



Grace sat in her pew and listened intently as the pastor spoke. Having never attended a funeral honoring someone so young, Grace felt heartbroken, as if a part of herself had also died. Her best friend Christina had lost a long, painful fight with cancer. She would have celebrated her twenty-first birthday next month, but now she was gone. Grace's heart quickly became overwhelmed with many questions: Why did Christina have to die? Why did someone so full of life and love have to suffer so much? How could death be so cruel, and will I ever see her again?

Grace had grown up in church, but had never felt compelled to commit to anything. She had always thought, *Church is a* 

nice place to meet friends, sing songs, sit in comfortable pews, and listen to a comforting message. Every now and then, she would hear about a law in the Bible that slightly dampened this comfortable cocoon of a religion, but she easily found ways to brush it aside. She often wondered, What is the connection to everyday life, and why does any of this matter? Once she left for college, these doubts about church were compounded, as she saw more and more reasons to believe that she didn't need God or anyone else telling her how to live her life.

Everything was different now. She had never dreamed of the day she'd have to tell Christina goodbye, especially like this. Yet, here she was; and thinking about the tragedy of death flooded Grace's mind with questions: Is it possible to have true hope in life, especially when death is an ever-present reality? Is there any way to be assured of life after death? What is the purpose of life, especially if it can end so unexpectedly?

With a heavy heart, Grace listened as Pastor John addressed a sea of sad faces: "Today we are here, not only to mourn and honor Christina, but also to rejoice in the Good News of Jesus Christ, which sets us free from the power of sin and death itself. It all started in the beginning of time.

"In the beginning, God created the world. As the Creator, He is also the Lawmaker. We, His created beings, are accountable to His law. The problem is, His law demands 100% perfection, and man chose to rebel against God's law. The first man and woman, Adam and Eve, disobeyed God's command and ate the forbidden fruit [Genesis 3]. When they committed this sin, the entire human race was affected and has been in rebellion ever since. Romans 3:23 tells us that 'all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."

Why is that such a problem? wondered Grace.
Nobody's perfect, so what's wrong with that?

As if aware of her question, Pastor John continued: "This is a huge problem, because we're also told that sin warrants the death penalty. With the first sin of Adam and Eve, the whole world became infested with sin's consequence, death. Because God is holy and perfect, any hint of unholiness is not to be tolerated in His law. This unholiness is what He calls sin. Sins are not just major criminal acts, as defined by our code of law... God's law considers seemingly minor offences as sin, such as dishonoring parents, speaking half-truths, or holding a grudge. In James 2:10, we read: 'For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.' Committing even one act of unholiness makes each of us entirely guilty. For the guilty, God's law has one sentence: death. The Apostle Paul, in Romans 6:23, confirms this: 'The wages of sin is death...'"

At this, Pastor John clarified: "I'm not talking about merely physical death, but spiritual, unending death. You see, this pas-

sage and others in God's Word, reveals that this death penalty involves eternal separation from God in a literal place called Hell. In Hell there is eternal torment, and all who go there have no escape from the eternal flames. Your worst nightmare pales in comparison to the sobering reality of Hell. The Bible assures us that Hell is a very real place; in fact, there are more mentions of Hell than of Heaven, Jesus describes Hell in Mark 9:43-44: '...the fire that never shall be guenched: where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not guenched.' Likewise, in 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9, Paul described how God punishes sin: 'In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power.""

At this, Grace was floored. She had certainly always considered herself a good person, but suddenly remembered a recent in-

cident when she had lied to a friend about posting something on Facebook about her. She knew it would be hurtful, but mounting peer pressure had seized her, and she caved. Then, to spare her friend's feelings, she had blatantly lied about it. So that would be considered sin, she thought. That was just one example, which immediately reminded her of other, related offences. The more she thought about it, her conscience began to convict her, for her whole life had been tainted by many offences against a Holy God. Wow. What do I do? Grace wondered. Tears filled her eyes as she realized that she, a sinner, was condemned to Hell.

astor John finished the verse, "Yes, 'the wages of sin is death, BUT the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.' Who is Jesus Christ? Jesus is God's Son, fully God and fully man. This Jesus came to earth and lived a sinless life. Because He is fully God, He had the power to obey God's law, unlike any other man. In Hebrews 4:15, we

read: 'For we do not have a high priest Who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but One Who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.' This perfect One, the Son of God, was a high priest, which means He acted as a perfect intercessor, or mediator, between God and man."

What does that mean? Grace asked herself again. I thought the problem was that I'm a sinner condemned to Hell. How does Jesus erase what I've already done? It's great that He was perfect, but I'm sure not...

Again, as if fully aware of Grace's inner turmoil, Pastor John went on: "As our intercessor, Jesus was able to do something no one else could do. Mohammed couldn't do it, Buddha couldn't do it, Joseph Smith, author of the Book of Mormon, couldn't do it... only Jesus could. He could fully obey God's law and take the penalty meant for us. Because He is fully God, He had the power to live as a sinless man and take the curse of

the law in our place. Galatians 3:13 says, 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us - for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" [i.e., the Cross].' As we said, the penalty (or curse) of sin is death, so Jesus had to die in our place. Speaking of Himself, Jesus said in Matthew 20:28: 'Even as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.'

Ontinuing his thought, Pastor John went on, "We quoted this passage earlier, but I'd like to include it here and read the rest of what it says. Romans 3:23-26 tells us, 'For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, Whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in His divine forbearance He had passed over former sins. It was to show His righteousness at the present time, so that

He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.'

"It is clear, from what we read here, that Jesus' death was not the death of a mere man, but a payment for our sin. He was a ransom, a propitiation, a justifier...all for us! Because of Him, we are offered the remission of sins in our past, and we may be declared righteous. As proof of the fact that Jesus was not just a man, He rose from the dead! By His resurrection, He conquered death itself! This is why we may declare that both sin and death have been conquered through Jesus. As our conquering Savior, Jesus crushed death and offers to us our own resurrection from the dead and eternal life with Himself in Heaven. In 1 Corinthians 15:55, Paul declares: 'O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, Which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.'

"Carlier in this chapter of 1 Corinthians, in verses 19-22, Paul encourages us that through Christ came the resurrection from the dead, because He has risen and is the victor over death: 'If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.'

his is a gift, an offer, that is available to all. Such a gift is made possible because of God's amazing love for us. We read in John 3:16, 'For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son [Jesus], that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.' Furthermore, we are shown how to receive this offer in Romans 10:9, 'If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.'"

Ourely it isn't that easy, thought Grace. I've heard that God helps those who help themselves...do I need to do anything at all?

astor John's next sentence immediately answered Grace's question: "We are powerless to save ourselves. In light of God's holiness, our best acts are like filthy rags [Isaiah 64:6] and do not bring us any closer to restitution. The reason this is such Good News is that we may rest in Jesus' perfect record for our eternal security. If we confess our sin and call on the name of Jesus, we can be saved. His work on the Cross is the finished, final work. In Ephesians 2:8-9, we read, 'For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.'

hen we respond in faith to this invitation, we are promised not just an escape from Hell, but a new, eternal destiny. In 1 Peter 1:4, we are assured that those in Christ will

have '...an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you.'

his is indeed the greatest gift in the world! All you have to do is receive this gift of God's amazing grace by trusting in the finished work of Christ to save you. My challenge to you is this: will you? He invites you to come, acknowledge the gravity of your sins and eternal judgement, believe that Jesus lived, died, and rose again, paying the penalty for your sin, and ask Him to become your personal Savior and Lord."

Grace did just that. With tears in her eyes, she recognized her desperate need to be saved, that her sins needed to be forgiven and paid for, and that Jesus was the only hope. Forgetting her surroundings, she knelt beside her pew and, for the first time in her life, surrendered to Jesus. As she cried out to Him and thanked Him for His grace, an incredible burden was lifted. When she lifted



her head, she refocused on the casket and thanked God for using a tragedy to bring her to Himself. She now knew, without a doubt, that if her body were in that casket, her soul would be with the Lord.

After the service, Grace approached the pastor and said, "I was so moved. You know what? I received the Lord Jesus as my Savior today. Thank you for the wonderful message!"

raise the Lord!" he replied. "What is your name?"

The answered timidly, "Grace."

Pastor John remarked, "How fitting! Grace means 'unmerited favor by God,' which is exactly what our sweet Savior gave you today. Grace, I rejoice with you!!"



After they had visited for awhile, John asked, "How did you know Christina?"

With tears welling up in her eyes, Grace replied, "She was my best friend. I miss her so much!"

"Grace, I have good news. The day before she passed, Christina asked me to come over and visit with her about faith. I had known her family and had seen her in church for years, but had never personally visited with her about faith. Of course, I agreed to come and offer what comfort I could. When I arrived, I knew something inside Christina had changed. She seemed eager to learn about Jesus, as if her awareness of death had..."

"...changed everything?" Grace asked, completing his sentence.

"Ves! Her face lit up when I came in, and she told me she wanted to know how to be

saved. Grace, take heart. Your friend Christina accepted Jesus as her Lord and Savior, and that means..."

"will see her again!?!?" Grace's face suddenly lit up, and she smiled the brightest smile John had seen that day. For the second time today, Grace rejoiced, knowing that God's amazing grace had saved them both.

If you have any questions, we'd love to hear from you!

aStoryofGrace2020@gmail.com

