

Transforming Grace
Part 8 - Good News About Grace
Rev. Jean Smith

The gifted concert violist, Nicolo Paganini, was playing before a packed house one night, surrounded by a full orchestra. He was playing a number of difficult pieces and then he came to one which was his favorite — a violin concerto. He started to play the concerto with the orchestra accompanying him. A few moments into the piece, one of the strings on his instrument snapped and hung gloriously down from his instrument. Relying on his genius, he continued to play with the remaining three strings. A few moments later into the piece, a second string snapped. Again, relying on his genius, he continued to play the piece on the remaining two strings. Then a third string snapped leaving him only one string to play on. Three strings dangling from his instrument and he continued to play. At the end of this magnificent concerto, the audience stood and applauded until their hands were numb, so incredible was the playing of this genius. Never thinking to ask for an encore, the Italian audience sat down. Paganini stepped to the front of the stage and held his instrument high and announced, "Paganini and one string." Then he continued to play a full encore with the orchestra accompanying him. Incredible playing. He made more music that evening out of one string than most people ever could out of four. Paganini and one string and the attitude of persistence.

In our own lives, I think we tend to focus on the strings that dangle rather than what we can do with what we have. What are the strings that dangle in our lives? I call them the inevitable. The inevitable that happens to us are when the computer gets zapped during a thunderstorm leaving us without access to all our files and the internet. Or when you get a flat tire making you late for work. Maybe it's worse, like when you have to put your dog down or when you go through a divorce. Maybe it's losing a loved one or watching an adult child go through drug addiction. We don't have control over the inevitable in our lives. Like Paganini, we are left with one string and somehow we have to find the ability to go on.

How do we do that? How do we transform the "inevitable" in our lives into a symphony on one string? How do we do that? I want to suggest to you this morning that we can persist in the one string situations in our lives by God's transforming grace. His transforming grace will enable us to persist through the difficult experiences that inevitably come our way. **Here are four steps to being transformed by God's grace.**

THE FIRST STEP IS TO CHANGE THE WAY YOU THINK. Philippians 2:5 says, "*Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.*" An attitude is the way we think about things. Having the same attitude that was also in Christ Jesus will transform our lives. It's important the way we think about things. Romans 12:2 says, "*Do not change yourselves to be like the people of this world, but be changed within by a new way of thinking. Then you will be able to decide what God wants for you; you will know what is good and pleasing to Him and what is perfect.*"

Think back to high school biology class and the experiment with the glass case and the caterpillars inside. In a few days the caterpillars each spun a cocoon and then a few days later a butterfly came out. That's called metamorphosis. The caterpillar works hard to spin its cocoon. Then it waits for the transformation to take place. We have to work hard too. We have to wrap ourselves in God's Word, paying particular attention to what Jesus did and said. Then God's transforming grace takes over and transforms our lives making something beautiful out of us, giving us spiritual wings.

That reminds me of the church that brought a family over from a third world country for a visit. The host family took them to a shopping mall. The women went off to browse some clothing stores while the men walked around on their own. The man and his son were so excited with everything they saw. They were particularly fascinated by the moving walls that would open and close. They couldn't believe it. They observed an elder woman slowly walking up to these walls and pushing a button. The walls opened and she stepped inside a little room. Then the walls closed behind her. A few moments later the walls opened up again and out stepped a beautiful 24 year old. Without hesitation the man turned to his son and said, "Go get your mother." Shallow, but he was thinking TRANSFORMATION.

The way we think about is so important. Proverbs 4:32 says, ***"Be careful what you think because thoughts run your life."*** What's in your head will influence what's in your heart and that will influence how you act. Think of it this way. If I take a glass and I fill it with Coke to the brim, and then if I bump the glass, what will spill out of the glass? Not orange juice. Not milk. Not coffee. No, if I bump a glass filled with Coke then Coke is what will spill out. What happens when you get bumped? What happens when I get bumped? What comes out will be dependent on what we put into our heads, the thoughts we filled our heads with will influence our attitude and our attitude determines our behavior. If we fill our heads with good thoughts, good things spill out of us when we encounter the inevitable bumps of life. We have to take responsibility for the way we think. We can't be like the guy who got made at his VCR for the horrible stuff it was playing on the TV.

It's not only **the thoughts we think** that influence our attitude. It's also **the company we keep** that influences our attitude. 1st Corinthians 15:33 says, ***"Don't be fooled, bad friends will ruin good habits."*** There's a business principle that says, **"The people around you will determine the level of your success or failure."** The people you surround yourself with influence your attitude. Parents, this is really important. You say, "My child is in elementary school now. He's old enough to pick his friends. No, he's not. You need to supervise who he hangs around with. His friends will influence him in powerful ways, in ways that have eternal consequences.

There is a **third thing that influences our attitude and that is the problems we experience**. Problems are packed full of potential.

First, our **PROBLEMS** are predictors. They can predict our success or our failure based on how we react to them and how we allow them to shape our attitude. We can choose to be bitter or we can choose to grow closer to the Lord through them. **PROBLEMS** are reminders that life is tough and we need God's grace to help us through them. They can remind us of what's really important. They can remind us who really cares about us and who's just a fair weather friend. **PROBLEMS** are opportunities to make changes—opportunities to make adjustments in our lives, opportunities to grow. They are crossroads in our lives. They give us the opportunity to take action and choose a different direction than the one we were going in. They are opportunities to get closer to the Lord. **PROBLEMS** can actually be blessings in disguise. The Bible says we grow more through trials and difficulties than anything else. Adversity and hardship promote spiritual maturity. Our problems become blessings when we see God work through them. **PROBLEMS** present us with lessons to be learned. Some lessons can't be learned any other way. **PROBLEMS** are everywhere. You have problems. I have problems. We all have problems. They are inevitable. **PROBLEMS** are messages. God uses the problems in our lives to speak to us. God reveals to us what we need to change and how we need to grow through our problems. **PROBLEMS** are situations to be solved. God promises to provide solutions to our problems. God doesn't care where we've been but he does care where we are going. He wants to be involved in our lives and he uses the problems we encounter to bring about solutions that will take us where he wants us to be.

THE SECOND STEP TO BEING TRANSFORMED BY GOD'S GRACE IS TO CHOOSE TO FOCUS ON OTHERS. Philippians 2:4 says, "*Do not be interested only in your own life, but be interested in the lives of others.*" Sometimes that's difficult to do. Our sinful nature tells us something very different. Our sinful nature tells us to watch out for number one. Our sinful nature tells us we need to look out for ourselves because no one else is going to. Our sinful nature says, "You only go around once so grab for all you can." Our sinful nature makes us very selfish. It makes us very self-centered. We need to get the focus off of ourselves and on to others. God's transforming grace will be experienced as we choose to focus on others rather than ourselves.

Anyone who has been involved in mission work knows what I'm talking about. When you choose to focus on helping others, not thinking of what's in it for yourself, there is a transformation that takes place in you. We saw it when a group from Concord went down to Nashville to help flood victims. We see it in the people from Concord who work for Habitat for Humanity each week. We see it in the people who prepare the food and serve the food for the Ladle every other month. God transforms our lives as we focus on others rather than ourselves. Jesus said, "*Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.*"—Matthew 16:25.

THE THIRD STEP IN EXPERIENCING GOD'S TRANSFORMING GRACE IS TO CHARGE THROUGH YOUR QUITTING POINTS. These are times in your life when you want to give up. They are times in your life when you are tempted to chuck it, when you think, why am I doing this? It's too hard. I know I need to do it. I know it will be good for me to do it. I know I said I would do it. But it's so much work. I experience quitting points when I'm exercising. I feel so good when I go to the Y and swim my 50 laps. But there's a point in my 50 laps where I feel like quitting. I have to charge through the first 25 laps and then I tell myself, it's downhill from here. Somehow that inspires me to keep going. If you're a runner, you know what I mean.

There are quitting points in our spiritual lives too. Like when we don't want to pray. Like when we don't want to spend time in God's Word. Like when we want to sleep in on a Sunday morning rather than get to church. Like when we don't want to resist temptation or battle an addiction. Like when we feel God is distant and we wonder why we're trying to keep on believing. Like when we want to give up on someone who disappoints us. We all have quitting points, moments in the struggle and the striving when we want to give up.

It's much easier to quit something than to finish it. People do it all the time. People drop out of college, quit jobs, get divorces, and leave things undone left and right. We all struggle with quitting points, especially in our spiritual lives. The apostle Paul talks about this in Philippians 3:13 and 14. He says, *"No, dear brothers and sisters, I am still not all I should be, but I am focusing all my energies on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us up to heaven."* When we press through the quitting points in our lives, God's transforming grace rewards us. The Bible says, *"We can rejoice when we run into problems and trials for we know they are good for us. They help us to learn to be patient and patience develops strength of character."*—Romans 5:3.

THE FOURTH STEP IN EXPERIENCING GOD'S TRANSFORMING GRACE IS TO CHART A COURSE FOR GROWTH. The process for charting a course for growth begins with memorizing God's Word. Psalm 119:11 says, *"I have thought much about Your words and stored them in my heart so that they would hold me back from sin."* If you want to grow in your faith, you will need to memorize God's Word. This will enable you to see things from God's perspective.

The next thing to do is **personalize what you memorize.** For example, a great verse to memorize is Jeremiah 29:11, *"For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'" Here's how I personalize this verse. "God says he has plans for me, plans to prosper me and not to harm me, plans to give me hope and a good future."*

The last thing to do is to **analyze life's situations as they come in light of what God's Word is saying**. This verse tells me that God is in control. He is going to make good things happen in my life if I remain faithful. Even when I find myself playing on one string, with three dangling, God will fulfill his plans in my life. He will do the same for you as well. The Triune God is a God who transforms our lives as we change the way we think, as we choose to focus on others, as we charge through our quitting points and as we chart a course for growth.