

As we enter into these “gesima” Sundays – the three Sundays before Lent begins, the focus becomes one on grace. In Lent, we’ll hear about all that Christ has done for us; in these Sundays before, we hear about why. Knowing that our Lord went to the cross for us, not grudgingly but graciously, helps to shape our response to this act of grace.

That idea – how we respond to the grace of God – is a key point that St. Paul makes in our Epistle lesson this morning. And so, we’ll consider the grace of God, and then how do we respond to it.

So first, when we speak of God’s grace, what exactly are we talking about? Grace is something that we as Christians talk about all the time and so it never hurts to briefly pause and ask the old Catechism question: “What does this mean?”

One simple way of defining grace is that grace is God’s undeserved favor toward sinners. Again, grace is God’s undeserved favor toward sinners.

We never earn or merit or deserve grace – it’s always freely shown to us by God. And it’s shown despite the fact that we are sinners, opposed to the holy God and who really deserve God’s punishment, not His favor. Grace is when God gives us good things, or looks upon us with kindness, despite the fact that we deserve the opposite.

St. Paul highlights God’s grace in the history of the ancient Israelites. Speaking of them, he writes, “For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.”

They were under the cloud, the cloud of God’s presence, guidance, and protection, because God in grace had come to them. They passed through the sea, being led out of bondage in Egypt and then having their enemies drowned in the waters, because God in grace used His mighty power to rescue them.

In grace, God made His covenant with them through Moses, using the cloud and sea to symbolize this. As they journeyed, God graciously provided for them – literal bread from heaven and water from rocks for their bodies, and His word and presence with them as food and drink for their souls.

Despite all their complaining and rebellion, the preincarnate Christ remained with them as their Rock.

Moving ahead roughly 1500 years, Christ would bring forth the fulfillment of all these events that had pointed to Him. Instead of the rock being struck by Moses’s staff to give water to the people, Jesus Christ, the Rock, would have His side pierced by a Roman soldier’s spear, giving forth blood and water to pay for sin and wash away transgression.

He would send His disciples out to baptize, not into Moses, but into the Holy Trinity, joining them to the life of God Himself. After ascending into heaven, Jesus would send the Holy Spirit, so that the God of Israel might not dwell in just one cloud over the tabernacle, but in the hearts of all who believe. And all this was done by the Lord out of grace.

These gifts are of course still graciously given today by our Lord. Though not visible, His protection is constantly with us as the cloud was with the ancient Israelites.

His word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, shining in the pages of Scripture even brighter than the pillar of fire. We are baptized into His holy name, joined to Him by water and the word which washes our sins away and drowns the old sinful flesh that seeks our destruction. Jesus gives His flesh and blood to be our food and drink, preserving us both in body and soul as we travel through the wilderness of this life toward the promised land of heaven.

He is our Rock, just as He was for the Israelites, for the apostles, and for His people of all time. And again, all of this is freely given to us by our Lord out of His grace.

How then shall we respond to these gifts? How should we live as those who have been baptized into His holy name? In our reading, St. Paul gives us both an example of what not to do and what to do.

As to what not to do, the apostle reminds us of what happened to most of those Israelites who were given those gifts. He writes, “Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.” Despite receiving so much through the grace of God, the Israelites took that grace for granted and responded with pride.

After where our reading ends, Paul gives several examples. He talks about how the people made a golden calf, a god who would look impressive but stand there silently while they indulged in whatever sins they desired. He references when the people indulged in sexual immorality with the peoples of Moab and Midian. He recalls when they put Christ to the test by despising His gifts and growing impatient with His direction.

Throughout their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, the people repeatedly grumbled and complained, pridefully thinking that they knew better than God, seeing themselves as entitled to the grace He’d given and wanting more besides. When God wouldn’t give them what they wanted right away, they’d threaten to kill Moses, or return to Egypt, or worship idols like the Baal of Peor.

In despising God’s grace, they therefore brought His wrath down on themselves. Thousands and thousands fell to the sword, and to plagues, and to poisonous serpents. God doesn’t delight in doing this to His people, but if they persist in despising His grace, they will all finally end up in the eternal destruction of hell. So He sends punishment, to turn them away from condemnation and back to Himself.

We need to consider these words of warning very carefully in our own day. As Paul writes in the verse immediately following our reading, “Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.”

Our sinful flesh constantly tempts us as Christians to respond to the grace of God with pride. We might think that, because we're baptized, we can do whatever we want and God has to bring us to heaven, that we're entitled to salvation. Or we're tempted to believe that, because we've received God's grace, we're above God's word and can pick and choose what parts we want to hear and what parts we want to dismiss. Or, following in the footsteps of the ancient Israelites, we take God's provision for granted and despise His gifts, thinking that we know a better way and if we were gods, we'd do things better.

Such despising of God's grace will bring the wrath of God upon us just as it did the ancient Israelites, either as punishment in this life or even as condemnation in the next. Therefore, when we fall into such thinking, when the Holy Spirit convicts us that we are walking in the same path as the people of old, we must repent, begging our Lord for His forgiveness and asking for strength to change our ways.

By the grace of God, we also know what the answer will be to such begging: "You are forgiven!" God tells us in His word, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Our Lord is ever gracious, always welcoming those who turn back to Him.

He is always willing to set us back on the path toward the eternal promised land. And in His word, He shows us how we should walk in light of His grace, to our blessing and to the blessing of those in our lives.

This is the other part of our Epistle lesson, which actually comes before the examples of ancient Israel. At the end of chapter 9, Paul shows us the right way to respond to the grace of God, namely with thanksgiving and godly living. To make this point, the apostle uses the illustration of a runner competing in a race. He says, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it."

No one in a serious race is there for a participation trophy. You're in the race to win it. And as Paul points out, only one person wins. Now, does this mean that we're all competing against each other, that the goal in life is to be better than the person next to you so you can win the award of eternal life? Not at all! Otherwise, grace would be meaningless!

The one person who has won the great race is none other than Jesus Christ. He is the one who has triumphed over sin, death, and hell, who has overcome the prince of darkness and the grave. He is the one praised by the hosts of heaven, who gather around Him, endlessly crying out, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!"

So if Christ has already won the victory, what then should we do? Should we just give up and scratch, leave the track and head to the concession stands? Since we can't win the perfection of God for ourselves, should we just go on sinning? Not at all!

Even aside from Scripture, we would agree that would be a bad thing. Think about when you've watched races or other athletic events. Maybe you've seen a race where the last person is

getting absolutely left in the dust. If that person just gave up and walked off the course, it would be seen as shameful.

But when that person keeps on running, pushing and pushing even though there's no way he'll be winning, it's seen as a good and praiseworthy thing. Often times such a person will get even more applause and cheering when he finally comes down the home stretch than the person who took first place! That athlete is praised because he's still running to obtain the prize, even though it's hopelessly out of reach.

We Christians run the race of life in a similar fashion, but for us, the prize isn't out of reach. Yes, Christ is the one who has won the prize, but out of His boundless grace He desires to share it with us. He is waiting for us at the finish line, to give us that imperishable wreath, that crown of unfading glory. We don't deserve it in the least, and yet still He gives it to us – gladly!

We run, not to win the prize by our own efforts, but to receive that which Christ has already won for us. The splendor of heaven, the end of all strife and sorrow, the joyful reunion with those who have gone before us in the faith, the perfection of the new creation, the indescribable goodness flowing from the presence of God Himself – that's what we're running towards. We're running toward our Savior, who stands at the finish line with open arms, waiting to receive us.

And while He is at the finish line, by His limitless power as God, He also is with us as we run. He is with us in His word, admonishing us when we'd want to stray, encouraging us when the race is long, cheering us as we run faithfully in His footsteps. He strengthens us with the Sacrament – His own body and blood – sustaining us just as He sustained His people in the wilderness. When we stumble, He picks us back up with His words of forgiveness. When we feel short of breath – poor in Spirit – He puts His Spirit – the very breath of God – into us.

He also reminds us that we are not just running for ourselves, but for the sake of those watching us. As Paul writes, our race must be run with discipline, lest what we say we believe and how we live contradict each other and we be disqualified. If we give up running, or head off down paths of our own choosing, then others will see, and think that the grace of God must not be that great, if even God's people don't pursue it.

But when we do run, pressing on even when it seems that we're so far behind that it's hopeless, then others see that and are led to think that this prize that Christians are striving for must be worth something. Our Lord uses our example to lead others to join us in the race, to share in the gifts of grace that He has won for us.

As you run the race, striving to run in the path shown by the Lord's word, remember that you run by the grace of God in Christ Jesus. Look back and see, like the ancient Israelites, all the places where God has already shown you His grace in your life, and then press on, fixing your eyes on Jesus, who awaits at the end with the glorious prize of salvation that He has already won for you and will give you by His grace.

Run in such a way that the words of St. Paul, written toward the end of His earthly race, may be yours as well: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.”

In the name of Jesus, amen.