

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 20, 2011**

**GRACE AFTER GRACE**

**John 1:1-16**

Do you know who Louis Zamperini is? I've wanted to tell you about him for some time. I had never heard of him until a few years ago, when I came across his name in the midst of my doctor of ministry study of revival movements and methods. You may not know who he is, but in the 1930s and 40s, people all across America recognized his name. Louis Zamperini was one of several celebrities who came to faith in Christ during an eight-week evangelistic campaign held in a massive tent known as the "Canvas Cathedral" set up on a lot in downtown Los Angeles in the fall of 1949. The campaign was led by a fiery, young Baptist preacher from North Carolina named Billy Graham. (Graham was only 30 years old when the campaign started in September 1949.) In His providence, God used the high-profile conversions of Louis Zamperini and others to heighten awareness of and increase interest in the revival taking place at the corner of Washington and Hill Streets. And, God used the Los Angeles Campaign, and the thousands of lives which were changed there, to make Billy Graham a nationally-known figure who would go on to preach the message of the gospel – the message of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone – to more people than anyone in history.

You may still be wondering who Louis Zamperini is, and why I bring up his name today. Let me tell you a little about him. Born in 1917, he is still alive today at the age of 94. An outstanding runner who, for several years, held the national collegiate record for the mile, Zamperini made the 1936 U. S. Olympic team, and was the first American finisher in the 5000 meter race at the Berlin Olympics. Had he continued his career as a runner, some people believe, he might have been the first to break the four-minute barrier in the mile. But in September 1941, just three months before Pearl Harbor, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps. During World War II, he served as a bombardier on a B-24 in the South Pacific. On May 27, 1943, some 800 miles from base in Hawaii, his bomber lost an engine and crashed into the Pacific. Zamperini and one other crew member survived on a life raft for 47 days, confronting sharks, starvation, and dementia, before being rescued by the Japanese Navy. Zamperini spent the next two years as a POW at a notorious Japanese prison, where he and other American POWs endured physical torture and mental abuse. A guard named Watanabe, nicknamed "the Bird," was especially cruel and heartless in his relentless attempts to break the spirits of the Americans.

Louis Zamperini was officially declared dead in 1944. Nobody knew he had survived the airplane crash the previous year. So, when he returned home in California when the war was over, it was big news. His fame skyrocketed. But he did not handle it well. It was not well with his soul. He descended into a self-made prison of bitterness and alcoholism. He suffered constant nightmares about his experiences as a POW, and was consumed with an obsession to kill the Bird in revenge. But that changed, and changed dramatically, in October 1949, when he walked into the Canvas Cathedral where Billy Graham was preaching, heard

the gospel, and, drawn to faith in Christ and regenerated by the power of the Holy Spirit, Louis Zamperini put his trust in Christ for salvation.

If you'd like to know the rest of the story of his life, I've got a book to recommend to you. It is called *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption*, by Laura Hillenbrand (who also wrote *Seabiscuit*). I'll tell you just a tiny bit more today. Hillenbrand says this of Zamperini, after he had come to faith in Christ: "When (Louie) thought of his history, what resonated with him now was not all that he had suffered but the divine love that he believed had intervened to save him. He was not the worthless, broken, forsaken man that the Bird had striven to make him. In a single, silent moment, his rage, his fear, his humiliation and helplessness, had fallen away. That morning, he believed, he was a new creation."

A year later, in October 1950, Zamperini returned to Japan and spoke on the power of forgiveness at the prison where he had been held. The audience included many of his former captors, but the Bird wasn't there. When he learned that the Bird had taken his own life, says Hillenbrand, "(Louie) felt something he had never felt for his captor before. With a shiver of amazement, he realized it was compassion. At that moment, something shifted sweetly inside him. It was forgiveness.... For Louie Zamperini, the war was over."

*Grace* is written all over the story of Louis Zamperini. On a life raft in the Pacific for 47 days and then subject to torture and deprivation in a Japanese POW prison for two years, Louis Zamperini was given grace to endure hardships we can hardly imagine. He received grace from a Source he did not even know at that time in his life. It was grace from God, who had a gracious, redemptive plan for his life, and never let Louie out of His sight.

After the War, in the providence of God, during Billy Graham's 1949 Los Angeles Campaign, Louis Zamperini was given saving grace, grace received through faith in Christ. He was given grace to be saved, grace to receive forgiveness for all his sins, grace to be set free from the past and free from the power of sin and guilt, the grace God has shown to us in the person and work of His Son Jesus Christ, who took our sins upon Himself and gave His life for us and our salvation in His death on the cross. As the Bible says in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "God made Him who had no sin (Jesus) to be a sin offering for us" in order to restore us to a right relationship with Him. That, my friends, is grace.

Then, having received grace to endure and grace to be saved, Louis Zamperini was given grace to forgive, as well. He was given grace from God to enable him to act in grace toward those who had treated him with ungrace at its worst. As we have seen the last two Sundays, to act in grace toward others is the central idea in Ephesians 4:32, where Paul tells us to forgive one another just as God in Christ forgave us. We are to act in grace toward each other, just as God has acted in grace toward us in the saving work of Christ.

In all of this, Louis Zamperini was given grace from the Lord Jesus Christ, who is described by the apostle John in the opening verses of his Gospel as the Word of God who took on our flesh and blood, and came "to tabernacle" with us – to make His dwelling among us in this world (John 1:1-4, 14). He became fully man without for a second ceasing to be fully God.

In his Letter to the Colossians, Paul says of Jesus that “God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him” (1:19) and that “in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (2:9). Jesus is truly and fully God, just as He is truly and fully human.

Grace was available to Louis Zamperini, and grace is available to you and me, because Jesus is “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). He is full of grace and full of truth. We don’t find some kind of finite mixture of truth and grace in Him. No. Jesus brought the full measure of both. He is full of grace, and full of truth. He is the incarnation of both grace and truth. Since we have been talking about grace these past two months or so, I want to focus specifically on what the Bible says about the fullness of His grace.

Look at verse 16: “From the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another.” That is the NIV translation. One blessing after another. All of us. From the fullness of His grace. We have all received blessing after blessing from the overflow of His grace to us. Amen? I know it is true in my life.

I think there is more for us in this verse. Here is a better translation: “Out of His fullness we have all received grace on top of grace.” Or, “grace upon grace.” Or “grace following grace,” “grace heaped on grace,” “grace after grace,” “one grace after another,” “grace without measure.” All of these are attempts to express the amazing truth of God’s Word that there is an endless supply of grace, which is available to us no matter our circumstances in life, and no matter our need. The river of God’s grace to us in Christ never runs dry, and never will run dry.

Listen to what Charles Spurgeon says about this in his *Morning and Evening* devotional for the morning of March 15. This is great stuff!

“Christ has grace without measure in Himself, but He has not retained it for Himself.” (In other words, He has not kept it to Himself, or for Himself.) “As the reservoir empties itself into the pipes, so has Christ emptied out His grace for His people. ‘From the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another.’ He seems only to have (grace) in order to dispense (it) to us. He stands like the fountain, always flowing, but only running in order to supply the empty pitchers and the thirsty lips which draw close to it. Like a tree, He bears sweet fruit, not to hang on branches, but to be gathered by those who need. Grace, whether its work be to pardon, to purify, to preserve, to strengthen, to enlighten, to quicken, or to restore, is always to be had from Him freely and without price; nor is there a single form of the work of grace which He has not given to His people. As the blood of the body, though flowing from the heart, belongs equally to every member (of the body), so the influences of grace are the inheritance of every saint united to the Lamb; and herein there is a sweet communion between Christ and His church, inasmuch as they both receive the same grace. Christ is the head upon which the oil is first poured; but the same oil runs to the very skirts of the garments, so that the most lowly believer has an unction of the same costly moisture as that which fell upon the head. This is true communion when the sap of grace flows from the stem to the branch, and when it is perceived that the stem itself is sustained by the very nourishment which feeds the branch. As we daily receive grace from Jesus, and more constantly recognize it as coming from Him, we shall behold Him in communion with us, and

enjoy the felicity (the happy blessedness) of communion with Him. Let us ... (take) from Him the supply of all we need with as much boldness as (we take) money out of our wallets.”

Grace without measure. An ever-flowing fountain of grace. The oil of grace. The sap of grace. I love the richness of the imagery Spurgeon uses to describe the fullness of God’s grace. F. F. Bruce speaks of this fullness found in Christ as “an ocean from which all His people may draw without every diminishing its content. What the followers of Christ draw from the ocean of divine fullness is grace upon grace – one wave of grace being constantly replaced by a new one. There is no limit to the supply of grace which God has placed at His people’s disposal in Christ.”

Do you hear that? There is no limit to the supply of grace available to you and me. It is an ocean which can never be depleted. It is a flowing river which will never run dry. Martin Luther spoke of the Lord Jesus as an overflowing fountain of grace, saying that “even if the whole world were to draw from this fountain enough grace and truth to transform all people into angels, still it would not lose as much as a drop. This fountain,” he said, “constantly overflows with sheer grace.” The supply of God’s grace will never, ever run out. God will never run out of grace.

To the testimonies of Luther and Bruce and Spurgeon, let me add the voice of another, more contemporary witness, Andy Stanley, who has written an excellent new book on the grace of God called, fittingly enough, *The Grace of God*. (Some of you may be more familiar with Andy’s father, Charles Stanley.) Here is what Andy writes: “The grace of God is not limited to an act of God at the time of our salvation. *The grace of God is (also) the life of the Savior coursing through the souls of believers to sustain us through those things that will not or cannot change.* It is a well of living water. It is God’s power manifest in our weakness. In this way the grace of God is a constant reminder of the presence of God. If you have ever gone through a difficult season of life and felt as if God carried you through it, then you have experienced this form of grace. Perhaps you’ve watched in amazement as a Christian friend walked through a dark valley relationally, physically, or financially and yet maintained his or her peace. That’s God’s *in-spite-of* grace. The grace to endure. It’s tempting to think that someone who is able to maintain peace in the midst of a personal storm is simply in denial. But as a pastor I’ve seen God’s sustaining grace in the lives of so many people on so many occasions that I know it’s real.” [Me, too.] “The apostle Paul ... referred to it as a peace that surpasses or ‘transcends’ all human understanding (Phil. 4:7). That peace, he said, actually guards our hearts and minds. He was so confident in this expression of God’s grace that he told the Philippian believers ‘to be anxious about nothing’ (4:6). That’s a pretty insensitive thing to say, unless you are absolutely confident that God’s grace will be sufficient for whatever someone is facing. (Paul) was. And we can be as well” (Andy Stanley, *The Grace of God*, p. 176). Yes, we can.

In the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, all who belong to Him have received grace upon grace, grace on top of grace, grace after grace after grace from the ocean of His grace. His grace is a many-splendored thing, and is available to each one of us at every moment, no matter what circumstances in life we may be facing.

It is by grace and grace alone that we are saved. It is by grace that our sins are forgiven – all of them, past, present and future. It is by grace that we are born again into the family and kingdom of God. It is by grace that we are reconciled to God the Father and to one another, through the reconciling work of Christ on the cross.

It is the grace of Christ that gives us strength when we don't feel strong. Jerry Bridges suggests that when Paul says, "I can do everything (God wants me to do) through Him who gives me strength" in Philippians 4:13, it is the same as saying, "I can do everything by His grace," for that grace is the strength or enabling power God gives us to do His will. It is grace that enables us to endure in faith, hope, and love, and not lose heart when life is hard. It is grace that enables us to keep going in spite of setbacks or suffering or disappointment.

Grace upon grace, grace after grace, grace on top of grace, is available to us from the fullness of His grace in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow. It is always available. And you need never fear that it will run out, or that God will have to ration it. In the words of John Blanchard: "So (God) supplies perfectly measured grace to meet the needs of (His people). For daily needs there is daily grace; for sudden needs, sudden grace; for overwhelming need, overwhelming grace." It comes in different sizes and shapes, depending on what we need at the time. Whatever form it comes in, its nature remains the same. The grace of God is the gift of His kindness and love extended without charge to people who do not, cannot, and will not ever deserve it. People like you and me.

God supplied grace after grace to Louis Zamperini, according to his needs. He has done the same for me. That same grace is available to you in Christ, too. No matter what you may be facing. No matter what lies ahead. No matter what. Look to Jesus at all times, and He will make you strong in His grace (2 Timothy 2:1). He will give you grace upon grace, one grace on top of another, just when you need it.

Lord, let it be so, to the praise of Your glorious grace. Amen.