

God's Amazing Grace

by Pastor Mike Taylor

2:8 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:

2:9 Not of works, lest any man should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

When one speaks of God's grace, it has been defined as the love and mercy given to us by God because God desires us to have it, not because of anything we have done to earn it, but is the condescension or benevolence shown by God toward the human race. It is understood by Christians to be a spontaneous gift from God to man being a generous, free and totally unexpected and undeserved -that takes the form of divine favor, love, clemency, and a share in the divine life of God.

It is an attribute of God that is most manifest in the salvation of sinners. Christianity holds that the initiative in the relationship of grace between God and an individual is always on the side of God, not man. God pursues us, as we do not pursue Him.

CAPTURED BY GRACE

I just got finished reading a book by David Jeremiah, called "Captured by Grace". In the pages of this book, Dr. Jeremiah explores the life of Paul, and contrast it with another man who wrote the words of that most beloved hymn "Amazing Grace" John Newton. If you read about the life that each of these men had before they met the Lord of Glory, you would understand how depraved and sinful they were. How deceived each man was.

Saul of Tarsas was a zealot of the Jewish faith, being a Pharisee, he made it his mission to stamp out this new heretical sect of Judaism, called at the time, "The Way". We can read the story of Saul at its beginning in Acts chapters 7 of the stoning of Stephen, where Saul is introduced as a man consenting to the death of this young disciple of Jesus Christ, but moving on into chapter 9, Saul is on the road to Damascus and the risen Jesus Christ comes to him and knocks him off his horse and blinds him:

9:3 And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven:

9:4 And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?

9:5 And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the goads.

I wondered what the word goad meant and what it referred to, or as some translations have it pricks. It is a reference to the pointed stick or metal poker that was used to drive an oxen team to do what you wanted them to do, where you wanted them to go. You were leading them, but pricking them with this stick, even as the oxen would kick at it. Paul was being pursued and was being driven to do what God wanted him to do with a spiritual sharp stick.

As you read the story, you have to wonder what went through Saul's mind when he is confronted by the risen Lord. The same Lord he was determined to stamp out any worship of by persecuting all who were following Him. I just can imagine it destroyed everything he thought he was, or believed up to that point. If he was wrong about this, what else was he wrong about? He had to meditate on this in his weakened condition. For three days, he took no food or water, being blinded by the intense light that shown about him, as the revelation of Jesus Christ came to him bodily in His glorified state.

As the story progresses, Paul is healed by a follower of Jesus Christ, one Ananias who God commands him to go to Saul and heal his eyes, by laying his hands on him. From that point on, Saul who changed his name from Saul

to Paul, became a zealot for Jesus Christ and Him crucified and there is no other man in the Bible, (save the persecution of our Lord) that was more persecuted, all for his faith in the Lord, Jesus Christ. Nor was there a more a bold tower of spiritual faith and conviction that there was found in Paul, the apostle.

Then there is John Newton, a man who had a terrible life. Abandoned as a child, reared in a boarding school that is nothing more than a child prison, lived the life of a sea faring slave trader, guilty of the murder by deprivation of other human beings transported in the squalor of a ship's bowels, and was at service of every evil he could think of, in word and in deed constantly. If you read the story of John Newton, you wonder how this man ever became known as a pastor of a church in England, a minister of righteousness, and the author of one of our most beloved hymns, "Amazing Grace". It is a story of about each man, living in the clutches of a sinful, evil life and changed in an instant by one thing, God's grace and mercy. In this beautiful book mentioned, you discover that they both were "captured by grace". God's grace lifted them out of the miry clay of a life headed for hell, and set them on a solid rock, a changed man. If you want a book that will touch your mind, soul, and spirit, then this is a good one to read, but back to God's grace. Why?

That is the question. Why would God bother with men such as these two, or any man, for that matter, who are prone to sinful ways? Since Adam fell, men have had a sinful nature that separated them from a righteous God who can't abide sin in His presence. King David wondered the same thing when he wrote in Psalms:

8:4 What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?

In each of these men, whose life I read about in the context of grace, it was God who did the pursuing. David Jeremiah called it the "hounds of heaven". God was on these men's tail and they may have felt His presence, a conviction or something in their spirit that they felt they were being stalked. The book envisions it this way:

"Saul feels the beginning of a chill along his spine. This has happened before—more than once. He roots out the Christians: he does his job: he is reminded of their strange calmness, their—what is the word for it? Some kind of irrational mercy. And always, as Saul is reflecting over the oddity of it all, he hears the----footsteps." (Captured by Grace, P. 3)

Of course, this is literary interpretation of what Saul might have felt, but in the moment Saul may have "felt a strange inside feeling that he was the one being pursued, and that someone, or something else was pursuing him. Of course, it's irrational. What possible sense could it make? He was God's champion, defender of the faith. He must continue on, root them out, and capture them one by one. Capture their faith, capture---yes, that's the word, their grace." (Captured by Grace, P.3) It was the same in comparison with John Newton, a man wallowing in sins of the flesh in alcoholism, murder, revelry with women and every other word was a blasphemy against God or a curse word. How were these men changed, into the exact opposite of what their life was in the beginning into men of faith, men of passion for Jesus Christ, and followers of the righteousness of God to the end of their days?

It was grace. Such grace can only come from God. It is unmerited, unlimited, and a gift not sought for by anyone. For no matter what we have done, no matter the depth of our transgression, the darkness of our hearts, grace overrules them all. God pursues us relentlessly. He will not give us up, and once He has captured us, He won't let us go.

Saved a Wretch Like Me

There's a line in that wonderful, old song, that most of us can sing by memory.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound. That saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found. Was blind, but now I see."

What do you feel when you sing that line? A lot of people just belt it out and never realize that they are who the writer was talking about. He was talking about himself, and he was talking about you, and talking about me. "A Wretch like me." Have you ever tried to define what a wretch is? It's an Old English term, that means a person in

exile, a person who is miserable and terribly lost. As the New York Times wrote in a piece about the morals of this country, “we are a wretched people in need of a road map.” Amazing that the New York Times recognizes the terrible condition that this country, this world for that matter, is in. That road map is the Bible. The Bible speaks of the nature of mankind, in Romans:

3:11 There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.

3:12 They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

3:13 Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips:

3:14 Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness:

3:15 Their feet are swift to shed blood:

3:16 Destruction and misery are in their ways:

3:17 And the way of peace have they not known:

3:18 There is no fear of God before their eyes.

That pretty well sums up the condition of most of the people that have turned away from God as the Sovereign of this nation. This is true of the world at large, but even more so than for the USA. We were a nation conceived on Christian principles, founded on our belief in the Ten Commandments of how men are to worship God and treat one another, no matter what anyone tries to tell you. No other nation has been more blessed, and more rich in material favor, and has become the greatest nation on the face of the earth, greater than any nation in all of history. Even the poorest among the people are considered rich by any other nation's standards.

You might be thinking, “hey, I’m a good person. I don’t do drugs, I don’t run around on my wife, and I go to church every Sunday”. Good for you, but in God’s eyes, you are a wretch and lost, if you depend on your own goodness and morality. We are all sinners in God’s eyes, and wretched by definition, or outcast, exiled, and separated from God. Paul speaks of it this way:

5:19 For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one (Jesus Christ) shall many be made righteous.

5:20 Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound.(to define sin) But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound:

5:21 That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord.

Sometimes it is said that grace is a five letter word that is spelled J-E-S-U-S.. For Newton’s hymn, the melody embodied the idea, BUT Jesus was the Man. He was the perfect once and for all, perfect image of grace. John 1:

1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

1:2 The same was in the beginning with God.

1:3 All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

1:4 In him was life; and the life was the light of men.....

1:14 And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

God in His mercy, had a loving, deep desire for the work of His hands. He desired a relationship with His creation, as the potter makes a masterpiece by the work of His hands and cherishes this example of perfection. He longs for us, His perfect creation. Going back to Psalms where David ponders why God has a desire for us. Psalm chapter 8:

8:5 For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour.

8:6 Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet:

We were intended for honor and glory, but Satan, the usurper managed to deceive our first parents and cause them to choose a different life, by free choice. They chose the knowledge of good and evil, and chose a very different, dangerous world that we now live in. But God in His mercy has extended His mercy and His grace to a creation that is drowning in sin and unable to save themselves. Ephesians:

2:1 And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins;

2:2 Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience:

2:3 Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.

2:4 But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us,

2:5 Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;)

This is love...This is grace...This is mercy...unwarranted, undeserved, without merit. God became a man, lived amongst His own creation. Why? Because He knew man could NOT save himself. We were dead. We were killed spiritually by Satan and slaves to sin without hope or any way out in of ourselves. But to reclaim us, Jesus became our kinsman redeemer, whereby a person who has been sold as a slave, as we were sold to a sin filled life, by the act of one man (Adam) and the evil deception by our adversary, Satan the devil, we were reclaimed by one Man, Jesus Christ. Romans:

5:14 Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come.

5:15 But not as the offence, so also is the free gift. For if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many.

5:16 And not as it was by one that sinned, so is the gift: for the judgment was by one to condemnation, but the free gift is of many offences unto justification.

5:17 For if by one man's offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ.

5:19 For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of One shall many be made righteous.

The Prodigal Son

If there is one story in the Bible that speaks of grace, let us quickly look at the story of the prodigal son. It's a much preached about parable that Jesus told. We all know how the story goes. About a young man who wanted to go his own way, to leave his father, and took his portion of the family fortune and went out into the world to live a sinful, riotous life until all his money ran out. Where did it get him? Down in the mud, feeding pigs and longing for the corn husk that they ate.

Until, he came to himself and realized that he must return to his father, and throw himself upon his mercy, and pray for being nothing but a servant, as he deserved nothing more from him. Luke 15:

15:17 And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!

15:18 I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee,

The parable that Jesus told, is a story about us. This is where all of us are, or were. We were sold under sin and lost within the family of mankind, by inheriting the sin nature of Adam and Eve. This story is not so much about the son, but of the father, who upon seeing his son coming from afar off, runs to greet him. Realize that during his running to his son, the father had to lift up the mantle of his robe to prevent him from tripping over its hem. Thus exposing his bare legs and running with love and compassion holding that hem. The discards all thought of his being the patriarch in the community and the decorum of Middle Eastern man, but runs with abandonment to the son he had been looking down this road for so long, only now to fall upon his neck and kiss him. The son gave his much rehearsed plea to his father for becoming part of his servants, and not worthy to be his son. But notice the father's reply, again Luke 15:

15:22 But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet:

15:23 And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry:

15:24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.

We are that son. God is that father. It's not so much a story about the guilt of the son, but of the grace of the father. We were dead, but God has made a way for us to come back to him. What is that way, the only Way? John 3,

3:16 For God (your Father, my Father) so loved the world,(you and me) that he gave his only begotten Son (Jesus Christ), that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

3:17 For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

3:18 He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

For Paul, it was the realization that he was wretched. For John Newton, it was the realization that he was also a wretched wandering prodigal son. As Paul wrote in 1st Timothy chapter 1:

1:13 Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.

1:14 And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.

1:15 This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.

For John Newton, who wrote “Amazing Grace” the words spoke of his blindness, his sin, and the grace he received. It was the same, for both men. They both were blind, they both were lost, but now they see. And they both were saved by grace. Are you like any of these three examples? Are you wallowing in sin and lost from being away from the Father who loves you? Does life seem to be a desperate road of being unable to find your way back to where you know you should be? Do you feel that tugging at your heart, and the unrest of your mind? God is pursuing you and won't stop till He captures you. Will it take a blinding light and being knocked from a horse, or being so low that you reside with pigs and eating scraps from someone else's table, as Newton and the prodigal son did? Or will it be something even worse? Do you understand the mercy and grace that has been extended to all who believe in the only pathway back to the Father who created you? Jesus said:

John 14:6 I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

You see, God became a man, as John 1 proclaims. He lived and died 2000 years ago for one purpose and that was to make available to all who believe to receive God's Amazing Grace.

This is Pastor Mike Taylor, praying grace and mercy enter into your life through Jesus Christ, my Lord. Should you need prayer, counseling, or just a listening ear, email me at realteam1999@sbcglobal.net, or visit me online at www.churchofgod-usa.org.

God bless you, till we meet at Jesus Feet.