

# Turning to the Grace

Have you ever been hungry, because you don't have enough money to buy food? Have you ever hesitated to buy something you really need, because you ought to save the money for another, more urgent expense?

Let me tell you my own experience. When I studied at a theological school in Korea, preparing to become a minister, I was too poor to buy both food and textbooks. I borrowed my textbooks from the library, and lived on baguettes, remembering a picture which shows an old man saying grace over a simple loaf of bread. I was trying to live my life as simply as that old man, with my loaf of bread, thinking that one loaf was big enough for me to make my soul sing. I knew that I was in need of money but I also knew that I was rich in the love of God.

At that time, there was a marathon in the school. Even though I didn't exercise, I ran the race hoping to win a prize which would provide enough money to buy my favourite books. I ran with all the strength I could muster. As it turned out, I just barely won fifth prize in the race; the prize was enough money to buy the books I wanted so much. Even with small triumphs, it was very hard to live without any help. So I decided to work in a church in order to be free from money worries.

When I studied in theological school, church work was optional. I fell into temptation at the church, because I had the wrong purpose; I followed the voice of financial need, not the voice of the Lord, Jesus. When I was in trouble, it would have been better to have listened to what my soul really needed. That is, not money, but the grace of God.

As I reflect on my experience, I can understand Jesus' situation when he was tempted by the devil. Of course Jesus was fully God, but at the same time he was a complete human. The Bible says, in Philippians 2:6, "Christ was truly God. But he did not try to remain equal with God. Instead he gave up everything and became a slave, when he became like one of us."

Jesus, as a true human, felt the same way we all do; he suffered just as we do; he was vulnerable to temptation just as we are. Ideally, it should be natural for us to emulate Christ's response to temptation. Actually, that temptation was not about bread, but about the relationship between God and Jesus. The devil said to him "If you are God's son, tell these stones to turn into bread." "If you are God's son, jump off." Not so much a temptation as a taunt – show me proof of a relationship, show me proof of God's love.

How about you? What kinds of temptation have you faced? Real temptation usually comes not through visible but invisible things; not through money, food, a house or new clothes, but through our unbelief, that inner voice that asks dangerous questions. 'Does God really love and care for me?', 'Am I qualified to be called a child of God?', 'Will God give me grace, even now?'

This kind of questioning is connected to the questions which were asked of Jesus. He was tested about whether he was the son of God or not; whether he relied on the grace of God or on his own power. How did Jesus respond to the temptation? He answered from the Scriptures, the Torah, "No one can live only on food. People need every word that God has spoken." "Don't try to test the Lord your God!" "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him". He turned to the grace of God, because his faith was grounded in the love of God. Such grace isn't earned through good works, it isn't limited to what we have experienced before. This grace comes straight from God.

Just before the temptation, Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River. The Bible says, in Matthew 3:16, "As soon as he came out of the water, the sky opened, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down on him like a dove. Then a voice from heaven said, 'This is my own dear son, and I am pleased with him.'" And then, the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the desert, where he proved his absolute conviction of the love and grace of God.

What does grace mean? It's a word I like to use often, so we should check the meaning and make sure we all have the same understanding. Grace implies a spontaneous gift, mercy, compassion and the merciful restoration of a broken relationship. The Hebrew word "hesed", which is one concept of grace, signifies a

helpful deed that springs from the mutual obligation of devotedness between persons who are bound by bonds of blood relationship: between parents and children.

A mother's love seems mysterious to me. She loves her baby, really, just because he or she is her baby. God's love for us may be something like this. We are God's children, so we are simply loved. Ideally, an infant does not earn her parents' love; she is born to be loved. Because of this pre-existing love, the parents care for their child through all the vulnerable years of her youth without demanding equal value from the child; they will always love her, even when she appears to not want or need their love.

God "graces" us in similar ways. There is grace in the simple gift of our existence, in the natural steadiness of life, in the simple things God gives us. God spontaneously gives us beauty and breath and touches of love, just as parents give their children food and warmth naturally, almost automatically.

Where can we find the grace of God in our daily life? We frequently say 'thank you, thank you'. When we say 'thank you', we also express the grace of God. Ask yourself, "What am I thankful for today?" "What am I *especially* thankful for today?" and then you can find the grace of God which is already within you.

As we start the Lenten season, a time of focused contemplation and reflection in light of our faith, let us be reminded that our forty days have begun where Jesus' forty days have concluded: with the grace of God. Let us keep in mind the living words of God towards us, "You are my own dear daughter and son, and I am pleased with you".

May the grace and love of God lead us through our own desert times, empowering each of us to overcome every temptation and stay strong in our faith.