

“Grace Gets In Through The Cracks”

- I. Introduction: Jesus is the Light of the World and there is power in that light. The light draws us into itself. When we taught in New York City, Peg and I lived in a Columbia University building on the upper west side of Manhattan. We were fortunate to have a spacious, beautifully appointed apartment. Its one significant drawback was that the sunlight came through the apartment windows only 45 minutes a day. Loving to sit, read in the sun, and pray, I learned exactly when the sun would arrive. For those 45 minutes, I would follow the sun through the five rooms in the apartment. Eventually we moved. There just wasn't enough light.

In today's "Prologue" to his Gospel, John described Jesus as the "light that shines in the darkness and the true light which gives life to all people." For John there is an organic unity between light and life. It is in the very nature of Christ to enlighten the space and the time and the people around him. But I do not believe that Christ just projects the light. In a more complete and full way Christ is the light . . . perfectly pure energy, ready to fill us with new life if we are willing to take it. As followers of Christ, how it is that we can experience the energetic new life of Christ?

- II. First, the Light of Jesus Christ Has the Power to Show Us Truth. In his 4th gospel, John claims that without the spiritual light of Jesus Christ, the darkness of evil would prevail in our lives. One of the themes of the Christmas story is the light of Christ which pierces the darkness. As the light of the world, Jesus Christ helps us to see God more fully and to see ourselves and others more accurately. The first step in this process of discovering is to recognize our own incompleteness and imperfection. Our incompleteness and imperfection is very specifically described by C. S. Lewis in his whimsical book *The Screwtape Letters*. Uncle Screwtape is a mature demon who writes a series of instructional letters to his nephew Wormwood. Wormwood is just getting started in the demon business and is assigned to prevent his "patient," a young man, from falling into the hands of the "enemy" God. As I have read and re-read *The Screwtape Letters*, it always impresses me how often evil can be quite subtle and is usually encountered in specific concrete situations in which we make day-to-day decisions.

One of the more interesting areas on which *Screwtape* offers advice is church-going. By all means, advises Uncle Screwtape he demon, do everything you can to prevent your patient from communicating with God in church. One strategy might be to en-

courage the patient to critique the service, for example, the quality of the sermon, the enjoyability of the music, or even the length of the service. By all means, stresses Screwtape, keep your patient in the position of evaluator rather than worshipper. Keep him or her from focusing on his own spiritual needs and his sense of incompleteness without the “Enemy” (God). In other words, keep him off focus and in spiritual grayness. Keep him or her away from the light of Christ at all costs. For you see, if we become accustomed to the darkness, then the darkness, not the light, seems natural to us. We become like those fish at the bottom of the sea that have been away from light for so long that their eyes are unable to take it in. The same is true with our spiritual eyes. As Lewis emphasizes in the Screwtape Letters, when we develop the habit of not perceiving our own spiritual needs, we also fail to see our need for God.

III. The Heaviness of the Law

The second thing that Christ can do to help us take in the light is to free us from the heaviness and weight of the law. In the time of Jesus, the Pharisees had 613 rules, 248 commands, 365 prohibitions, and 1,521 emendations. The fundamentalists of many religions have tended to build a large number of rules into their spiritual practices. With associated punishments and condemnations. In his book *What’s So Amazing about Grace?* Philip Yancy challenges the rule-bound Christian religious life. He writes: “The Christian life, I believe, does not primarily center on ethics or rules but rather involves a new way of seeing. . . when I begin to see myself as a sinner who cannot please God by any method of self-improvement or self-enlargement, only then can I turn to God for outside help – for grace– and to my amazement I learn that a holy God already loves me despite my defects” (p. 272).

IV. Let’s call it the amazing grace alternative The truth is that God loves us unconditionally in spite of our shortcomings! When we come to fully understand our need for God and God’s love for us then we’re really ready to become connected with God. We simultaneously see our need and God’s grace. Yancy writes: “As I seek to look at the world through the lens of grace, I realize that imperfection is the pre-requisite for grace. Light only gets in through the cracks” (p. 273).

Let me close with a description of a grace-filled experience. This incident is described at the end of Yancy’s book *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*

Bill Moyers’ documentary film on the hymn *Amazing Grace* includes a scene filmed in Wembley Stadium in London. Various musical groups, mostly rock bands, had gathered together in celebration of the positive democratic changes throughout the world, and the promoters scheduled an opera singer, Jessye Norman, as the closing act.

For 12 hours, groups like Guns ‘n Roses blast the crowd through banks of speakers, riling up fans already high on booze and dope. Meanwhile, Jessye Norman sits in her dressing room discussing the hymn “Amazing Grace” with Moyers. The hymn was

written, of course, by John Newton, a cruel slave trader. Later he became a minister and joined in the flight against slavery.

Finally the time comes for Norman to sing. A single circle of light follows her as she strolls on stage. No backup band, no musical instruments, just Jessye. The crowd stirs, restless. Few recognize her. A voice yells for more Guns 'n Roses, others take up the cry and the scene begins to get ugly.

Alone, acapella, Jessye Norman begins to sing very slowly. "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see." A remarkable thing happened in Wembley Stadium that night. 70,000 raucous fans fell silent before her aria of grace. By the time she reached the second verse, "Was grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved" the soprano had the crowd in her hands.

By the time she reached the third verse "Was grace that brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home," several thousand fans were singing along, digging far back in nearly lost memories for words they had heard long ago.

Jessye Norman later confessed she had no idea what power descended on Wembley stadium that night. Yancy concluded that the world thirsts for grace. When grace descends, the world falls silent before it. The light of Jesus Christ falls penetrates through the cracks of our struggling world.

- V. Conclusion: My prayer today is that we will be led by the light of Christ at the Church of the Ascension to more fully see our absolute need for God, and, as a result, to more powerfully connect with God's grace. Let's begin our new year with a deep sense of gratitude for Christ's presence among us as the true and eternal light of the world. *Alleluia. Amen.*