

THE GRACE OF GOD IN THE FACE OF JESUS

Luke 22:54–71

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Luke 22:54–71 (NIV)

“Then seizing him, they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest. Peter followed at a distance. But when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them. A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, ‘This man was with him.’ But he denied it. ‘Woman, I don’t know him,’ he said. A little later someone else saw him and said, ‘You also are one of them.’ ‘Man, I am not!’ Peter replied. About an hour later another asserted, ‘Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean.’ Peter replied, ‘Man, I don’t know what you’re talking about!’ Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: ‘Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times.’ And he went outside and wept bitterly. The men who were guarding Jesus began mocking and beating him. They blindfolded him and demanded, ‘Prophecy! Who hit you?’ And they said many other insulting things to him. At daybreak the council of the elders of the people, both the chief priests and teachers of the law, met together, and Jesus was led before them. ‘If you are the Christ,’ they said, ‘tell us.’ Jesus answered, ‘If I tell you, you will not believe me, and if I asked you, you would not answer. But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God.’ They all asked, ‘Are you then the Son of God?’ He replied, ‘You are right in saying I am.’ Then they said, ‘Why do we need any more testimony? We have heard it from his own lips.’”

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I've entitled my message today "The Grace of God in the Face of Jesus Christ." What is the grace of God? If we apply a dictionary or theological definition to it, we generally say the word "grace" means "unmerited favor"—favor that we were given that we didn't deserve. Someone has defined grace as an acronym—"GRACE: God's Riches At Christ's Expense." I like that as a Christian definition of grace.

But the word "grace" is a lot like the word "love." You don't know it simply because you can define it from a dictionary sense. Love must be acted out. There is a behavior to love. I will sometimes tell a couple that is standing before me on their wedding day as I'm giving the little message that the pastor gives, "Picture a day ten years from now, on your tenth anniversary, when it has been learned that there is an uncommon love in your home. Eyewitness News has come out with their cameras to film a day with you. They are going to show, on the screen that night on TV, love in action. That's what love does when it behaves. "

Grace also is a form of behavior. We see that in our Scripture today, how grace behaves. How it behaves when someone fails us. How it behaves when we are struck. How it behaves when there is an injustice done, Jesus faces all three of those things in our Scripture today. He is failed by Peter. He is struck by militia that are attached to the high priest retinue and He is also done a grave injustice by a high supreme court tribunal.

More even, how love or grace behaves is the experience of grace. Sometimes you might think of this question, "Have you ever experienced someone who really loved you?" Then we might ask: "Have you experienced grace in your life? Do you experience grace from another human being? Have you experienced God's grace?"

When we look at our Scripture today, we see what grace is. We see how it behaves. We also sense what it's like to experience it.

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I. The first way we see grace in the face of Jesus Christ is His grace given in the midst of failure (verses 54–62).

It's Peter's failure. We all can identify with Peter because we've all had times where we have failed the Lord, or we failed other people, or we failed ourselves. In Peter's case, we see the three ingredients that are always present when there is spiritual failure. When you have them all together, or sometimes even just one of them, you will find yourself walking a similar path of failure to the Lord.

A. The one element that Peter had was self-sufficiency. The Lord said to Peter, "You're going to deny Me." And Peter said, "It can never happen to me. I'm strong enough and tough enough." Self-sufficiency is not a strong enough kind of thing to keep us spiritually put together.

B. The second thing in Peter's failure was prayerlessness. The Lord had said to him in the Garden of Gethsemane "Pray with Me one hour and watch and pray that you do not enter into temptation." But lack of prayer in Peter's life had opened him to failure.

C. Then the third thing that happened to him was indecision. On the one hand, he wanted to be close to Jesus so that he alone of the disciples, with John, were with Jesus outside the room in which Jesus was being tried by the religious court. He wanted to be with Jesus. The one side of him wanted commitment and love and a relationship with the Lord. But the other side of him wanted to play it safe and cool.

When we are limping along between two opinions and are in a place of indecision—bring that together with prayerlessness and self-sufficiency—we're in for a dynamite time of failure. It happened with Peter.

What happens when we fail the Lord? We find that this phrase occurs, "The Lord turned and looked at Peter" (Luke 22:61). The penalty of sin is not to face the anger of Jesus, but the broken

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heart of Jesus. The heartbreak in His eyes. I don't believe Jesus looked at Peter that night with anger or retaliation or a scowl. But He looked at him with genuine compassion and empathy and concern. Peter knew that. That's why he went outside and wept bitterly. How bitter sin is to the believer! Peter was a broken man. Not all the broken places in our life are for the bad. God can make those broken places for the good.

I was talking recently with a young minister who was filled with dreams and ambitions and plans for ministry. As I heard him give his scenario for the future, I finally said to him, "The most important thing about ministry is not goals. It's not administration. It's ministry. You will be a more effective minister if God can put a tear drop in your life and give you a little bit of heartache. It will expand you a lot and make you empathetic with people, to not treat them as objectives and numbers but as human beings who need Christ's reconciling and healing compassion."

Peter had a tear drop in his life. He had a grave failure in his personality and spiritual life which the Lord will take and work with and restore. Because God's grace is all about helping us when we have failed Him. In fact, Mark 16:7 gives us a beautiful thing which the Lord had instructed the angels to tell the women at the tomb on Easter Sunday morning. The women had gone to the tomb and the angel was there and said to the women, "You go and tell his disciples and Peter." That's a powerful phrase. If the angel had told the women just "Go tell the disciples," when the women went out to tell the disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead, Peter, coming off the heels of his bitter failure would have said, "He evidently didn't mean me. None of you have failed Him like I've failed Him." But because the Lord thought of Peter being in that moment, He probably thought, "I know Peter won't believe it but I still want him on board. So you've got

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to tell him. Go tell the disciples and Peter.” It’s the marvelous restoration of the Lord. It’s the way His love always individualizes us.

I read, last week, a book by a pastor in the northwest called *Beyond Forgiveness*. The pastor is Don Baker. He was writing this book to deal with what had happened when a ministerial colleague, a staff member of the church he pastored, fell into moral sin. They were seeking to bring him along on a pathway of rehabilitation and restoration. Don tells about the fact that he and his wife live in the country. When they get up in the morning, they like to sit in their breakfast nook and look out the window and see the beautiful rolling green pastures and the sheep feeding on the hillside. (That would be a great way to wake up, wouldn’t it?) He saw, one morning, that there was a sheep that had rolled over and was on its back. Its feet were sticking straight up in the air. He walked out of the house and went over to the place where the sheep had evidently laid down, it was kind of an incline, and in lying down, the sheep had gotten caught in sort of an indentation or gully and had not been able to get back up. Its legs were rigid and stiff. Don Baker assumed the sheep was dead. Since he knew who had the sheep—his neighbor, Mr. Harlow—he called him up on the phone and said, “Mr. Harlow. I think you ought to get over here. One of your sheep has died.” In a few minutes, the neighbor arrives in his truck. He gets out of the truck and walks over to where the sheep is lying there and he spent what seemed to be a considerable amount of time over a dead animal. Finally, he called Don Baker and said, “Don, come here. I want to show you something.” Don went over. His neighbor said to him, “This sheep is not dead. What is happening with him is what we call a ‘cast sheep.’ Every so often,” he explained, “a sheep that is heavy with wool or heavy with carrying a lamb will lie down and roll into a slight recess in the ground on its back and there, in that recess, the sheep is not able to get back up. It’s helpless. There is no possibility for the sheep to get back up. It will not survive that

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position very long, for the gases in its belly will begin to ruminate and expand. Its joints will stiffen and atrophy. And if left to itself, within a short matter of time, it will die.” So Don Baker reports he watched his neighbor as he gently rolled the sheep onto its side and began messaging its limbs and body. After a time, it seemed like its legs began to relax and the occasional muscle twitches in its body indicated that it was indeed alive. It wasn’t very long—while the shepherd, this owner, was messaging the sheep—until he finally took his strong arms and put them underneath his sheep and stood the sheep up on very wobbly legs and helped it to wobble along until it got its sense of step or gait. And slowly it walked away, now able again to stand on its own.

I think this represents the kind of situation that Peter is in personally in life. There are some moments of life like that. When your failure has been so keen that you’re not able, in your own energy, to get yourself functioning again. A cast sheep.

People come along and say, “Do better! Get up! Have some more faith! You can do it!” All those commands are being given to someone who cannot stand up and has no power of their own. In such occasions, we need the help of the Good Shepherd, the gentle shepherd, like He did with Peter, to help us back on our feet. We also need to be, I think, keenly aware and ask God to help us be aware of people around us that may be in that moment—a cast sheep. As much as they would like to change or we would like to see them change, they cannot do it on their own strength and under their own power. The grace of the Lord is seen in taking time to restore someone who has failed.

II. The grace of the Lord, also in this Scripture today, is seen when He is struck (verses 63–65).

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The militia who was attached to the high priest took Jesus and mocked Him, blindfolded Him and struck Him and wanted to play the Prophet Game with Him. This is different than the Roman soldiers, who later that morning would take Him and put a purple cloak on Him and a crown of thorns on His head for a crown and beat Him and spit upon Him and strike Him with their fists.

The Roman soldiers played the game of the King with Jesus. But this is a militia, a Jewish militia, under the control of the high priest, who takes Him and plays the game of the Prophet. So while He is blindfolded, they strike Him with a stick and say, “Guess which one, if You’re a prophet. Tell us which one was hitting You.” He is subject, in that moment, to physical abuse, verbal abuse, psychological abuse.

As so often happens when we are hit upon, we take on the character of the person who hits us. If they are angry, we are angry. If they are vengeful, we are vengeful. If they’re sullen, we’re sullen. If they’re not speaking, we’re not speaking. If they’re unkind, we’re unkind.

Jesus here does a beautiful thing. When hit upon, He makes—as Isaiah says—no railing accusation. I think one of the hardest things about trying to be a good disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ is this difficult pathway of not letting your own life mirror the kinds of negative things that might be directed against you by others. But instead, to try responding with the kind of magnanimity, gracefulness, gentleness of Jesus, who never let His own face become contorted with the anger and the mocking that was surrounding Him.

I want you to think, for a moment, about someone who has hurt you. It may be a family member, it may be someone in the church, it may be a friend, it may be someone in your immediate past or your distant past—when you have been struck. Have you experienced God’s grace in your life to be able to respond to that individual with grace and with forgiveness?

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I was in a Christian bookstore sometime ago. I saw a book that attracted my attention. The title was outstanding. It simply said *These Tears Are For Diane*. I wondered, “What kind of a book is this?” I picked it up and looked at it. It seemed very interesting, so I bought it. The author, as far as I know, has only written this one book. Her name is Goldie Bristol. The book is in the form of a personal testimony. The testimony is her and her husband’s testimony. It’s a story that had its roots back in November 17, 1970, in San Diego. Their daughter, Diane, was coming home to her apartment one night and, after parking her car in the driveway and walking toward the door, she was assaulted by a man. She was raped and she was murdered. Two and a half years went by with the crime unsolved. Then a man was found, arrested and convicted and sentenced to a double-life term.

Another couple years went by, the Bristols—it had now been five years since they had lost their daughter, Diane—as they were praying, they increasingly felt an urgency, kind of a heaviness, kind of a direction from the Lord upon their life that they needed to reach out and be a witness to the man who had raped and killed their daughter, which at first seemed too difficult for them to contemplate and do. But they finally came to this kind of conclusion. “We can see no other purpose for his coming into our lives if there’s no possibility that he will be saved. We didn’t ask for this intruder to come into our life. Now that he’s here, God can work some good in it. He needs to know that God loves him and God will forgive him if he will ask Him to. He needs to know the grace of God.”

So they sat down and wrote him a letter, a letter not condoning what he had done to their daughter but expressing their own personal concern for his wellbeing and stating God’s concern. They gave him, in that letter, a means of understanding God’s plan of salvation: We’ve all sinned and come short of the glory of God, we need to confess Jesus as our Lord and ask Him for

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forgiveness and that, upon our asking, He will indeed come into our heart and life and be our Savior and forgive us and wash us from the past.

They received no response to their letter. So they went the second mile, and a month later, they wrote again. This time they received a response to their letter from the prisoner. He said he had not written at first because he could hardly believe that the letter could be genuine. But when the second letter arrived, he realized that it was a genuine effort to reach out to him. He said he had not realized that there were people anywhere in the world who would put their concern for him above their own hurt. Again, I think that's the most difficult thing you're ever called upon to do as a Christian, and that is to put your concern for another person ahead of your own hurt.

Because when you are hurt, it's so much easier to magnify the hurt and not be concerned about the other person who had been dishing out the hurt.

Goldie said, after they wrote this man a lengthy correspondence and ultimately visited him and led him to the Lord, "What good would it do to hate? Hate would not bring our daughter back. Hate would only spread the poison of anger and unforgiveness in our own life. And hate wouldn't do the killer any good. So we had no option, if we were going to be healthy and go on with life, we had no option but to forgive." The dictionary associates "malice" with "malignancy." It eats and consumes and finally destroys. If I allow malice to take hold of my life, I'm anything but a free person. The very tool I would use to get even is the one that would chain me. Only God is able to handle this kind of treachery in our lives and release us from the entrapment. So the decision is mine. I either carry anger, unforgiveness, and resentment around with me and break under the load. Or hand it over to my heavenly Father, who can bear the weight.

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Can you ask God for a special grace so the blow directed against you does not become a wound in your soul? Ask God for a grace that is summoned forth when struck.

III. The third arena where the Lord's grace is at work is when He was victimized by injustice (verses 66–71).

We know, from reading all four Gospels, that Jesus had two trials—a political trial and a religious trial. The religious trial being first. The object of the religious trial was to raise the question if He was indeed the Messiah. The object of the political trial was to raise the question if He was the king of the Jews, because then they could accuse Him of sedition and advocating the overthrow of the government.

But here, the religious trial is divided into three phases. One before Annas, the other before Caiaphas, both informal hearings. Then the final formal hearing, which only Luke here is concerned with. Mark's Gospel tells us that this formal hearing of the high counsel or the supreme court, the Sanhedrin, was one that was illegally constituted. For jurisprudence then is as jurisprudence now, the judge cannot act as a prosecuting attorney. Nor can a presiding judge suborn a witness. That is to say, a presiding judge cannot pay bribery to a witness in order to get them to make up a story. This is exactly what happened in the trial of Jesus. Those sitting in judgment acted as prosecutors. The witnesses were suborned. And even then, their testimony did not agree.

So the witness was asked to testify against Himself, which in those days, as well as in our day, allows for the opportunity of the fifth amendment. They put Jesus under an oath to tell who He was. They said to Him, "If you're the Messiah, tell us." Jesus knows that they will not accept His definition of Messiah. That's why He says, "If I tell you, you will not believe Me." They kept wanting to portray Him as a political Messiah. His kingdom, He said, was not of this world but

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it's God's reign in the heart. He knows that they won't engage in any kind of honest dialogue with Him. Because earlier in the week they refused to answer His questions, that's why He said to them, "If I ask you, you would not answer." He who taught the disciples that they could not deny Him now could not deny Himself. So He makes explicit testimony that "The Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of God." Then they ask Him, "Are You then the Son of God?" He says, "You're right in saying that I am." That becomes the indictable charge against Him.

Again, however, in this whole engagement of a miscarriage of the jurisprudence system, in this whole incident, we see grace in the Lord. As Isaiah 53 again tells us "He opened not His mouth." He does not take on the character of His accusers. There are not shout matching. There's no force, there are no threats. There's no edge in His voice. There's no bitterness. If any one of His accusers or people who sit in judgment on Him had wanted to be reconciled to Him, He would have gladly put His arms around them and forgiven them.

I don't know how many of you have been following the trial in Israel of John Demjanjuk. He was, I think, in Cleveland, Ohio, an auto-mechanic for the last thirty years. He is accused of being Ivan the Terrible of the Treblinka concentration camp that killed so many Jewish people. He was a guard at the shower room door where these suffering Jewish people were put to death. That's the allegation against him. I get the *Jerusalem Post*, so I've been following it a little bit. This trial is absolutely the center of Israeli attention today. It's more than the Watergate hearings were to us a few years ago when we were all glued to the TV, because the Jewish people are reliving their whole experience of the Holocaust. This last week, in the trial, there was a witness who worked as a Jewish person carrying the bodies out to the dump. He had been around this Ivan the Terrible. In the court, from a distance, on the witness stand, he looked across the room and he identified John Demjanjuk as Ivan the Terrible. The attorney asked him to come closer, to

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take a closer look, so he left the witness box and walked cross the room till he was face to face with John Demjanjuk. The accused, seeing another person coming towards him seemingly (at least it looked this way from the TV cameras) innocently arose as though to greet someone. He stood erect and smiling. He stretched out his hand to shake the accuser's hand. When the one that had survived Treblinka saw the hand extended, he shrank back in horror and collapsed weeping because he could not. We understand this. If you had been in a concentration camp, I think there would be absolutely no condemnation in your heart toward a witness such as this who could not take the hand of an accused that he believed is Ivan the Terrible.

We're talking about God's grace. We're not talking about what a human can do. We're talking about what God can do. If any one of the people who had been guilty of doing what they did to Jesus were to come over to Him and stretch out their hand and greet Him, we would know that Jesus would not collapse at the prospect. Nor would He turn in rage. But if it was as handshake genuinely offered, He would reach for it and draw the person to Himself. This is the grace of God which takes us in. "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us that we should be called the children of God" (1 John 3:1). Or, as Paul says, "For a friend one might dare to die but God died for us while we were yet His enemies, while we were yet sinners, Christ loved us" (see Romans 5:8). The grace of God in the face of Jesus.

One of the tremendous things that comes out of the trial of Jesus, as we realize, looking back through the lenses of the centuries that He conducted Himself so well that we can now say, "'Twas not He that was on trial. It was they.'" One of the great truths of the gospel is that the elevation of Jesus to the right hand of God has not altered His character. He's in the place now of all prominence, high above all principalities and authority and power. Yet He is still the same. Jesus Christ—yesterday today and forever—is the same God of grace. If Jesus looked across a

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room at a disciple—Peter—who had failed Him, you can be sure that, even from heaven, He looks at us with His compassion. He looks at us when we are the one lost lamb. He looks at us when we are the cast sheep. He takes us up in His arms when we are not strong enough to walk on our own. Surrounded by bloodthirsty and insulting enemies in full prospect of horrible outrages, an unjust trial and a painful death, the Lord took time for His erring disciple, Peter. If the heart of Jesus was so gracious when He was a prisoner in the judgment hall, we surely must not think of Him as less gracious now that He sits in glory at the right hand of the majesty on high. He is the God of grace. Behold the grace of God in the face of Jesus.

Closing Prayer

Our Lord, as we come to You now in prayer, we come with thanksgiving for Your great grace. We thank You that Your death is sufficient to pay the price to cover all of our sins and that You gladly take us into Your kingdom when we have failed You, when we have struck You, or in whatever other way we have been against You. There's not a single one of us here whom You do not dearly love, dearly care about. There's not one of us that You do not want to restore to full order of living. There may be some friends in here today whose lives feel very much like a cast sheep. They're still alive, but they're on their back and they have no grace or ability or power in themselves to stand up and be healed. We pray, Lord, that this service would be a service of healing. That the mighty grace of the loving and gentle shepherd would come and put a strength underneath our life, to lift us up and get us out of the deep ravine that we are in, the helpless incline of the soul. Give us Your strengthening grace. Help us, Lord Jesus, to find as well, within our hearts, the ability to reflect Your grace to others. We've all sinned and come short of the glory of God. We've all failed, even as Christians, to show grace to others. We wanted our pound of flesh. We wanted to exact from others what they owe us. Sometimes, Lord, that's not

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possible. We have to choose whether we're going to live the rest of our life consumed with anger and resentment or whether we're going to give someone else what they don't deserve and do it gladly and not from a better-than-thou, holier-than-thou vantage point. But truly give to another a gift of grace and say, "I accept you as you can be, not as you are. In God's name, I forgive you and I love you." Give us, Lord, that kind of grace in our lives. Thank You for the grace You show us. Thank You, Lord, for being the same in heaven as You are on earth. Still the Lord, looking out for us, concerned for Your lambs, Your sheep. We are the sheep of Your pasture. Thank You, Lord, for Your presence here today. In Jesus' name. Amen.