

Grace in Place of Grace: A Devotional Sharing

By Lingxiao Zhang

In the beginning was the Word. The word was God. God created all things by the Word; for it is by Him that everything has been made, and without Him nothing has there been made: He was at the beginning in God. It must also be said that from the beginning of the Christian and spiritual life, as well as in its progress and consummation, everything is wrought by Jesus Christ. "Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." (John 1:17) "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men." (John 1:4) The grace has been merited for us by Jesus Christ, by the merit of His redemption. The conduct of grace of God in the conversion of the sinner, the first step and entrance into the Christian way, both spiritual and interior, the first must be wrought out by penitence, the exterior and interior. For we must quit sin not only of the body, but also of the heart and spirit. But as outward conversion must always depend on that of within-the heart and spirit. God begin within, then He reforms the outer. The first conversion is made within. God creates this spirit, drawing it out of the horrible chaos where it lay; then He frees the body from sin. He gives this heart a secret proneness to be in Him. Before conversion, this spirit and heart like a deep abyss, are so enveloped in darkness, that the poor soul does not know what to do. It sees within itself noting but the darkness and horrors that sin has spread there; it sees out of itself but void and surrounded by every evil. Nevertheless, although this is the case, the Spirit of God does not cease to hover the tears of penitence, over which grace rests, and is diffused in spite of the darkness of ignorance. God see the grief of this ignorant sinner, sends him in the midst of his darkness, a ray of His light-a light of grace which is the light effected by Jesus Christ. It is then we can say, those who were in the darkness of sin and ignorance have seen a great light, and that the sun has risen upon those who dwelt under the shadow of the death of sin. This blind spirit feels his darkness dispersing little by little, begins to comprehend that the Word of God is an efficacious word. It is speech, and it is light. As the Uncreated Word is the source of the light communicated to the creature. This is why the Divine Word is called the splendor of the saints; for He is a Word full of light, shed abroad on them. What is the first word God says? "Let there be light"; and this word is no sooner spoken than there is light. This darkness of ignorance is changed into a light of truth, which increases little by little, as the rising sun disperses by degrees the darkness of night. The light has emanated from God Himself, shed His lights of grace upon a heart, diffused in those dark places. This one begins to discover its cause, perceiving nothing but his own darkness, later that man begins to enter into the knowledge of himself, and of the vileness and baseness of his origin. At this point, an earnest desire of returning to God is born! All this is done by the grace of the Redeemer, and the bounty of the Creator.

God regenerates and recreates us by His Word.

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In the very beginning, God formed man by His Word. He made man in His own image. God gave man a spirit so that He could come into him and mingle His own life with man's life. This, of course, was the state of man before the Fall. At the time of the Fall, man's spirit was deadened. God lost His chance to move into man's spirit. Man lost the ability to contain the life of God and to bear the image of God. It is this that causes God's sorrow for the loss of men, and which renders Him so desirous of their salvation.

God made all things for man, but man He made for Himself. So, there was only God before and after man, that he might tend to no other conclusion than Him. Man was the end of all the rest, but he had no other end than God. Man was created to be united to the will of God and submitted to Him. He created man in His own image. But man through sin having disfigured this beautiful image, it was the design of the redemption that God, who delights so entirely in His Word, not being able to suffer men in whom this image had once been graven to perish, and lose at the same time forever the image of His Word and the characters of the Divinity, was willing that His Word should come to restore it. For it is the Word-God alone that can retrace Himself, none but He can do it. When a mirror has lost the object it reflected, the distant object must need approach it, without which it could never be represented. It was necessary, then, that Jesus Christ should come into man, so that man, never more losing this Divine object, should no longer lose the image and character of the Divinity. God re-traced in him His image, which is His Son and Word, impressing upon him His Spirit. And as His delights were to dwell with the children of men, and His Son begin the only object of His regards, seeing that He can take pleasure in no other than Him (for if He delights in some creature, it is only by His Son). "And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17) It was necessary that, before taking man into His delights, He should make him in His image, imprinting upon him the character of His Word, without which He could not take pleasure in him.

There is something in this universe which is the very opposite of God: it is the self. As long as we employ our self-nature in any way, some faults will also continue to exist in us. It was the entrance of the self. Which came into the soul as a result of the fall, that established a difference between the soul and God. Every sin begins when we separate our will from God's. Adam brought sin into the world because his will was contrary to God's. If our will was united to God's, we would never sin. The loss of the selfhood in the soul increases the purity of the soul! In fact, the soul's purity is increased in exact proportion to the loss of self!

All the graces that are produced in us grow out of death of self. As the operations coming from God aim only at destruction of self and all that pertains to it, surrender all to God. At first God's grace dealings aim only at defeating the ways of man and break down our strong natural inclinations, so that He may become the principle of our actions and life. We must realize that the soul of man is naturally restless and turbulent. We accomplish very little even though it always appears busy. Because of a strong

self-love, and a hidden confidence in ourselves and our own work. We resist God, not submitting to His working; we become the guiding force of our own works. Although the grace of God is empowering the little good we do, self interferes powerfully. Grace seems to enter into action like the school teacher, who is forced, by the hand of the child he wanted to help, to form a very imperfect handwriting. If the child had allowed the teacher to direct his hand, every letter would have been perfect. When we do not yield to God's hand, we try to succeed by our own efforts. We think we have won a victory when we have done much; it seems to us that God, who usually does not go against our freedom, has surrendered to us. It is easy to see that we must go contrary to our natural ways and yield to God. Yield ourselves completely to the inner workings of the Spirit. Jesus Christ has come into us into our inmost parts. Yield to His workings there. We must allow the Spirit of God to act in us. Allow Him leads and governs us, to do in us and with us what He pleases. Allowing Him to do with us what He wants, and in the way He wants, and working according to the moving of Him who moves us. Not interfere in what God does in our lives. Bear all the ways of God continuously. We can remain firm in a passive consent, enduring as patiently as we can all that God has introduced into our life. Then the first passively on our part, must be to yield our ways to God, little by little, and to allow Him to take over. For a long time, the soul possesses only a shadow of passivity, often acting more than God, then as much as God, and gradually till finally He takes over, until the fullness of grace completely stills the activity of the self.

We begin at conversion with self-activity. But gradually, we move toward passivity. Along the way between those two points our soul is gradually purified of all those movements of the soul. In this process that lies between self-activity and passivity we begin to recognize those elements which separate us from God. Then, by giving we passive consent to God, He takes us, degree by degree into a more and more passive state. Our capacity for becoming passive is gradually increased. Our capacity to be passive before God under the crushing of the cross is enlarged in a secret, hidden manner. Self-effort gradually decreases, Eventually, it ceases altogether, When self-effort ceases, our will is passive before God. It is at this point we begin to yield ourselves up to the impulses of the divine Spirit until we are totally absorbed with Him. We are in total concert with His will in all things-at all times. This is Divine Union. The self is ended. The human will is totally passive and responds to every movement of God's will. What we call the "death of the will" is the passing of our will into His will. Our will must change, not only as it controls our external actions, but also as it relates to our innermost desires. If we are faithfully followed, there we see the accomplishment of all passivity, Jesus Christ works, not through a body which He would change and beautify, but through a body which He owns. In such a state we are really His members, His children. He is our God. We are His images, with more advantages than when God first created man in His own image. In this soul, at last, He takes delight.

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All is wrought by Jesus Christ, and nothing can be done without Him. He takes man from the beginning of the road, and does not leave him for a moment until He has brought him with Him into God, provided that we are willing wholly to abandon ourselves to His wonderful conduct. God takes care of our interior when we fully submitted to Him. The Holy Spirit delights to instruct us in everything. When we place all things in His hands, He Himself takes care of us; in renouncing ourselves continually so to remove the oppositions of nature to grace, and in so doing to resign ourselves entirely to the whole will of God, so that by this renouncement and resignation, we may give place to God to act in us in entire freedom. It is in this that man's principal work with grace consists, it is God's to make it, and He does so infallibly, provided that we are faithful to cooperate with His grace in submission to His entire will, obedience to His conduct, bearing with reverence all His operations. All are capable of it, since for this it is only necessary to have a heart well submitted to God, and the principal part of the work depends on His grace. This grace is near us, always ready to flow out into our hearts.

All the graces which God gives us tend only to cause Him to be loved with our whole heart. When God comes into a heart, He must destroy, consume, and annihilate everything else in it. He desires nothing lodge there with Him. He cannot bear a rival. He desires no one with Him, not even a king, not even of the best things. There is nothing that He does not set His hand to render Himself absolute master, and to destroy all the obstacles that prevent Him from being so alone. He cannot agree with anything whatsoever, nothing can be found in company with Him. Yet He is the most worthy to be loved and faithful of all beloveds. How deep is God's love! He gives Himself to those who have made a place for Him. He becomes our end, fullness, and everything. When we let go of all that is standing in His way, we will find ourselves swept into Him and His love. This is what is called death to self; but this term is really a contradiction because when this happens our spirit can never be more alive. Our spirit then lives the true life, the life of God.

The course of the operation of God in souls by Jesus Christ from the beginning of our conversion, and the necessity there is of corresponding to it. By an entire dependence on the conduct of grace, which does not leave for a moment the soul that it has taken under protection, until it has conducted it to its end. Then God alone is the soul's principle. Having no other end than God, God's will and His glory. When we experience what is like to be a creation in God, we will see what simplicity, innocence and enlargement is waiting for us. We become subject to God alone and nothing else holds any power over us. This is the kingdom of Jesus Christ, without which we cannot do the will of God, The reign of God must come in us; this means He must lead and govern us as He pleases so that His will may be done. As our will is lost in God's will, we still have purposes, But these purposes are God's desires within us and have nothing to do with ourselves. God reigns from the center of our spirit, and everything that is not of Him dissolves in His presence. As we pass into fuller union with God we

are changed and transformed by Him. This means our will is consumed and give place to the will of God.

God desires to give Himself utterly to man that names His name. And He will do this, giving Himself to each of us according to our individual capacity. God alone communicates Himself to the soul of man, and He communicates Himself in proportion to the soul's capacity to remain passive and how much we are prepared to receive him. A great, noble, and extensive passive capacity aids the Lord in pouring Himself into the soul. In this same proportion we are transformed by Him into His image. God continually increased both the fullness of grace and our capacity to receive grace through all our days. A perfect annihilation brings an absolute emptiness and a capacity for this emptiness: this excessive emptiness through grace becomes an excessive fullness. The measure of emptiness in the self brings the measure of fullness because God never lets the emptiness stay open without filling it. Being empty inside without faith causes anger and wrath but emptiness with grace brings and entirely filled with God's love. The fullness of God always causes both the emptiness and then the grace of reception. We will receive the fullness of God's love and His Word. The process of losing oneself in God happens in different degrees in different people. Every person can be completely full. But some have larger capacities than others. A cup and pitcher can both be full of water, but each holds different amounts. Every person has his own capacity to receive the fullness of God. "For from His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (John 1:16) The wonderful thing is that God is able to enlarge this capacity day by day. The more we live by inward grace, the larger our spirit grows, without effort on our part. Allow His nature to dwell more fully within us. To the same degree that He enlarges us, He fills us. As air rushes to fill a vacuum, so God will fill us when we are emptied of self. How does our spirit expand and increase? By learning to die daily. We must let go of our old nature so that we might lose ourselves more deeply in God. Our ability to grow in Him is unlimited.

Be patient in all the suffering that God sends us. If we love for the Lord is pure, we will love Him as much on Calvary as on mountain Tabor. The Lord Jesus loved His Father on mountain Tabor where He was transfigured, but He loved Him no less on Calvary where He was crucified. Surely, then, we should love the Lord as much on Calvary, for it was there that He made the greatest display of His love. God gives us the cross, and then the cross gives us God. There will come to us an inward spiritual advancement when there is also in our life a real progress in knowing the experience of the cross. Abandonment to Christ and the experience of the cross go hand in hand. As soon as anything comes to us in the form of suffering, at that very moment a natural resistance will well up somewhere inside us. When that moment comes, immediately resign us to God. Accept the matter. In that moment give us up to Him as a sacrifice. By doing this, we will eventually make a wonderful discovery. It is this: When the cross does arrive in our life, it will not be nearly as burdensome as we first feared. Receive it as from God, no matter what it is. The burden is far lighter this way. Sometimes we may bear the

cross in weakness; at other times we may bear the cross in strength. But whatever it is, it should be the same to us since we bear the cross in the will of God. Bear the cross with the Lord's strength, not our own. Consider our present situation as a way to show God that we love Him through a willingness to sacrifice ourselves. Don't reject the cross (or should I say the crown). The cross will become a means of encountering the Lord Himself. The cross will become for us a deep way of experiencing our Lord. Eventually there will come a point when the cross will not even be viewed as "the cross." It simply becomes another means of knowing Christ. God's nature becomes more fully manifest in us through the cross, and we will grow more intimately acquainted with our Lord by encountering that cross. The cross will work the work of God in us. The work of God will bring the cross to us, and the cross will bring the Lord Himself to us. We were able to see God in all our circumstances, and the coming of the cross is really something that comes from the Lord's hand. Nor from man, not from circumstances, but from Him. The cross has become Christ Himself. We will walk by a simple and pure faith. We see God and God only.

God would give grace to all who follow the way of faith and abandon. God alone should be our guide, being the Spirit of our spirit and Life of our life. He will become the very center of our life and our source of life. We should then live, act and walk from the life of God within us. Keep Himself before us and make us walk after Him. He fights also for us against all our enemies. Let His Life within us carry us along as a father (but a Father all full of tenderness and love) carries his little children. When we have abandoned ourselves blindly into His hands through all the dark and painful ways through which it is necessary to pass to arrive at Himself, and be received in Him alone. God's protection and assistance correspond to the various degrees of abandon. When the soul is only being born, God only begins to call it as from a distance, conducting under His orders by the medium of man (like Moses) and of direction, until it attains to the coming out of Egypt. When abandon is more advanced, God Himself comes to be its conductor, when the people having entered into the desert, the Lord went before them in His cloud. But when abandon becomes most blind and most perfect, then God Himself takes these so dear His children in His arms and carries them with as much speed as safety into the true promised land, which is the transformation into Himself.

It must also be observed that, as it is natural where there is more assurance and signs, there is less faith and abandon; and that, on the contrary, where there is to be more faith and abandon, there must necessarily be less assurance and signs, so when abandon is yet feeble and imperfect, God does not do so much on behalf of souls, for they find plenty of supports out of Him. But in proportion as they blind themselves and detach themselves the more from everything to trust in Him alone, He makes them walk by more unknown ways, to exercise so much the more their faithfulness, and at the same time to take a more marvelous care over them, and in fine, when they seem to themselves to be quite lost, and being in vast and frightful desert without any light of

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hope, one would say that everything failed them, and that so impenetrable paths can only end in their perdition, it is even then that God holds them in His arms and carries them with more speed and safety into Himself, enraptured that they hope in Him against all hope, and trust in Him without any appearance of success.

God transforms us a little at a time. He causes our spirit to be continually enlarged. No wonder David said: "Oh, how great is Your goodness, Which You have laid up for those who fear You, which You have prepared for those who trust in You." (Psalm 31:19) Although David had come to know his own sinfulness, he had also come to know the incredible grace of God even more. We also know these: "much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many." "much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ." (Romans 5:15,17) Those who come to such a place are also the ones who all too gladly give their lives to glorify God. Their only desire is to see God glorified. This is because God has transformed their nature, and they have come to share in His concerns.