

“What is this grace?” Rom 1:1-7

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Good question for the 4th Sunday in Advent - what is grace? How would you explain – what is grace? It could be described as a gift that is completely free and entirely undeserved.

And you all have received such gift from God, God's grace, which is completely free, and, this is important, entirely undeserved. Today we will use these few verses from Paul's letter to Romans, and will try to picture and understand what is this free and undeserved gift that we all have received.

I want you to listen to what we will discuss today with clear understanding that you are recipients of God grace. That you, each of you, have already received this grace about which we will talk today. It has been given to you already.

Therefore, you should listen to everything that we'll discuss as to your story; the story about God's grace that He prepared and now gives to you. It all begun in the very beginning.

We can't comprehend it, but even before the world was created God chose you to be His children, His saints, and ultimately to dwell with Him forever, and then He showed His grace to you, which resulted in ... you being here today.

Listen to this story. Our first parents rebelled against their gracious Creator. They thought that they will be something more if they won't listen to Him and will make up their own mind.

This is the curse of entire humanity. The Bible calls it sin. We are born with it. It determines how we act. It explains why from the moment when we could move we act so selfishly.

Our sin is what makes us rebel to against our gracious Creator and to dream that if only we won't listen to Him, we will have a better life. What a blind foolishness it is.

This is the problem for entire humanity. Us, Christians, including. How often do you want to listen to your God, and how often do you just want to do what you want?

How often do you look for God's gracious and wise will, and how often do you think that you know better? This is, why we examine ourselves before the confession and absolution – so that we would see how much we fail to live according God's wisdom.

The rebellion of our first parents brought sin, sufferings and death into this world. But as soon as this had happened, the Son of God, the Second person of the Trinity spoke to our parents right away.

And do you know what He said? “You have brought death and destruction into my wonderful creation. The consequences will be devastating, your rebellion will lead to so much sufferings and pain that your children will cause to one another.

But, I promise that I will take care of it. I will destroy sin and death, I will put an end to all pain and suffering and I will restore this wonderful creation in its perfect goodness. This I promise. Just one thing, – it will require my life in exchange to yours. And I will give it. I promise.”

As time went this promise was repeated again and again through God's servants - prophets, and for our sake recorded in what we know today and the Bible. As centuries and millennia pasted by, this God's promise begun to take more and more specific form.

The One, who will come and restore the goodness of God's creation, will be descendent of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He will come from the tribe of Judah. He will be like Moses. He will be the Son of the king David according to flesh.

Meaning, He will be something much more than just a man. Otherwise it wouldn't be necessary to mention ‘according to flesh’ as we all are flesh. He will be, as Isaiah foretold, God with us, Immanuel.

And all this time, preparing to rescue His creation from sin and death, all this time gracious God had you in His mind. He did all of this for you. All this time the Son of God knew what will happen and how much this grace will cost Him, and He was prepared to do it for you.

Then, in the fullness of time, He came down from the heaven and was born as one of us, He suffered and died for you and then, exactly as He had promised, on the third day He rouse again, defeating sin and death.

Basically, defeating anything that our reason can master. The resurrection! For Paul and for you, the resurrection of Jesus is not simply His resurrection. It is *the resurrection* from the dead. He is the firstborn of the dead. This is God's gracious plan of salvation.

As Jesus was raised from the dead in the power of the Holy Spirit, so you, too, by God's grace have received the same Holy Spirit as a guarantee that you also will be raised in new, perfect, eternal bodies to live with Jesus forever.

The resurrection of Jesus is simply the beginning of this new creation that gracious Creator has promised to us. If you are united with Jesus through your baptism, you'll also be united with Jesus in the day of resurrection.

Then you will dwell in this new creation in the presence of God, in eternal blessedness, joy and happiness. This is His promise to you.

Do you want to know what grace is, as completely free and entirely undeserved gift? Here it is, God's grace for you! All of this gracious God has done for you and gives to you. Freely. Undeservedly.

And this is not all. If God only did what we just discussed, then how would it help you? How would you even know about it? Without more of God's grace you wouldn't.

It is by His grace that Jesus called His apostles, and He also called Paul. He called him so that everyone could hear what this gracious God has done. Jesus sent His messengers to deliver this message, these Good News about what God has done for you to the ends of the earth.

Jesus gave them the same Holy Spirit, in whose power He did His ministry among us. And He promised that wherever these Good News will be proclaimed His Spirit will accompany these words and will give life, eternal life to those who listen to this message.

Jesus called the apostles, apostles called the next generation of disciples, they the next and so on. We call all these people – the Church. This is how you heard about Jesus. This is how you received the Holy Spirit.

This is how this gracious God rescued you from the power of sin and death. Through His Church. Where the Good News are proclaimed. Where the life-giving Sacraments are given to God's people.

This is where God's grace made you His child. This is where God's grace happens for you. It is completely free. Free for you. But remember, to Jesus, the Son of God, it costed His life.

Also, remember, this gift is entirely undeserved. For how could we, who are born rebellious against our Creator, who don't know Him and don't want to know Him, who only care for ourselves, how could we deserve this gift?

How could we deserve this gracious God caring about us and preparing our salvation long before we were born? How could we deserve God's only Son sacrificing Himself for us? The gift of forgiveness and eternal life is entirely undeserved. But here it is, offered to each of you.

Now imagine, if there was a human being who would be in total control over your life, and who would have done that much for you? What would your attitude towards him/her be? Now, be honest and examine what is your attitude

towards Jesus Christ like? Now, think what do you deserve with your attitude towards Jesus?

This is God's grace in its fullness, that regardless of who you are, and how much you ignore, neglect, rebel against Jesus, He doesn't withdraw His promises and still cares for you. He remains faithful. He keeps waiting for you, He keeps protecting you and leading you to your heavenly home. By His grace.

One last thought. Paul calls Christians in Rome saints. He does it in other letters as well. It is important for us to understand what he means by saints. We tend to imagine that saints are truly good people, morally superior than others.

Those who live very good and moral lives. And then we tend to imagine that this description would suit us. And if we do so, then we begin to look down at others, who are not as saintly as we are. What could we have in common?!

God's grace. God's grace is what we have in common. When Paul speaks about saints, what he means is – people, to whom God has showed His grace. People who have received this free and undeserved gift.

People, whom God has chosen to be with Him. And God is not a man. He doesn't look for good people, whom He could choose. Sure, He can choose people, whom we consider good, but at the same time He chooses those, who really need His grace.

He chooses tax collectors, and prostitutes. He chooses thieves and robbers. He chooses addicts and adulterers. He chooses liars and murderers. He calls all of us, whatever we are, and whatever messy our lives have been.

He makes us His saints. How? He gives us His Holy Spirit and He changes our hearts. And He will raise us again in new bodies, without sin, where the old things will be gone, and we will live with Him. We don't deserve it. No one does. But He still does it.

And once it hits our hearts what God's grace is, there is no more grumbling and complaining about those who are not as good as we are. Instead, there is humble gratitude for the grace that we have received, and true joy, for others have received it as well.

For this is, what saint means. A sinner who has freely received God's entirely undeserved grace. This is what we all are. Saved by grace. By grace alone, and not by thinking that we are better than others sinners.

Paul concludes this introduction by His famous greeting. "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul begins almost every letter with these words.

And, as you have noticed, the same words pastors say before the sermon. Grace and peace to you! We have heard what grace means. God's free and entirely undeserved gifts of forgiveness and eternal life.

What is this peace that Paul mentions? It comes from Hebrew word shalom, which means much more than simple absence of conflict. It means total, all embracing well-being. Physical, emotional, social, spiritual well-being.

When everything is as it is supposed to be. This was our state in paradise. Shalom. This will be our state in new heavens and new earth. Shalom. Peace. And this is what Jesus has brought you.

God's grace brings you God's peace. We all are sent to proclaim and to live this message, so that through us God could extend His grace to all people, and so that all people who live in this broken world would have the hope of having God's peace.

Remember what these words mean and say them to one another. Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.