

By Grace Alone

‡ God’s gift of life
‡ Living by God’s grace

In the Name of Bill’s best Friend Jesus, dear Joan and all who loved our brother in Christ:

It has long impressed me since my early days as a pastor how these memorial services are like the last word on a person’s life. Parents and pastors, Sunday School teachers and Christian friends have all influenced and contributed to the goodness of the life we celebrate, but here we are to hear the last word on Bill Olson. We could spend hours reminiscing, eulogizing Bill’s accomplishments, but he would not like that. Many times my brothers and sisters at New Life have said, “I don’t want a eulogy. I want a sermon.” What’s the difference? You’ll understand if you know the last word on Bill’s life.

‡ God’s gift of life

Thirty-one years ago my family and I began to receive blessings from God through Bill and Joan. Two little ones, expecting our third, Cindy on bed rest – their help cleaning the parsonage is still a treasured memory. Our kids were blessed by Joan teaching Sunday School, but you could see how important God’s Word was to Bill. Stopping by one day, I found Bill out in the shop listening to the Bible on cassette. One nugget of wisdom he shared: “Pastor, if you don’t take care of yourself, no one will.” Isn’t it easy for all of us to neglect the basics and then think we’re doing God a favor?

Some pearls of wisdom were practically priceless. For weeks I’d been praying about how to remove a chimney from the parsonage. Finally, since Bill was a master millwright, I asked him. He listened while I described some crane contraption we could build on top the roof. Then one question: “Why don’t you take it out the bottom?” “It could fall and hurt someone.” “Not if you take it out one brick section at a time.” Ask me sometime, and I’ll share how that was accomplished. But when the workday was done, I called my brother who remodels homes in Portland, Oregon. “I figure engineering, labor, materials would add up to about \$6000.” “Interior chimney, \$6000.” Saved by a word of wisdom!

But none of that wisdom began with Bill, because *“the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.”* (Psalm 111:10 NIV84) “Bill was always the first one to offer help, whether to family, friends, his son’s friends or to a stranger. Be it automotive, household, electrical, plumbing, welding, etc.... He was always there for any family project to lend his expertise, roll up his sleeves and work hard. Jack of all trades, master of Millwrights. Bill was a great mentor to his sons, teaching them the tricks-of-the-trades that he loved.”¹ But none of these good works, as helpful as they are, could bring Bill one step closer to God. Something had to happen first, just as it must for all of us before we can please God.

In the Lesson read before our text the Holy Spirit says through Paul: *“You were dead in your trespasses and sins, ²in which you formerly walked when you followed the ways of this present world. You were following the ruler of the domain of the air, the spirit now at work in the people who disobey. ³Formerly, we all lived among them in the passions of our sinful flesh, as we carried out the desires of the sinful flesh and its thoughts. Like all the others, we were by nature objects of God’s wrath.”*²

Real hunters who actually get their deer must be careful; a “dead” deer can attack you before it expires. But once it’s really dead, you know its not going to head for the hills. We were born *dead*,

¹ From family memories Todd Olson emailed on 1/26/2018.

² EHV ~ *Evangelical Heritage Version*. The Wartburg Project, © 2017. (NPH: 800-662-6022; also at Amazon / Kindle)

spiritually speaking – dead corpses stumbling from one destructive passion to another, hurting ourselves and everyone around us, earning nothing but *God's wrath*. We could not make ourselves alive.

That's where the last word on Bill's life was also the first word on his new life. *"God, because he is rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in trespasses. It is by grace you have been saved!"* (EHV) God first worked the **Grace**-miracle for Bill in the Word-powered water of Baptism. There God gave that little baby a gift just as God's Word, the Bible, promises in so many places: *"Indeed, it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹not by works, so that no one can boast."* *Faith* is like the hand that receives God's gift of salvation, bought and paid for by the blood of God's own Son, shed on the cross for Bill, for you, for me, for all. To try to substitute some other works besides God's good works in Christ is boasting God's will not tolerate. No eulogies. All **Grace!**

Since we were sin-dead corpses by nature, unable to please God, earning only His *wrath* and eternal displeasure, this **Grace** is truly love undeserved by us. **Grace** is that wonderful quality in God's heart that make Him want to help the helpless. **Grace** couples with His mercy that shines more brightly for the most miserable and helpless, especially those who will just admit it. The angels carried Bill's immortal soul through the wide open gates of heaven into the arms of God – all **By Grace Alone**.

† Living by God's grace

This is where folks get hung up a bit. Seriously, some have asked, "Well then, are you against good works?" My answer: What does God say? That's the last verse of our text: *"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared in advance so that we would walk in them."* (EHV) Bill was proud of the things he made, the house he built, the repairs he could do after everyone else gave up. But the machine could not brag, nor the house boast, nor the furniture claim any credit for the work of Bill's hands. Neither can we for what God has done in us and through us. We are *God's handiwork* (NIV11) created for His own special purpose to be *good works workers*. He created us to literally walk around on His good works, revel in Jesus' works of living, dying and rising again for our justification – then help our neighbor throughout our lives. That's **Living by God's grace**.

Jesus said that first you have to make a bad tree good so it can bear good fruit. He assures us that's what He did with us by giving us the gift of faith: *"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."* (John 15:5 NIV84) Even better, *"They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, 'The LORD is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him.'"* (Psalm 92:14f NIV84)

So God says that good works are necessary, but not for salvation. Good works are necessary as evidence that faith exists. The Bible tells us that faith alone saves, but faith is never alone. And even if it makes some kind souls uncomfortable, God says He will reward good works. Listen: *"God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them."* (Hebrews 6:10 NIV84) He just wants us to remember these rewards are always rewards of **Grace** as Jesus said to His disciples: *"So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'"* (Luke 17:10 NIV84)

Don't make an even bigger mistake on this sermon. Don't think you can do good works or reach the rewards of heaven on your own. That would dishonor not only Bill's memory but the reputation and honor of God for all His **Grace**. God loves you as surely as He loves Bill home in heaven today. But don't forget that Bill flourished *"in the courts of our God."* (Psalm 92:13). You could see it when the Holy Supper gave him such peace in Jesus' forgiving **Grace**. If you're not attending church regularly, without God's Word and sacrament, you're like an ATV with no gas, guns without bullets, the bon with no fire,

nature without the God of all creation. May the last word on Bill's life be the first and last word on yours. All for living, a gift forgiving, everything you need in Christ alone: **Grace...Grace...only Grace.** Amen.