

## 2 Corinthians 6:1-2

And working together with Him, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain - for He says, "AT THE ACCEPTABLE TIME I LISTENED TO YOU, AND ON THE DAY OF SALVATION I HELPED YOU"; behold, now is "THE ACCEPTABLE TIME," behold, now is "THE DAY OF SALVATION".

My Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

The Epistle lesson for today talks about several things. Paul writes about his mission and proclamation, he writes about what he has endured for the sake of the proclamation, and he writes about the urgency of salvation. If I were to preach on all three, we would be here for a while. So I am going to focus on the last one only. It speaks about the urgency of salvation. Our theme is, "It's Now or Never."

Paul has just written about how God is entreating us to be reconciled to Him. He said, "He made Him who knew no sin of His own to be sin on our behalf, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him." Then Paul writes that we should "not to receive the grace of God in vain." To respond to this exhortation, of course, we have to have some idea of what he is talking about. We have to ask what He means by the grace of God, and then we have to ask how one receives it "in vain."

So, what does He mean by the phrase, "the grace of God"? He means, in this case, the whole Gospel. He means that entire story about the Son of God coming to earth, taking on human form and human nature and making the commitment to us that becoming one of us means. Paul proclaimed that God became One of us. He took on our nature and our

burdens and He bore the whole Law of God. He faced extraordinary temptations, like those in the Bible account of the confrontation of Jesus with the devil. But He faced many more and greater temptations than those. He faced the temptation to destroy those who taunted and tortured Him. He faced the temptation to wipe away with a thought the gross sinners around Him. He faced the temptation daily to pack it all in and drop the flesh and return to heaven.

Do you know why He did not? Because He knew that without Him, we were lost. Without Jesus, we have no hope. So, Jesus resisted all the temptations and stayed the course and kept the Law and then died innocent, bearing our guilt and our sins and God's own wrath over our rebellion. He carried it to the cross and nailed it to the cross in His own body and died there in your place and mine. He could see that price with divine precision already in Gethsemane, which is why He prayed so fervently, and why His sweat came like great drops of blood. He faced the moment toward which all of history had worked. He knew that, on that night, our salvation was now or never, so He faced it in that moment of "now". He paid the price of our sins and rebellion. He suffered horribly, and died for you and for me. And now He pours out forgiveness and everlasting life for all who will receive it. All that is needed to receive it is to know the truth, and to trust God to keep His Word and raise us from the dead, and bring us into that everlasting life in glory.

That is the grace of God. And you have just received it. You have heard it. That is one form of receiving. If you heard what I just said and did not believe it, or apply what Jesus did and gives to your sins and your guilt, then you have received the grace of God in vain - you have received it as if it were empty and worthless and powerless to save. It doesn't matter whether you might have dismissed my teaching and

preaching about forgiveness, or simply did not make the connection between Jesus' death and your life, you would have treated the grace of God as either a lie, or a meaningless fantasy - having no relevance to your life. Either way, that is what "in vain" means.

Another way to receive the grace of God in vain is to hear it and accept it as true, but not allow it to have any part in shaping your life, who you are, how you think, or what you do. The Gospel is a transforming power. It changes people. I want you to understand that I did not say that it can or may change people. I said that it changes people! The Gospel creates faith in us. The Gospel teaches us how to serve God. The Gospel creates the desire in us to be new people in Jesus Christ. The Gospel teaches us stewardship - you know, using the things of God which He has given to us for our use in ways that will accomplish His will and bring praise to His name. All of which is to say that the grace of God, received by us through faith, will accomplish all of these wonderful things.

Yet some people come to church each week and go home unchanged. They live for their pleasures. They chafe against the Word of God, and do not humble themselves before it. The service is "church" and life is everyday, and the two rarely, if ever, mix. The opinions of such people are not altered by what they hear or "believe", nor are they shaped by the Word of God. They are shaped by family and friends. Their behavior - what they will do and what they won't do - is just like everyone around them. They are afraid to be different. They make their decisions on the basis of what they want rather than what they understand God wants, or what is clear in His Word. They, too, receive the grace of God in vain.

Now, I know that every one of us can identify to some degree with what I have just described. That is because every one of us has the battle of the flesh going on in us - our spirit, shaped by God and His grace, does battle every day with our flesh, which is shaped by our sinfulness and the corruption of our society around us. The fact that we can identify with some of what is clearly wrong does not excuse the things that are wrong. Rather, that fact should cause us to examine ourselves and repent, and seek to put right what is wrong within us so that we do not receive the grace of God in vain - that is, receive the grace of God in such a way that we also deny it and build within ourselves the edifice of sin and death that we have seen destroyed by Jesus with His passion, grace and forgiveness. If we excuse sin because we, too are guilty, or rest secure in even our sins without repentance, we shall go to hell at the last - to die eternally, and yet never been over and done with it - dead and gone; we shall suffer the torments of the damned - fire and pain and grief and remorse, along with Satan and his demonic hoard forever.

The life of the Christian is a life of self-examination and repentance, and renewal at the fountain of God's grace - the Word proclaimed, and the gift of the holy Sacrament of the body and blood of Christ. I admit it doesn't sound like fun at all times - or even tolerably pleasant at some times. But this is the life of the Christian. I hear God's Word, and I apply it to myself. I examine myself in the light of God's Word and I find my sins and failures and fears, and I repent. I ask God to remove them and strengthen me. It is frustrating and difficult at times. But it is the life of a Christian. It is not part of the life of a Christian, it is the life - an on-going process that we dare never turn away from, for fear that our flesh will confuse us, and deceive us, and lead us into mis-belief, or despair, or other great shame and vice.

The rest of the Epistle is Paul describing what the "now or never" approach to the Gospel meant for his life and the life of the other Apostles. It meant beatings and stonings and persecution on a scale we might have difficulty imagining. He tells us all of that so that we may not fool ourselves and imagine that accepting the grace of God will be all sweetness and light. But bearing the scorn and persecution of the world is part of genuinely accepting the grace of God. It means we are not 'fair-weather friends' but disciples. It demonstrates that we truly believe, so much so that we will face the hostility of the world and the hardships that the confession of the truth bring upon us. We want to embrace that grace of God with all of our might, come what may, for we know that the time is coming when we will need it - but the moment of our greatest need is not known in advance, so its now, or never.

Paul also reminds us that God never leaves us helpless in the face of these troubles which follow His grace around. We also have what he calls "the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left." We have the Holy Spirit, and the Word of truth, and the power of God with us. We have the fellowship of the saints, and the mutual consolation of the brethren - for we all face the same pressures, the same sorts of pains, and the same kinds of sorrows. We can support one another in the patient endurance which is the calling of the disciples of our Lord who have received the grace of God to good effect.

Today is the day of salvation. Now is the acceptable time. It's now or never! So, come on in. God is freely forgiving sins and freely giving eternal life and salvation to all who believe. You don't need to earn it in any way -- you can't. Paul says we are working together with Jesus Christ. We work by His grace and by His power and by His help and guidance. But we share in the work. He gives grace, and we receive, and we walk in that paths the God sets before us - and they are not

simply pleasant or simply awful in this life - but a little of each, and you should be prepared, so that you do not receive the grace of God in vain, but with understanding, and commitment, and purpose, and faith. Don't wait. It's now or never.