

There's a state park in northern Minnesota on the very north shore of Lake Superior. Judge C. R. Magney State Park is one of those scenic places with trees and rocky gorges, pristine rivers and beautiful waterfalls. The last eight miles of the Brute River flow through the park, dropping 800 feet in elevation. In that run are several waterfalls and cascades. At one waterfall the river splits in two. Half the river falls over the edge dropping below and continuing. The other half drops into a hole. And disappears. Devil's Kettle, as it's called, has been studied from all angles. Surely the water comes out somewhere. Studies throwing ping pong balls, colored dye, and logs into the hole have all been done. Dropping cameras, GPS trackers, those have been tried too. Nothing has ever come out. Scientists, naturalists, everyone is stumped. There seems to be no good explanation as to where all that water is going.

It's that same curiosity that leads human beings to try and find answers to life's big questions. Why are we here? What is it all for? If I'm held accountable for all the wrongdoing in my life, how will I ever be alright? And people have come up with answers. But every human answer centers on human beings. We're here for us. We exist to bring happiness to others and ourselves. And we will be able to overcome the few wrongs we do and achieve something grand anyway.

There's a problem with a human centered answer to a much bigger question. Actual experience. Human beings have been trying for centuries to improve. But after centuries the level of improvement is low if at all. In fact most judge the world to be getting worse, not better. A better answer is needed. That's where Paul's letter to the Ephesians comes in. As Paul writes his inspired words his answer is centered much different. It's centered really on one word, a word he gives a very clear definition of.

God gives the very definition of grace

A little scene setting first. It's a small phrase in Paul's writing but if we skip over it we might just get everything else wrong that we talk about today. Because without an understanding of this phrase the impact of what Paul says will be diminished. Paul says, **"when we were dead in our transgressions"**. Transgressions, if you haven't heard that word before or very often, is another word for sins. A line is drawn. Cross the line and its sin. One side is okay; the other side is forbidden. To transgress is to step over the line onto the forbidden side. In this particular case, God draws the line. One side is no sin, the other side is sin. When we transgress we step over God's line.

Paul says those who transgressed the commands of God, stepped over the line into forbidden territory, are described in one way. Dead. Have we ever crossed a line into doing something we weren't supposed to? Be honest. Lied to anyone, cheated in business transactions, held grudges or been angry with someone for no reason? Thought horrible things about another person, stepped on them to get ahead, picked on anyone? The list could go on. If we're being honest we've transgressed God's Law. That's no small thing. God's Word convinces us in spite of ourselves that we're transgressors. We're described as **"by nature objects of wrath."** Since that's true only one thing can be said about us in our natural condition before God gets involved. We are dead. Dead in our transgressions. Dead in our sinful selves. Everything that can be said about a dead person can be said about you in your sins. Hold on to that because it will be super important a bit later.

With a little imagination many people have come up with what they think are solutions to the Devil's Kettle waterfall. Plenty of suggestions, not one absolute positive solution. No proof. It remains a mystery. Fellow objects of God's wrath, fellow dead bodies in our transgressions, I could stand here all day imploring you to get better in life. I could yell and scream that you must get better or you'll suffer. I could speak softly words of encouragement. None of it would be any help. Only God provides the solution. **"But because of his great love for us..."** You were an object of wrath, you were dead, BUT. Love you couldn't explain and love you couldn't earn, that's God's great love for you.

It doesn't stop there. **"...God, who is rich in mercy..."** Rich in mercy, not treating you as your transgressions deserve. Mercy that reacts to your needs and then acts. Love and mercy come from God to you. What do they accomplish? **"Made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions."** This has to be from God, his overwhelming mercy and kindness. Has to be and you remember why. Because dead people don't respond, can't respond first. You and I were dead and God called us to life in Christ. God's great love and rich mercy made you who were dead, a dead body spiritually, waiting for judgment and nothing else, made you alive.

Two more things God did for you now that he's given you life in Christ. **"God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus."** Raised you up and seated you. For Jesus to be raised he needed to die. I know it's the season of Lent, but let that not diminish the joy we feel for the resurrection. Christ's resurrection glory never fades, not during Lent, not ever. It can't and it won't. It is the greatest accomplishment because for Christ Jesus it declared his work complete and fulfilled. Every step you took over the line of God's Law has been completely paid for. The empty tomb announced the payment. You have what Christ won for you, a freedom from sin and a promise of resurrection. You have from Christ something that can't be taken away. Though you don't experience it quite yet, you already have been raised with Christ and seated with Christ in heavenly glory. That's all yours.

Few sweeter words have ever been recorded in human history. **“For it is by grace you have been saved through faith.”** God’s grace. A quality of God that makes him willing, even eager, to give us love that we as sinners have not deserved. Love from God that expects nothing in return. Love that chooses to love those who are unlovable. God’s grace took any and all first steps to save you. God’s grace motivated God to give you life. God’s grace overflowed and you were raised with Christ. God’s grace flows continuously and you have the promise of being seated with Christ in heaven. God’s overwhelming and never ceasing grace for you took your spiritual corpse and gave it spiritual life. On the basis exclusively of what Jesus did for you, demonstrating visibly what God’s grace looks like by hanging on a cross to die, you have been saved. Rescued for eternal life.

In case there is doubt as to how you’re saved, Paul continues. **“For it is by grace you have been saved through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works...”** Two negatives and one positive. Did God understand people or what? God knew the human mind would try and take credit for being saved, for getting to heaven, for a good life here on earth. Knew we would want to choose to have faith, even just a little bit from us. So he emphasized in clear language what is true. Your being saved is completely and totally, 100%, everything to do with God’s grace. It’s undeserved. It’s not from you. It’s not by works. So it’s a gift. God’s gift. Free and clear to you. Given to you because he was thinking about you. He loves you and wants to shower you with this love always. He hands salvation to you and says you’re with me now. I want you in heaven. I’ve done everything necessary to make it happen. I love you and I have saved you in Christ. The belief you have in me is mine, I gave that to you too. It’s all a gift.

What happens now are good works of course. **“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”** Hearing about God’s grace motivates us now. We move forward doing the very good works that God lays out in the Bible. Things that please him like honesty in business and demonstrating love in relationships. All these things we do, like helping our neighbor and being polite, yet still none earn us anything before God. They are works of thanksgiving. Motivated by God’s grace. In fact God gets credit for them because he prepared them in advance. He laid out a whole bunch of wonderful good works that please him. We spend our lives of faith picking and choosing which ones we’ll do, knowing any and all make him happy. God is completely deserving of praise for his gifts, his mercy, his love, his grace in Christ.

That’s where it all comes back to. Did you catch it? When God speaks of the forgiveness we have, **“made alive with Christ.”** When God speaks of his kindness, **“expressed his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.”** God makes us alive and seats us, **“raised us up with Christ and seated us...in Christ Jesus.”** He created us **“in Christ Jesus.”** If you want a definition of grace, to understand it, to see it, look and listen for Christ. Grace is God’s gift to you. In Lent and any time of year God’s grace, his undeserved love to you, is always in Christ Jesus.