



**Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> September 2022**

**Grace of the Father by Alan Jamieson**

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer, Amen*

Good morning everyone. I'm Alan Jamieson and together with Christine Simpson I'm a co-leader of Life Group. Helen has given you a brief introduction to Life Group and I would just like to add that the message this morning follows the pattern of Bible studies that together with faith application discussions form what we regularly share in the group.

Our OT reading this morning taken from Psalm 103 occasionally features in Fathers' Day services and it is easy to see why this is so. The reading reminds us of the goodness and gracious nature of God, and by implication it also provides an aspirational ideal for earthly fathers to follow. The pity of course is that all too often earthly fathers fail to measure up to this ideal.

Our text for today comes from verse 8:

*"The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love."*

The words should seem familiar as they come from how God described Himself when He passed in front of Moses on Mt Sinai to reveal His glory as recorded in Exodus. This description of the Lord as merciful, gracious, long-suffering and full of love became an integral part of Jewish religious thought and is found often across the Old Testament in Psalms as well as in books of the Prophets.

*"The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness ...." (Exodus 34:6)*

Speaking of prophets, we'll take a brief look from the perspective of grace at the story of Jonah. This may be a little surprising, but this little book written some 700 years before Jesus' birth gives an insight into Jewish understanding of the extent of

God's grace. Not the bit about Jonah being swallowed by a great fish and regurgitated, although no doubt Jonah appreciated God's answer to prayer at the time, but the relentless grace God showed in pursuing Jonah to bring salvation to the people of Nineveh.

Initially, Jonah wanted nothing to do with God's plan for Nineveh, and he attempted to flee in the opposite direction. But his running away from doing God's will culminated in a disastrous sea voyage and of course the incident with the fish. After his rescue Jonah belatedly, but still reluctantly, obeyed God and went to preach repentance on the streets of Nineveh. The wonder was that the people not only listened, but repented and were saved from destruction. Jonah was not the least bit happy with this outcome as he made it very clear that he would have preferred Nineveh to be wiped out. He sulked, complained to God and was anything but gracious in his attitude.

The story ends with God confronting Jonah about his prejudice and lack of compassion. Jonah is left (as are we) with God's open question on who qualifies for salvation from God.

God is gracious to all who respond in obedience and the implicit, but unstated conclusion to the book of Jonah is that the message of salvation is for all people. As Selwyn Hughes, the Welsh minister and devotional writer, put it:

*"The story focuses our gaze afresh on the fact that the God, we serve and worship, loves not just one particular race or group of people, but the whole wide world."*

Jonah's story is a multi-layered tale that contrasts God's persistent graciousness and love on the one hand against petulant, inconsistent human nature on the other. Grace in action versus the self-focused.

Turning now to the Parable of the Lost Son. In the view of William Barclay, author and theologian, "this parable is the greatest short story in the world", high praise indeed. As we well know, the story has three main characters, the wayward younger son, the loving father, and the elder (self-righteous) son. The parable could be named after any one of the three figures. However, of the three, today I will focus mainly on the father for what the story tells about a father's love, rather than engaging in moralising on the failings of the sons.

The Lost Son parable is the third of the "lost parables" recorded by Luke, following the parables of The Lost Sheep, and The Lost Coin. The "Lost Son" parable is only found in Luke's Gospel, and while Jesus on this occasion does not explain its meaning to his disciples and the others who were present, there is no doubt that Jesus meant the story to also point listeners and readers to an understanding of the abundant forgiveness of God, a forgiveness that is given without merit, without hesitation or any hint of condemning blame.

From what we know of Jewish customs of the time, the father in the story would have been required to make provision for his sons' inheritances, 2/3<sup>rd</sup> for the elder son and 1/3<sup>rd</sup> for the younger son. Inheritances would usually be received following the death of the father, that is unless the father wanted to retire, but to say the least it would be unusual for a son to take the initiative to demand receiving his share before his father's death. If a father wished to retire, he could take the initiative to discuss an early inheritance but never a son.

When approached by his son, the father did not argue but generously let him have his way. We can suppose that knowing his son well the father knew where the son was likely to go and what sort of life he would lead. Yet the father gave the son his freedom to make his own choices. The son cashed up his share, left for another country and proceeded to squander his wealth in wayward living. A famine arose and to survive he had to take work feeding pigs.

We can note the irony in the son's predicament. Everything he had has gone, the freedom he enjoyed as a loved son gone, his status and the privileges he enjoyed gone, his wealth and well-being all gone. His safety and his very survival was now under threat as he was reduced to a precarious living amongst the pigs. The lost son at this point rather than the totally free man he set out to be "... has become a wretched slave".

Eventually, the reality of the depths to which he had sunk, brought the son to his senses and he decided to repent, return home to his father and humbly confess his wrongful ways. He planned a speech to his father to plead for acceptance back not as a son, but as a lowly servant knowing that by his actions, he had forfeited any rights as a son.

Turning to the father, what do we see? Someone much wiser than me once said "... your children are always your children no matter their age." It is the lot of many a parent to always worry about and seek the well-being of their children no matter the circumstances.

The father must have been waiting and watching for the son to come home, waiting for the day when his lost son might return. We're told the father saw the son a long way off, ran to greet him, kissed him, and welcomed him. The father had no concern that his enthusiastic greeting would be seen by others as undignified and unseemly, rather than as a pure expression of joy, love and forgiveness that the one who was lost had been found.

Given how justified the father could have felt to scold his son, his unreserved grace of forgiveness gives us a lesson in how to forgive. There was no hint the father's forgiveness was begrudging or limited, done as a special favour as an exception, or even with a suggestion that the son's past behaviour might be kept in mind as some sort of future good behaviour bond. No, it was complete and final with the slate wiped clean. An example of extravagant grace and love.

And there is no doubt that Jesus intended for His listeners and readers today to understand that the father's grace of forgiveness in the parable parallels the abundant unconditional grace of God that is available to us and all who call on His name.

As the Apostle Paul writes in Romans, when Christians first decide to follow Jesus, they are saved by grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Moreover, Christians are also promised the same grace to sustain them to grow spiritually once they become committed followers. In 2 Corinthians Paul writes:

*“My grace is sufficient for you .... “ (2 Cor 12:9)*

and again in Philippians:

*“I can do everything through Christ who strengthens me.” (Phil 4:13)*

While the writer to the Hebrews writes:

*“Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” (Heb 4:16)*

On a personal note, I believe that the grace we receive through Jesus is, in one word, “amazing”. Mercy, the withholding of deserved punishment is one thing, but grace freely offered as a gift on an unmerited basis is in an entirely greater dimension. Mercy may pardon, but grace empowers. We should celebrate God's freely offered gift of His amazing grace, be thankful for it, and accept it every day as we follow Him in extending grace and humility to others.

To conclude, I am sure that you will be familiar with the first words of the Bible “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” So, having explored with you a theme of grace from the viewpoint of Fathers' Day and noting how the Bible overflows with the love and grace of God, it is fitting for me to finish by quoting the last verse in the Bible:

*“The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen.”*