

What's so amazing about grace?- Forgiveness

First Reading: Gen. 37:12-28

¹² Now his brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem, ¹³ and Israel said to Joseph, 'As you know, your brothers are grazing the flocks near Shechem. Come, I am going to send you to them.'

'Very well,' he replied.

¹⁴ So he said to him, 'Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks, and bring word back to me.' Then he sent him off from the Valley of Hebron.

When Joseph arrived at Shechem, ¹⁵ a man found him wandering around in the fields and asked him, 'What are you looking for?'

¹⁶ He replied, 'I'm looking for my brothers. Can you tell me where they are grazing their flocks?'

¹⁷ 'They have moved on from here,' the man answered. 'I heard them say, "Let's go to Dothan."'

So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. ¹⁸ But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him.

¹⁹ 'Here comes that dreamer!' they said to each other. ²⁰ 'Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams.'

²¹ When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. 'Let's not take his life,' he said. ²² 'Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the wilderness, but don't lay a hand on him.' Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father.

²³ So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe – the ornate robe he was wearing – ²⁴ and they took him and threw him into the cistern. The cistern was empty; there was no water in it.

²⁵ As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt.

²⁶ Judah said to his brothers, 'What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? ²⁷ Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.' His brothers agreed.

²⁸ So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.'

Then fast forward several years, Joseph is now steward of Egypt, reporting to Pharaoh himself. Joseph's brothers come seeking food during the famine. Joseph toys with them, and puts fear into their hearts, and then:

Second reading: Gen. 45:1-11

‘Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, ‘Make everyone leave my presence!’ So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. ² And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh’s household heard about it.

³ Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am Joseph! Is my father still living?’ But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.

⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, ‘Come close to me.’ When they had done so, he said, ‘I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! ⁵ And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. ⁶ For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be ploughing and reaping. ⁷ But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

⁸ ‘So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. ⁹ Now hurry back to my father and say to him, “This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don’t delay. ¹⁰ You shall live in the region of Goshen and be near me – you, your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all you have. ¹¹ I will provide for you there, because five years of famine are still to come. Otherwise you and your household and all who belong to you will become destitute.”’

Recap

Series of sermons and home group studies based on the book, 'What's so Amazing About Grace?' by Philip Yancey

Trev: Grace is God’s ‘Last Best Word’

‘God’s redemption at Christ’s expense’ – but also:

- Gift (the principle of grace)
- Redemption (the purpose of grace)
- Access (the privilege of grace)
- Character (the product of grace)
- Eternal life (the prospect of grace)

Doug: What Grace is and isn’t

- 5 misconceptions about grace; 3 enemies of grace
- ‘Grace is the beginning, the middle and end of the Christian life’

Bev: The parable of the lost sheep

My definition of Grace

Because somehow I don't think 'God's redemption at Christ's expense' really says it properly

- All the magnificent bounty of blessings and goodness and love of our almighty creator God, extravagantly lavished on people who don't have the faintest hope of ever deserving or earning them, fully paid for at what terrible cost to the Son
- repeat
- I've known people who've been Christians for many years, faithfully attending church, and doing all the things that Christians do, they've believed and committed their lives to following Jesus, but who haven't truly glimpsed the full depth of what it means to receive God's grace

- Somehow, being a Christian for them has been a struggle, it's been hard work, with none of the joy that people promised them
- But then it has suddenly clicked, and they've said to me, with a massive smile on their face, "I get it now!"
- So when we hear the quote from Philip Yancey that because of grace, 'There is nothing we can do to make God love us more; and there is nothing we can do to make God love us less', suddenly those words come alive with new power and meaning
- Maybe there are some people here who have still to fully appreciate the majesty and wonder of God's limitless grace to us
- I'm going to pause just now to pray for people to receive a fresh revelation of God's grace
- PRAY
- Perhaps God has started something in your heart just now. Don't leave without receiving prayer ministry at the end of the service, to cement what God is doing in you.

Forgiveness: Intro

And of course, one of the greatest aspects of grace is God's complete and utter forgiveness of all our failures and faults

- The Psalmist says, "as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."
- But the converse of that is that we are called to forgive others. As Paul says in Colossians, "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."
- And as Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." (We said it earlier.)

Narrative loop

Stage 1: The Conflict

'Forgiveness is achingly difficult... an unnatural act' (Yancey)

Stage 2: The Discrepancy

Joseph forgave his brothers, because with the benefit of hindsight he could see the hand of God in all of the things that had happened to him as a result of his brothers selling him into slavery.

- But what of those of us who don't have the luxury of such hindsight? Who can't see God's hand at work in the hurts that have been inflicted on us? How are we supposed to forgive in that case?
- I've heard many stories of Christians forgiving terrible hurts, but I also remember one case of someone being interviewed about a crime against her family who said, "I know as a Christian I should forgive the person who did this, but I can't."
- Even the most determined follower of Jesus can find it a herculean task to forgive (e.g. Corrie Ten Boom)
 - She and her sister had been taken to Ravensbruck concentration camp because her family had hidden Jews from the Nazis in their home in occupied Holland during the war.
 - She tells the story of giving a talk about forgiveness in Germany after the war in 1947. After the meeting, as most of the crowd filed out, one man strode forward towards the stage. She recognised him as one of the guards from Ravensbruck. She remembered she and her sister having had the shame of walking naked past this man in that camp. Her sister later died there. And now he held out his hand

and asked for her forgiveness. And she describes the terrible conflict rising up in her as he stood before her.

- And yet after what seemed like a long pause to her, she describes what happened:
- 'And ... I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that ... Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. “Jesus, help me!” I prayed silently. “I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.” And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. “I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!”'
- And yet for a long time afterwards she still struggled to come to terms with forgiving this man, until eventually she did find closure

Stage 3: The Clue

Philip Yancey talks about reading the following verses in Romans:

- Rom. 12:19 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’
 - And Yancey goes on to say, ‘At last I understood: In the final analysis, forgiveness is an act of faith. By forgiving another, I am trusting that God is a better justice-maker than I am. By forgiving, I release my own right to get even and leave all issues of fairness for God to work out. I leave in God’s hands the scales which must balance justice and mercy.’

Stage 4: The Gospel

By forgiving, not only do we receive forgiveness from God, but we transform our experience of hurt into healing

- What forgiveness is not (Internet counselling site)
 - In Rick Warren’s well-known book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, he explains that many people are reluctant to show mercy because they don’t understand the difference between trust and forgiveness. Forgiving others must be immediate, whether or not a person asks for it.
 - Trust, on the other hand, has to do with future behavior. It must be rebuilt over time and requires a track record. He explains, “If someone hurts you repeatedly, you are commanded by God to forgive them instantly, but you are not expected to trust them immediately, and you are not expected to continue allowing them to hurt you.”

Yancey gives three reasons for forgiving those who have hurt us:

- ‘First, forgiveness can halt the cycle of blame and pain, breaking the chain of ungrace.’
 - NT word for forgiveness – to release, hurl away, to free yourself.
 - Resentment – means “to feel again”, and to fail to forgive leaves the injured party trapped in the unending pain of the hurt
 - Internet counselling site: Scientists say that resentment is the unhealthiest emotion there is – it hurts us far more than those who have affronted us or anyone else. The Bible tells us this in Hebrews 12:15, “See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it, many become defiled;”.

- As we release unforgiveness and all the bitterness and anger that comes with it, we are freed to live and serve with real peace and joy and grow in spiritual maturity.
- ‘Forgiveness offers a way out. It does not settle all questions of blame and fairness – often it pointedly evades those questions – but it does allow a relationship to start over, to begin anew.’
- ‘The second great power of forgiveness is that it can loosen the stranglehold of guilt in the perpetrator.’
- ‘Magnanimous forgiveness ... allows the possibility of transformation in the guilty party’
 - ‘When you forgive someone... You disengage that person from their hurtful act. You recreate him. At one moment you identify him ineradicably as the person who did you wrong. The next moment you change his identity. He is remade in your memory.
 - ‘You think of him not as the person who hurt you, but a person who needs you... You recreated your past by recreating the person whose wrong made your past painful.’

Stage 5: The Consequences

- Our lives become a witness to the saving grace of God
 - Our lives can transform dark situations into a beacon of hope (e.g. Gordon Wilson)
- On 8 November 1987 a bomb planted by the Provisional IRA exploded during Enniskillen's Remembrance Day parade, injuring Wilson and fatally injuring his daughter Marie, a nurse. In an emotional television interview with the BBC only hours after the bombing, Wilson described his final conversation with his dying daughter as they both lay buried in rubble. His words "I bear no ill will. I bear no grudge" were reported worldwide, becoming among the most-remembered quotations from the Troubles. Whereas IRA attacks in Northern Ireland often resulted in reprisals by loyalists, Wilson's calls for forgiveness and reconciliation came to be called the Spirit of Enniskillen. [Source: Wikipedia]

How do we forgive? (Internet counselling site) N.B.

DISCLAIMER: THIS ARTICLE DOES NOT PROVIDE MEDICAL ADVICE

1. Acknowledge the pain.
2. Think through things.

Admit that what happened makes you feel sad or angry and be honest about what emotions are rising up in you; even if it epitomizes unforgiveness and you think you shouldn't feel that way.
3. Imagine being on the other side.
4. Remember God's forgiveness.
5. Reflect on our Biblical command.
6. Let go of the hurt.

Don't allow yourself to replay the offense over and over; let go of the pain and determine that you are going to choose to move forward. This is where prayer is essential as on our own, we are tempted to wander back to unforgiveness.
7. Continue to forgive.
8. Pray for the person who hurt you.

Closing comments

I've never experienced the sort of hurts encountered by people like Corrie Ten Boom or Gordon Wilson

- But I did once experience hurt from a church leader many years ago in a different place, during a time when we moved from his church to another.
- For months afterwards, I struggled with doubts about whether or not I had forgiven him
- Every time I came to a communion service, I felt conflicted, because I knew I should first leave my gift at the altar and make peace with my brother in Christ.
- And then after a long time, I bumped into him on the street, and threw my arms around him in a big hug.
- It was only then that I knew that I had indeed forgiven him
- I'm going to conclude with the words of the BBC advice line: If anyone has been affected by anything they've heard this morning, I urge you to go and seek prayer. We have confidential prayer ministry in the St Thomas Chapel after the service.
- Let's Pray now