



JOHN PIPER

FUTURE E
FUTURE C
FUTURE A
FUTURE R
FUTURE G

The Purifying Power of the Promises of God

*And God is able to make all grace abound to you,
so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times,
you may abound in every good work.*

2 CORINTHIANS 9:8

By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:10

I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed.

ROMANS 15:18

LOVING MINISTRY MORE THAN LIFE

MINISTRY IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN LIFE

According to the New Testament, “ministry” is what all Christians do. Pastors have the job of equipping the saints for the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:12). But ordinary Christians do the ministry. What ministry looks like is as varied as Christians are varied. It’s not an office like elder or deacon; it’s a lifestyle devoted to making much of Christ. It means that we “do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:10). Whether we are bankers or bricklayers, it means that we aim at advancing other people’s faith and holiness. Fulfilling your ministry is more important than staying alive.

This conviction is what makes the lives of radically devoted people so inspiring to watch. Most of them speak the way Paul did about his ministry: “But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus” (Acts 20:24). Doing the ministry that God gives us to do is more important than life. You may think you need to save your life in order to do your ministry. On the contrary, how you lose your life may be the capstone of your ministry. It certainly was for Jesus, only in his thirties. We need not fret about keeping ourselves alive in order to finish our ministry. God alone knows the appointed time of our service. Henry Martyn was right when he said, “[If God] has work for me to do, I cannot die.”¹ In other words, I am immortal until my work is done. Therefore, ministry is more important than life.

1. Henry Martyn, *Journal and Letters of Henry Martyn* (New York: Protestant Episcopal Society for the Promotion of Evangelical Knowledge, 1851), 460.

THEY LOVED NOT THEIR LIVES ABOVE MINISTRY

O, how many examples could be multiplied from the glorious history of God's faithful saints! William Carey sailed to India from England in 1793. He lost his five-year-old son, his wife became mentally ill, he labored seven years for his first convert, and he lost years' worth of precious translation work in a fire. But still he pressed on—for forty years without a furlough. Because ministry is more important than life. Adoniram Judson, "America's first foreign missionary," went to Burma in 1814. He lost a six-month-old baby boy, spent a year and a half in a "death prison," lost his wife from fever, suffered a mental breakdown, and waited five years for his first convert. But he kept on, because ministry is more important than life. Robert Morrison, the first Protestant missionary to go to China (in 1807), lost his young wife and worked seven years for his first convert. But he kept on, because ministry is more important than life.²

NO MIRROR FOR THE LAST TWENTY YEARS

Evelyn Harris Brand, the mother of Paul Brand, the world-renowned hand surgeon and leprosy specialist, grew up in a well-to-do English family. She had studied at the London Conservatory of Art and dressed in the finest silks. But she went with her husband to minister as missionaries in the Kolli Malai range of India. After about ten years, her husband died at age forty-four and she came home "a broken woman, beaten down by pain and grief." But after a year's recuperation, and against all advice, she returned to India. Her soul was restored and she poured her life into the hill people, "nursing the sick, teaching farming, lecturing about guinea worms, rearing orphans, clearing jungle land, pulling teeth, establishing schools, preaching the gospel." She lived in a portable hut, eight feet square, that could be taken down, moved, and erected again.

At age sixty-seven she fell and broke her hip. Her son, Paul, had just come to India as a surgeon. He encouraged her to retire. She had already suffered a broken arm, several cracked vertebrae, and recurrent malaria. Paul mounted as many arguments as he could think of to persuade her that

sixty-seven years was a good investment in ministry, and now it was time to retire. Her response? "Paul, you know these mountains. If I leave, who will help the village people? Who will treat their wounds and pull their teeth and teach them about Jesus? When someone comes to take my place, then and only then will I retire. In any case, why preserve this old body if it's not going to be used where God needs me?" That was her final answer. So she worked on.

At the age of ninety-five, she died. Following her instructions, villagers buried her in a simple cotton sheet so that her body would return to the soil and nourish new life. "Her spirit, too, lives on, in a church, a clinic, several schools, and in the faces of thousands of villagers across five mountain ranges of South India." Her son commented that "with wrinkles as deep and extensive as any I have ever seen on a human face...she was a beautiful woman." But it was not the beauty of the silk and heirlooms of London high society. For the last twenty years of her life, she refused to have a mirror in her house! She was consumed with ministry, not mirrors. A coworker once remarked that Granny Brand was more alive than any person he had ever met. "By giving away life, she found it."³ This is what happens, paradoxically, when ministry is more important than life.

DOING MINISTRY AND DYING WELL BY FAITH IN FUTURE GRACE

I stress this radical orientation on ministry simply to double the impact of the importance of future grace. For no one fulfills any spiritual ministry without relying on future grace. This is the unmistakable witness of the New Testament. And it makes future grace central and indispensable in doing ministry and dying well.

In 2 Corinthians 9:8, Paul said, "God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work." The immediate context relates to financial liberality. But the principle is stated more broadly than that. God is able to make all grace—all the *future grace* you need—abound to you so that you will (literally) "abound in every good work." Future grace is the means God

2. I took these little summary vignettes from Clay Sterrett, "Hanging Tough," *Faith and Renewal*, vol. 16, no. 4, January/February, 1992, 19.

3. The facts and quotes of this story of Evelyn Brand are taken from Paul Brand with Philip Yancey, "And God Created Pain," *Christianity Today*, January 10, 1994, 22–23.

supplies for "every good work"—not "every good work" imaginable, but "every good work" appointed by God along your unique path of ministry. The power for every one of them is future grace.

The church at Antioch gives us an example how this promise is to be trusted. When God called Paul and Barnabas to be missionaries, the church saw it as a summons to faith in future grace. They prayed, and then sent Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey with the confidence that future grace would go before them and give them success. We know this because when they got back, the book of Acts describes their arrival in relation to this work of grace: "They sailed [back] to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled" (Acts 14:26).

The connection here between future grace and ministry is clear. Literally it says, "They were handed over to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled." This was how the Christians in Antioch trusted the promise of 2 Corinthians 9:8. The promise said that God will make all grace abound to you for "every good work." So by faith in future grace, the church handed Paul and Barnabas over "to the grace of God for the work." Future grace was like an armed guard, and a supply of goods, and a team of physicians, and a spiritual force from heaven. It was strategically positioned in the future just out from the port of Antioch. And by faith the church entrusted the missionaries to God's great provision called future grace (see Acts 15:40).

GRACE IS THE GREAT DOER IN PAUL'S MINISTRY

Paul confirmed with his own words the absolute necessity of future grace for ministry. He said, "By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me" (1 Corinthians 15:10). Paul realized that the first part of this verse might be misunderstood. Someone might say, "See, he is telling us that God gave him grace in the past, and now Paul is simply responding to that grace, out of gratitude, by working for God as hard as he can." That would be a partial, but distorted, truth. It is not the picture of Christian ministry Paul wants to leave in our minds. So he goes on to say, "Though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me."

This text does not say that Paul is obeying Christ out of gratitude for

past grace. There is no doubt that Paul was filled with gratitude to God for multiplied liturgical grace. And no doubt, as we saw in chapter 2, this gratitude nourished his faith in future grace with happy reminders of the past. But this is *not* what the text says. It says that, at every moment, the *future* grace of God enabled Paul's work. Does it really say that? Doesn't it just say that the grace of God worked *with* Paul? No, it says more. We have to come to terms with the words, "Though it was not I." Paul wants to exalt the moment-by-moment grace of God in such a way that it is clear that he himself is not the decisive doer of this work. "Though it was not I."

Nevertheless, he is a doer of this work: "I worked harder than any of them." He worked. But he said it was the grace of God "toward me." If we let all the parts of this verse stand, the end result is this: grace is the decisive doer in Paul's work. Since Paul is also a doer of his work, the way grace becomes the decisive doer is by becoming the enabling power of Paul's work.

I take this to mean that, as Paul faced each day's ministry burden, he bowed his head and confessed that unless future grace was given for that day's work, he would not be able to do it. He recalled the words of Jesus, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). So he prayed for future grace for the day, and he trusted in the promise that it would come with power. "My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19). Then he acted with all his might. And when he came to the end of the day, he called *his* might the might of grace and gave God the glory. "Though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me." Or, with different words, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

THE GRACE TO WILL AND TO DO

This is the way Paul saw all Christian ministry happening, not just his. That's why he wrote to the Philippians, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12–13). God is the decisive worker here. He wills and he works for his good pleasure. But believing this does not make Christians passive. It makes them hopeful and energetic and courageous. Each day there is a work to be done in our special ministry. Paul

commands us to work at doing it. But he tells us how to do it in the power of future grace: believe the promise that in this day God will be at work in you to will and work for his good pleasure.

It is not the memory of past grace that wills and works for God's good pleasure. It is God himself, graciously arriving each moment, that brings the future into the present. It is not the gratitude for past grace that Paul focuses on when explaining how he "worked harder than any of them." It is fresh grace for every new conquest in his missionary labor. He does not say that the grace to do ministry comes from the past, as a memory, through the channel of gratitude; he says it comes from the future, as divine power, through the channel of faith.⁴

The power of future grace is the power of the living Christ—always there to work for us at every future moment that we enter. So when Paul describes the effect of the grace of God that was with him, he says, "I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed" (Romans 15:18). Therefore since he would not dare to speak of anything but what Christ accomplished through his ministry, and yet he did, in fact, speak of what grace accomplished through his ministry (1 Corinthians 15:10), this must mean that the power of grace is the power of Christ. Which means that the power we need for tomorrow's ministry is the future grace of the omnipotent Christ, who will always be there for us—ready to will and ready to work for his good pleasure.

ABUNDANT GRACE WAS ON THEM ALL—TO WITNESS

If our ministry is to witness to Christ tomorrow in some unsympathetic situation, the key will not be our brilliance; the key will be abundant future grace. Of all people, the apostles seemed to need least help to give a compelling witness to the risen Christ. They had been with him for three years. They had seen him die. They had seen him alive. In their witnessing arsenal they had "many proofs" (Acts 1:3). You might think that, of all people, their

4. Again I stress that gratitude is a precious and indispensable response to God in the Christian heart. But, contrary to much of Christian thinking, the New Testament does not portray gratitude as the motive for ministry. See chapters 1 and 2.

ministry of witnessing, in those early days, would sustain itself on the strength of the past glories that were still so fresh.

But that is not what the book of Acts tells us. It says, "With great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all" (Acts 4:33). The power to witness with faithfulness and effectiveness did not come mainly from memories of grace, or reservoirs of knowledge; it came from the new arrivals of "great grace." That's the way it was for the apostles, and that's the way it will be for us in our ministry of witnessing.

Whatever added signs and wonders God may show to amplify our witness to Christ, they will come the same way they came for Stephen. "And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6:8). There is an extraordinary future grace and power that we may bank on in the crisis of special ministry need. It is a fresh act of power by which God "bore witness to the word of his grace" (Acts 14:3; see also Hebrews 2:4). The grace of power bears witness to the grace of truth. This is not the performance of gratitude for what is past; it is the performance of faith in what is future.

SPIRITUAL GIFTS: CHANNELS OF FUTURE GRACE

When we think of the ministry of ordinary Christians, we think not only of the ministry of witnessing to Christ, but also the use of spiritual gifts for the building up of the church. Here the crucial point is that no one can exercise a spiritual gift without future grace. In fact, ministering through spiritual gifts is defined by the apostle Peter as mediating grace from God to other people. "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace" (1 Peter 4:10).

Future grace is "varied grace." It comes in many colors and shapes and sizes. This is one of the reasons spiritual gifts in the body are so diverse. The prism of your life will refract one of the colors of grace that would never come through my prism. There are as many future graces as there are needs in the body of Christ—and more. The purpose of spiritual gifts is to receive and dispense the future grace of God to those needs.

But someone may ask, "Why do you take Peter to refer to future grace?"

Doesn't a steward manage a household store that is already on hand?" The main reason I take Peter to refer to future grace is because the next verse illustrates how this works, and the reference there is ongoing supplies of future grace. He says, "Whoever serves... by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 4:11). When you fulfill your spiritual gift to serve someone tomorrow, you will be serving "by the strength that God supplies" *tomorrow*. The word is *supplies*, not *supplied*. God goes on, day-by-day, moment-by-moment, supplying the "strength" in which we minister. This means that spiritual gifts are fulfilled by the power of future grace, not merely in the power that we muster through thinking about past grace.

And when we rely on future grace in this way, what happens is that our gifts do in fact become grace for others. We channel grace from God to others. Paul gives a beautiful example of this in Ephesians 4:29, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, *that it may give grace to those who hear*." Before this day is done, there will be a moment in your life "as fits the occasion." Someone will be positioned to benefit from your words. This is the ministry that you will be called to at that moment: "for building up." If you put your faith in future grace and serve in the strength that God supplies, you will become a channel of that grace. You will "give grace to those who hear." They do not have it now. It is future. But when it comes—to you and *through* you—the satisfaction is so deep you will know why you were created and why you were called.

"*help*." The Greek original behind the phrase "grace to help in time of need" would be translated literally, "grace for a well-timed help."

The point is that prayer is the way to find future grace for a well-timed help. This grace always arrives from the "throne of grace" on time. The phrase "throne of grace" means that future grace comes from the King of the Universe who sets the times by his own authority (Acts 1:8). His timing is perfect, but it is rarely ours: "For a thousand years in [his] sight are but as yesterday when it is past" (Psalm 90:4). At the global level, he sets the times for nations to rise and fall (Acts 17:26). And at the personal level, "My times are in [his] hand" (Psalm 31:15). When we wonder about the timing of future grace, we must think on the "throne of grace." Nothing can hinder God's plan to send grace when it will be best for us. Future grace is always well-timed.

Future grace is the constant plea of the praying psalmists. They pray for it again and again to meet every need. They leave every minister a model of daily dependence on future grace for every exigency. They cry out for future grace when they need help: "Hear, O LORD, and be merciful to me; O LORD, be my helper!" (Psalm 30:10). They cry out for future grace when they are weak: "Turn to me and be gracious to me; give your strength to your servant" (Psalm 86:16). They cry out for future grace when they need healing: "Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing, heal me, O LORD" (Psalm 6:2). They cry out for future grace when they are afflicted by enemies: "Be gracious to me, O Lord! See my affliction from those who hate me" (Psalm 9:13). They cry out for future grace when they are lonely: "Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted" (Psalm 25:16). They cry out for future grace when they are grieving: "Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye is wasted from grief" (Psalm 31:9). They cry out for future grace when they have sinned: "O LORD, be gracious to me, heal me, for I have sinned against you!" (Psalm 41:4). They cry out for future grace when they long for God's name to be exalted among the nations: "God be gracious to us and bless us...that your way may be known on earth" (Psalm 67:1–2).

THE TIMING OF FUTURE GRACE

All ministry is in the future—a moment away, or a month, or a year, or a decade. We have ample time to fret about our inadequacy. When this happens, we must turn to prayer. Prayer is the form of faith that connects us today with the grace that will make us adequate for tomorrow's ministry. Timing is everything. What if grace comes too early or comes too late? The traditional translation of Hebrews 4:16 hides from us a very precious promise in this regard. We need a more literal rendering to see it. The more traditional wording goes like this: "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of

5. "While the throne of grace is open, and you yourselves not overwhelmed by the danger"—Henry Alford, *The Greek New Testament*, vol. 4 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), 90. "At the divinely appointed time"—*Thological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3, ed. G. Kittel, trans. G. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1965), 462.

Unmistakably, prayer is the great link of faith between the soul of the saint and the promise of future grace. If ministry was meant by God to be sustained by prayer, then ministry was meant to be sustained by faith in future grace.

MINISTRY IS A GIFT OF GRACE, JUST LIKE SALVATION

I recall coming to the end of my graduate studies in Munich, Germany, back in 1974. I had no idea where to go. I was ready to enter any ministry the Lord would open for me. I sent my résumé to dozens of schools and missions and agencies. One of the most encouraging letters I received in those days was from my friend and former professor, Daniel Fuller. He knew I was struggling to trust God for a place of ministry. So he quoted a little-known verse, 2 Corinthians 4:1 (NASB), "Since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart." He pointed out the word as in the phrase "as we received mercy." Then he showed me the link between "having a ministry" and "receiving mercy." He said that ministry is given as freely and as sovereignly and as graciously as the first experience of mercy that we received in salvation. That is what I needed then. And that is what I need now, to press on in my ministry. The place of ministry and the ongoing performance of ministry are gifts of grace, just like my conversion was. Therefore, ministry means living by faith in future grace.

One of the great threats to persevering in ministry is the paralyzing effect of despondency. Therefore we must find a way to triumph over this crippling sense of oppression. In the next chapter we will ponder how claiming the promises of God can fight off the destructive effects of despondency.