

That ye receive not the grace of God in vain

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There is a famous and popular garden known for its irises in South Carolina which began by mistake. Almost one hundred years ago, an amateur gardener bought cases of Japanese irises and planted them on his property. According to the local version of the story, he planted the iris bulbs upside down, and the flowers never came up. Frustrated, the gardener dug them all up, and ordered them to be thrown into a nearby swamp. To the surprise of all, that spring, hundreds of irises bloomed around the swamp. Over time the swamp of irises was cultivated into a garden and is now home to eight species of swans. What began as a mistake, planting bulbs upside down, then digging them up and throwing them into a swamp, has become one of the greatest small-town attractions for generations.

I tell you this story about the iris garden because it is a good analogy of what we are to think about God's grace. God's grace is freely given to all. It is very possible to receive God's grace in vain, which is kind of like planting flower bulbs upside down. If bulbs are planted upside down it is thought that they spend all their energy growing downward, then bending around, trying to grow upward and not quite making it to the light. Some say it is possible for flower bulbs to right themselves, for the flower to still grow and bloom even if they are planted upside down. But if that was always true, gardeners would not insist on there being a right way and a wrong way to plant a flower bulb. Likewise, receiving God's grace in vain means not cooperating with it. Yet, as so many have learned, it is only when we let go of our own designs and plans that the grace of God blooms and flourishes in our lives. We let go in frustration, and without realizing it, finally let God move in our life. Regardless of whether we know how to respond to it or not, *God's grace is always available to us, it is always being poured out on us, it is always made available to us through the Church. But we can fail to co-operate with it. Grace is God's unmerited goodness and favor towards us, to bring us into union with Himself, and it is always available in the Holy Spirit.*¹

We see in the Epistle for today that St. Paul has not received the grace of God in vain. He does not take it for granted. Instead, even though it seems as if he has thrown all his flower bulbs into a swamp, even though he must have

¹ Hewett, P. C. (2021). *A Mighty Salvations: Cathedral sermons* (-1st ed., pp. 91-92). URLink.

sometimes felt that he had cast his pearls before swine, he remains steadfast in spreading the Gospel far and wide. He responds to the Grace of God, he cultivates it in himself, which is what he intends for us to do as well. He would have us to respond to and cultivate the grace of God so that it grows and blooms in us into patience, even though we join him in facing afflictions, necessities, and distress, and even in the extreme situations of persecution and imprisonment for Christ's sake. In short, St. Paul would have us to be the very models of God's grace and patience even in amid chaos. He hopes that the other virtues of God's grace will bloom in us too, by watching and fasting, so that we may grow in purity, holy knowledge, long-suffering, kindness, and in the Holy Ghost. St. Paul shows us how to walk in the world and still grow in virtue, *as unknown and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.*

Jesus Christ, the role model for us all, the only one we should ever measure ourselves against, never received grace in vain, even when sorely tempted in the wilderness. This is one of the occasions in the scriptures where we really learn *What would Jesus Do?* Each time He is tempted, even after forty days of fasting and hunger, He rebukes the tempter with the Word of God. He is the Word Incarnate, and He uses the Word to keep Himself on track. Instead of turning stones into bread, He uses hunger as a source of spiritual power and victory. Instead of throwing Himself down from the pinnacle of the Temple, He insists on simple, humble trust in how the Father wants to do things. Instead of getting power from Satan, all that the world can offer, He puts first the claims of His Father for worship and service. The lies of the world, the flesh, and the devil get thrown back in Satan's face. Jesus shows us where our priorities should lie, He shows us how to receive the grace of God in true humility.²

Our Bishop loves to say that if we are to receive the grace of God, then we *must fast from the vices and feed on the virtues.*³ This is what Lent is all about, this is what the Christian life is all about. Our entire lives should be a fasting from vices and a feasting on virtues. But it is during these forty days before Easter that we endeavor to follow Christ into the wilderness, and there tackle the vices that try to separate us from God and His Grace the most. The Church takes this so seriously that it has prescribed the Exhortation to be read today. It

² Hewett, P. C. (2021). *A Mighty Salvation: Cathedral sermons* (-1st ed., pp. 91-92). URLink.

³ Ibid.

is a rather sober warning to us all, that we who *intend to come and receive the Holy Communion of the Body and Blood of our Savior Christ, must consider how St. Paul exhorts all persons to diligently try and examine themselves before we presume to eat of that Bread and drink of that Cup. For truly the benefits and the graces we receive through Holy Communion are great, but so is the danger great, if we receive the same unworthily⁴, if we receive the Grace of God in vain. It is yet another reminder to fast from the vices and feast on the virtues. That with the seed of Holy Communion, the virtues of repentance, a lively faith, and perfect charity with all may bloom in our souls.*

Let us receive not the grace of God in vain. Let us fast from the vices and feast on the virtues. That this Lent and for the rest of our lives we may always be a people disposed to give continual thanks to God, for His grace that He so freely pours out on us all, *submitting ourselves wholly to His Holy Will and Pleasure, and studying to serve Him in true holiness and righteousness all the days of our life. Amen.*

⁴ 1928 BCP. Pgs. 85-84