamentations. In the midst of those awful times he wrote in Lamentations 3:21-23:

. . . this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
Because of the Lord’s great love
we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

As I read that again I recalled a letter I received that touched my heart. It was written by a man that Charleen and I met in 1979 in Taichung, Taiwan. His name is Jim Cummings. Jim went as a single missionary to Taiwan. He lived with a Chinese family, mastered the Chinese language and worked his way into the hearts of the people there, leading many of them to Christ.

When we met him in Taichung, he offered to take a day out of his schedule to drive us up into the mountains to meet some of the people that he knew. I was impressed! Although I didn’t understand all the things that were said, I could sense the love in the relationship that was there.

Jim came to a point in his life where he wanted to do more than what he was able to do as an individual, so he accepted an invitation to become a professor of missions and to teach other people what he had learned through his lifetime career in

Taiwan. He moved to Denver and became a seminary professor. The rest of the story is picked up in the letter that says:

I think it was Napoleon who said, “A sentence of death wonderfully concentrates the mind.” Indeed that has been true for me and my family these past few months. That sentence of death came to me October 4, 1984, when I was

told I had a malignant melanoma, a particularly deadly cancer that races through the blood stream like an Olympic gold medallist gobbling up all the good cells it can find. The doctors couldn’t recommend any treatment that stood much of a chance against such a foe. We went home with this grim report hanging over our heads, virtually a death sentence. This seemed especially strange in light of the wonderful results the doctor had given me only a few months earlier following my annual physical exam.

My wife Maggie and I gathered our three daughters around us - our son came from Southern California later - and we broke the news to them. Maggie must have sensed that the doctor’s report would not be good because a few days earlier she had begun gathering special verses from the Scriptures. We prayed and cried together as we embraced, and Maggie shared with us some of those wonderful promises about God’s care, comfort and healing power. And then through our tears, we committed our situation and our lives to the Lord.

He said that “these have been the best of times and the worst of times for us.” He listed, with several paragraphs under each of his points, the lessons he had learned. He wrote:

I’ve come to understand more fully what it means to glorify God daily, even in my pain and struggles I’ve come to recognize more than ever now that the Lord cares about my family even more than I do I have also experienced first hand the unique ministry of the body of Christ I’ve gained a new awareness of trusting only in my Sovereign Heavenly Father.

It’s under that lesson that he wrote:

Well-meaning friends have come to us with scores of suggestions on how to receive God’s healing. Just try this cure, this pill, read this book. It would have

been easy for us to jump from one suggestion to another and to lose our perspective. It’s been important for us to understand that God is not playing some kind of divine shell game with us. He is not saying, “Just turn over the right shell and you’ll find the key to divine healing.” But he is teaching us to walk by faith day by day knowing that he is at work.

In difficulty God gives grace to endure. In fear God gives the grace of comfort. In pain God gives the grace to endure. In desperation God gives the grace of hope.

Maybe God is pruning me for some fruitful work in the days ahead. Perhaps he's preparing me for a ministry of comfort to others. Maybe he's just showing our family that his grace and love are all-sufficient. Whatever the case, our trusting only in the Lord is the highest form of worship we can offer him. There is nothing we can do more important than this.

We've learned to give ourselves to prayer as never before.

And then his last lesson, the one I particularly draw to your attention. He wrote:

We've also come to understand God's faithfulness in a deeper way. We have been able to say with Jeremiah, "Great is thy faithfulness." His mercies are, indeed, new every morning. And with Paul, "My strength is made perfect in weakness."

God's grace is sufficient for me.

Listen to what Jim wrote. Listen to what God says. Listen to the truth, even though all the clamor of this world seems to drown out God's word of grace. Hear it! Listen to it! Grace to you! God's grace to you! Powerful grace. Perfect grace. Sufficient grace. God's grace to you! Grace for you to hear . . . and grace for you to speak.

There's a power to the words of grace that are spoken. It was shown in Acts 20 when the Apostle Paul gathered around him some of his best friends, the elders of the Ephesian church, and reflected on those years he had been with them and all that had transpired. He then warned them that they faced exceedingly difficult days. And in Acts 20:32 Paul told them what to do when the difficulties came. He said, "I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified." Paul is saying that our speaking "the word of grace" to others will build them up, enable them to cope and give them strength and victory.

I once overheard my father tell about the turning point in his nearly fatal battle with illness following surgery. The doctors weren't getting anywhere. He became weaker and weaker. Then a Christian man came to his room and gave him a Bible verse from the Lord. It was the "word of grace that was able to build him up." Everything changed. The race toward death was turned around. It was a new beginning—all because a Christian friend spoke a word of grace.

Think of the thousands of words we all speak to one another—words of greeting, words of worry, words of criticism, frivolous words, routine words. But how many are words of grace? We need to recognize the spiritual power God has given us to bestow

God's grace on others. Speak to others the words of the Bible that can make the difference. Tell someone, "God loves you." Say to someone, "May the Lord bless you and keep you." Look another Christian in the eye and say, "God's grace to you." Write notes of encouragement reminding others of God's grace. Pray for God's grace on others. God has given us his grace to speak to others!

To whom should we speak the word of grace? The Apostle Paul spoke to the Romans, the Corinthians, the Galatians, the Ephesians, the Philippians, the Colossians, the Thessalonians and to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon. In other words, to everyone he could!

God has given every one of us a long list of people to whom we may speak God's love and grace: family; friends; co-workers; teachers; students; customers; clients; parishioners. To groups of people, to individuals, to people who were doing relatively well and those who are desperate to hear a word of hope and a word of grace. God has put into our lives men and women and boys and girls who need to hear God's encouraging word of grace.

We dare not miss the golden opportunities. We dare not shout when we could speak the word of grace. We must not be silent when we could encourage. We must be careful not to tear down when we could build up.

Imagine the impact we will have and we will receive when we "speak the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance."

Now I conclude with a benediction for you. Listen to the words that the Apostle Paul, by God's inspiration, spoke to the Corinthians, but words that are for us today as well: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen."

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