

### 3. The Event of Grace and Paul Tillich's "You Are Accepted"

This chapter is a commentary on three paragraphs from an essay by Paul Tillich entitled "You are Accepted" which is Chapter 19 in Tillich's book of sermons entitled *The Shaking of the Foundations* published by Charles Scribner's Sons in 1948.

This sermon is based on this verse (5:20) from Paul's letter to the Romans.

Moreover the law entered, that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.

In this sermon Tillich probes the meaning of sin and grace. He suggests that sin is best understood as something deeper than moral violations. It is an estrangement or separation from others, from ourselves, and from the Ground of our being. Grace is described as reunion, a reunion with the Ground of our being that leads to reunion with others and with ourselves. In paragraphs 10 and 11 Tillich discusses how the separation from the Ground of our being is the core estrangement from which the other estrangements flow. Then he discusses the event of grace in paragraph 12, which gets my nomination for the most illuminating paragraph in 20th Century theology. In this commentary, I am going to discuss in detail these three paragraphs. I begin with paragraph 10.

Thus the state of our whole life is estrangement from others and ourselves, because we are estranged from the Ground of our being, because we are estranged from the origin and aim of our life. And we do not know where we have come from, or where we are going. We are separated from the mystery, the depth, and the greatness of our existence. We hear the voice of that depth; but our ears are closed. We feel that something radical, total, and unconditioned is demanded of us; but we rebel against it, try to escape its urgency, and will not accept its promise.

The truth of this paragraph leaps from the page when we see what Tillich means by mystery, depth, and greatness. Reality is a mystery. The Ground of our being is a mystery. We do not have scientific or religious or moral knowledge in our possession that can fulfill our desire for absolute certainty. Thinking we know is the estrangement Tillich is talking about. Believing that the Bible's statements or our churches statements are absolute certainties is estrangement from the Mystery.

On the topic of depth, we find ourselves living on the surface. Human life is deeper than any depth we have seen so far. Most people make it their pattern to avoid exploring the depths of their own lives. Our conversations at parties or even with best friends are shallow. Our religious services are shallow. Our willingness to endure doubt or engage real questions is shallow. This is what it means to be estranged from the depths.

And as for "greatness," our self depreciation is more common than our boastfulness. And most of our boastfulness is a cover for our sense of inadequacy, deficiency, incompetence, and even worthlessness. The plain truth is that 14 billion years of cosmic emergence and three and a half billion years of evolution has gone into producing we human beings. The plain truth is that we humans are the self-awareness component of this amazing planet. The plain truth is that underneath all our self depreciation and minimized responsibility each of us is a very capable and powerful being with amazing potentiality for aliveness, compassion, justice, and so on. But as Tillich says in his conclusion, "we rebel against it, try to escape its urgency, and will not accept its

promise.” This rebellion, this estrangement from the Ground of our being, is what Tillich defines as sin. In the next paragraph Tillich explores the tragic consequences of being estranged from this inescapable Ground of our being.

We cannot escape, however. If that something is the Ground of our being, we are bound to it for all eternity, just as we are bound to ourselves and to all other life. We always remain in the power of that from which we are estranged. That fact brings us to the ultimate depth of sin: separated and yet bound, estranged and yet belonging, destroyed and yet preserved, the state which is called despair. Despair means that there is no escape. Despair is “the sickness unto death.” But the terrible thing about the sickness of despair is that we cannot be released, not even through open or hidden suicide. For we all know that we are bound eternally and inescapably to the Ground of our being. The abyss of separation is not always visible. But it has become more visible to our generation than to the preceding generations, because of our feeling of meaninglessness, emptiness, doubt, and cynicism – all expressions of despair, of our separation from the roots and the meaning of our life. Sin in its most profound sense, sin, as despair, abounds amongst us.

To be estranged from that which cannot be escaped is a deep pain. We need some kind of story to access the feeling of such pain. I recall a movie in which an angry black man and a bigoted white man escape from prison handcuffed to one another. The two men hate one another, but they are handcuffed together. They are estranged and yet bound. Perhaps each of us can imagine how it would feel to be handcuffed to our worst enemy. The movie is the story of how these two men come to terms with their predicament. But before they do, they are in a state of despair. They are bound to what they hate. Being estranged yet bound to the Ground of being is an even more hopeless predicament. There is no chance of ever getting rid of these handcuffs; we are bound for all time. Indeed, Tillich says we are bound for all eternity. There is no escape even through death.

This inescapable Ground may not always be visible to us, so our despair can remain hidden as well. But Tillich gives us hints as to how this deep trauma comes to the surface – our feelings of meaninglessness, emptiness, doubt, and cynicism. We can ask ourselves which of these we have experienced most. We can inquire into our inner reality to see if what Tillich says is true – that these feelings are rooted in our estrangement from the Ground of our being. It is important to note that despair is not a moral issue; it is a sickness, a tragedy, a wasting of our lives, a loss of joy and courage and compassion and personal strength. Despair is a painful sickness so deep that many of us prefer death to even looking despair in the face.

But Tillich’s sermon does not end with the experience of despair. In the next paragraph he opens the topic of grace, which he has already defined as having to do with reunion with the Ground of our being.

“Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound,” says Paul in the same letter in which he describes the unimaginable power of separation and self destruction within society and the individual soul. He does not say these words because sentimental interests demand a happy ending for everything tragic. He says them because they describe the most overwhelming and determining experience of his life.

Grace is an experience, not an idea. For the apostle Paul, grace points to the most overwhelming and determining experience of his life. It seems to me that this is what we need to keep in mind as we read the rest of this paragraph.

In the picture of Jesus as the Christ, which appeared to him at the moment of his greatest separation from other men, from himself and God, he found himself accepted in spite of his being rejected. And when he found that he was accepted, he was able to accept himself and to be reconciled to others. The moment in which grace struck him and overwhelmed him, he was

reunited with that to which he belonged, and from which he was estranged in utter strangeness.

Paul was struck, overwhelmed, found himself accepted, found that he was reconciled to others, found himself reunited with that to which he belonged. These phrases do not speak of an achievement, but of a gift given to Paul. It had something to do with the picture of Jesus as the Christ, but it also had to do with something eye-opening in the inner life of Paul. As we explore the rest of this paragraph, we need to keep these insights in mind as well.

Do we know what it means to be struck by grace?

This sentence is something more than a useful transition. The question asks us to understand the meaning of grace as a happening in our own lives. It asks us to look and see if we have had something like this happen to us.

It does *not* mean that we suddenly believe that God exists, or that Jesus is the Savior, or that the Bible contains the truth. To believe that something is, is almost contrary to the meaning of grace. Furthermore, grace does not mean simply that we are making progress in our moral self-control, in our fight against special faults, and in our relationships to men and to society. Moral progress may be a fruit of grace; but it is not grace itself, and it can even prevent us from receiving grace.

Tillich says in no uncertain terms that the happening of grace is not a sudden burst of believing that something is true. And grace is not moral progress, though such progress may result from the happening of grace. Tillich is saying that grace is not an achievement of human doing; it is neither an intellectual achievement nor a behavioral achievement.

For there is too often a graceless acceptance of Christian doctrines and a graceless battle against the structures of evil in our personalities. Such a graceless relation to God may lead us by necessity either to arrogance or to despair. It would be better to refuse God and the Christ and the Bible than to accept Them without grace. For if we accept without grace, we do so in the state of separation, and can only succeed in deepening the separation.

“Graceless” means what? It means without that stroke, that happening in our lives that Tillich is going to describe in the rest of this paragraph. Unless our beliefs and behaviors are expressions of some real life experience, they are just apples tied to an old tree that bears no fruit of its own. We might each explore when we have engaged in graceless acceptance of Christian doctrine or some other doctrine. We might explore when we have engaged in a graceless battle against the structures of evil in our personalities. If we have taken on beliefs out of fear of punishment by God or rejection by others, that is graceless acceptance. If we have changed our behavior in surface ways but not even faced our basic estrangements, that has been a graceless battle against evil. Why does such believing or such character improvement lead to arrogance or to despair? Because we have done these “improvements” on our own as a cover for our real sense of truth or our real motivations. We have become a pretense of some sort or another. And pretense is a state of estrangement heading toward despair.

We cannot transform our lives, unless we allow them to be transformed by that stroke of grace. It happens; or it does not happen. And certainly it does *not* happen if we try to force it upon ourselves, just as it shall not happen as long as we think, in our self complacency, that we have no need of it.

Tillich is determined to drive home one basic point. Grace is a happening. And like all happenings, it either happens or it does not happen. This may offend us, because it means that we are not in control. We cannot make it happen. We cannot take credit for the healing of our own lives. We cannot be sure that grace will happen at all. So now Tillich has us ready to hear

his answer to the question, "What is this happening of grace like?"

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage.

These lines are the sort of poetry that can awaken us to some deep experiences that we might not want to expose. It might be helpful to pick the sentence among these five with which we most identify and inquire into what exactly it is pointing to in our experience. Why would we do this? Because Tillich is saying that this is the first aspect of the happening of grace. Grace happens to us when the despairing aspects of our living are coming to the surface of our consciousness. These grim feelings may be there always, but grace is not happening until such feelings begin to surface. The surfacing of our despair means the self-conscious experience of being in despair. The moment in which grace is beginning to happen is the moment in which we are beginning to be willing to be in the despair we are actually despairing.

Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. *You are accepted*, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know.

That dark moment in which we are aware of our despair, including feeling our despair, is the moment Tillich means. At that moment, a light may shine or not. But if it does, the light we see or the voice we hear says that we are accepted. By whom? By ourselves? No, at this moment we do not accept ourselves. We are in despair over ourselves. By other human beings? No, even if they do accept us, it discredits them in our eyes for when we are in despair, we passionately believe that anyone who accepts us is foolish. Rather, that which accepts us is greater than other human beings, greater than ourselves. It is, of course, the Ground of our being, but we do not need that name or any other name. We only need for it to dawn on us that we are accepted by that which is the actual root of our actuality. We are welcomed home to Reality. We have been away in the dark corridors of estrangement. Now the light of home is welcoming us.

Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. *Simply accept the fact that you are accepted.*"

Tillich says four things not to do and only one thing to do. Why are we asked not to try or seek or perform or intend anything? Because all those seemingly useful responses are just ways of avoiding the real issue. We do not have any need to accomplish some sort of acceptability. We are accepted in spite of any and all unacceptabilities. Even though our life has been a waste, has come to no good, and is now wallowing in the ruin, we are welcome home to Reality, as if we were a newborn babe. A newborn babe does not have to do something to justify its welcome. Birth is a sheer gift which has only to be accepted and then lived. So also this welcome home to Reality is a sheer gift that has only to be accepted. But acceptance is an action. It is an action of nondoing. It is the action of doing nothing. Our home in the land of Mystery, Awe, Trust, Love, and Freedom does not have to be built. It was built before we were born. But this one thing does need to be done: simply accept the fact that we are accepted home.

If that happens to us we experience grace.

If what happens to us? Let us review: (1) we have become aware of our particular brand of immobilizing despair; (2) at that moment, a dawning takes place, the dawning that we are accepted by that which is greater than we; (3) we have accepted our acceptance. That's it. Those three dynamics are what Tillich means by grace, the grace happening, the happening that is grace. So what comes next?

After such an experience we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement. And nothing is demanded of this experience, no religious or moral or intellectual presupposition, nothing but *acceptance*.

Tillich refers again to moral progress and doctrinal belief. He indicates that the grace happening does not take place on that level. We may change our beliefs or our behaviors later, but the grace happening has nothing to do with that. Nevertheless, everything is transformed. This has not been a minor occurrence. We were walking West and now we are walking East. There has been an about-face in the fundamental march of our lives. It is not that all estrangement in our lives has disappeared. But a bridge has been established in the opposite direction. We are now crossing over (or perhaps through) our estrangement toward our authenticity. We were fleeing from our authenticity into ever-deeper estrangement. Now we are moving across the bridge. But this is just a bridge, perhaps a very small bridge over a great gulf of estrangement. And this bridge is not established by anything we have accomplished. We need not have joined some religious group. We need not have corrected our flaws. We need not have straightened out our theology. Only acceptance of our acceptance creates the bridge. This bridge of acceptance is 100 percent the gift of the Ground of our being. And this bridge of acceptance is also 100 percent an action of our core being. There is no way to rationally figure out this paradox; we have only to look and see that it is true.

Tillich goes on in the next two paragraphs to suggest how this core experience of grace has consequences in our relationship with others and in our relationship with ourselves. But Tillich never allows his understanding of grace to be detached from this underlying relationship with the Ground of our being.

This relationship with the Ground of our being is solitary, personal, very much my own or your own relationship. Yet it is also true that grace opens up our membership in a community of people who know grace and live from its foundations. And this community becomes a means of grace to others and to ourselves. This community assists people in discerning and confessing their despair, in hearing the cosmic Word of their acceptance. And finally this community beckons people to step out of their delusory safe boats and walk on the wild waters of accepting the fact that they are accepted.