

## God's Grace and Your Salvation

Today I'd like to talk to you about the importance of God's grace.

You have a sermon outline in today's Bulletin for those accustomed to taking notes and you should keep your Bible handy.

- But first lets have a word of prayer.....
- They tell me that it's profitable to start a sermon off with a story,

because it gets everyone's attention, Chris, our organist uses this ploy every time she does the children's segment of our Sunday service.

My story involves a Sunday School teacher who asked the students in her class, "If I sold my house, my car, my furniture and held a garage sale to sell off my clothes and appliances and I gave all the money I raised to the church, would I be assured of going to heaven?"

- "No!" the children all answered.  
"If I volunteered my time to clean the church every week, sweep the carpark, pick up all the papers blowing around the block and mowed the lawns, would I be guaranteed a place in heaven?"
  - Again the answer was a resounding "No!" (these kids knew their Bible)  
"Well" she continued, "then how can I get into heaven?"
  - From the back of the class a five-year-old shouted "You gotta be dead first, Miss!"
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We are all familiar with the stories from the Bible, especially the Old Testament stories about -

- ❖ Adam and Eve
- ❖ David and Goliath
- ❖ Moses and the Ten Commandments
- ❖ Noah and the Ark

Another story we all cherish is the story of Jonah and the great fish. It's a rollicking tale but, if we aren't careful, we can overlook the real message of this story. And never be tempted to call this story 'Jonah and the Whale' because nowhere in the Bible is the great fish called a whale.

The message of the story of Jonah is that you can't hide from God.

And, just as Jonah couldn't hide from God, we can't hide our sins from God.

He sees everything and is in control of everything. And the twist in this story about Jonah is that he, although a prophet of God, thought he could hide from God. Hide from God! Run away from a supreme being who knows everything and created everything! Where do you suppose you'd need to go.....into a cave, to another planet, the other side of the universe?

Just where in the world, or out of this world, can you go to escape God? In the scripture reading today we learned that the vessel Jonah took passage to Tarshish on was beset by a violent storm and then threatened to sink.

The ship's crew decided to throw Jonah overboard, because they knew he had offended his God. See Jonah ch 1 v 10 where it says "They knew he was running away from the Lord, because he had already told them so." Now Jonah was adrift in a sea with mountainous waves and there was no doubt he would have drowned but God took pity on him and sent a big fish to swallow him whole. In verse 17 we read "But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights".

" Now lots of people have assumed this was a whale and Jonah had a 'whale of a time' once inside. But it simply couldn't be so. Actually we don't know what sort of fish it was. Indeed experts in marine life assure us this fish could not have been a whale because the gullet of a whale is not large enough to swallow a man whole (unless Jonah was a midget) for whales, these monsters of the deep feed on plankton, a form of sea life which is minute though rich in nutrients. Whatever it was, this great fish was a leviathan, a monster of the deep. So, when you hear someone referring to the Bible story by the title of Jonah and the Whale, remember that this great fish was not necessarily a whale. Of course, later in the story we find that Jonah was vomited up by the giant fish and in chapter 2 verse 10 of Jonah we read that "the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land". It just goes to show that "you can't keep a good man down".

So, what was Jonah doing inside the great fish? Verse 1 of chapter 2 tells us that "From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God". So, what was Jonah doing inside the great fish? He was praying. I guess if I went overboard during a big storm, feared I was to drown and then some monster fish swallowed me intact I'd be praying too. And, as he prayed, he drew God's attention to the great sin of people of Ninevah; which was to worship other gods before the Lord Almighty. Indeed in v8 of ch 2 we read that Jonah identified the people living in Ninevah as "Those who cling to worthless idols (and) forfeit the grace that could be theirs".

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What's this 'grace' Jonah speaks of when he addresses his prayer to God about the people of Ninevah? The Ninevaharians were reputed to be a bloodthirsty race who liked nothing better than to torture their prisoners of war in the worst possible ways. No wonder Jonah didn't want to go preach to them, But when he did arrive in Ninevah by a most circuitous route he found them repentant and God took this into account and forgave them....that is, he extended his grace to them and didn't destroy them as originally planned.

Are you good at forgiving people who wrong you? There are people who just cannot forgive others. They harbour ill-feelings towards others all their lives for imaginary and actual misdeeds done to them.

Apparently Jonah was one of these people because he was outraged over God extending his forgiveness and grace to the Ninevahrians. He had been promised a slaughtering and he wanted to see them punished.

In a situation where an individual harbours ill-feeling towards another who do you think suffers the most from this negative attitude....the person who did the misdeed or the person who refuses to forgive them?

I can assure you that the real damage befalls the person who harbours the ill-feeling towards the other. I once attended a funeral service in this very church and the family of the deceased split into two camps and sat on opposite sides of the church. They wouldn't have anything to do with each other because of a perceived wrong done some 30 years ago. What a sad state of affairs

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But I'd like to digress a little if you'll allow me the privilege. Before the scripture reading we all sang a hymn. What was the name of that hymn? It was 'Amazing Grace' of course. Do you know who wrote it and in what circumstances?

For the sake of the informed and those less informed I'd like to spend a little time outlining the life story and motivation for this beloved hymn by the Rev John Newton.....a hymn which even edged its way into the popular Top Ten music charts in the 1960s and I once participated in an aerobics class in which the music for Amazing Grace had been recorded in a tempo which suited the exercises we were doing:

John Newton, who wrote the hymn 'Amazing Grace' was born in 1725 in London. His mother died of Tuberculosis when he was only 7 and at the tender age of 11 years he went to sea with his father who was the master of a cargo vessel plying its trade in the Mediterranean. Seven years later when he was 18 he went to visit relatives and was keelhauled and pressed into service in the British Navy. EXPLAIN

Not happy with his situation in life he tried to desert, was caught and received eight dozen lashes for his trouble.

He determined to jump ship at the first opportunity and the vessel he chose to escape on was one involved in the African slave trade. EXPLAIN

John didn't get along with the new ship's captain and was himself sold into slavery for three years until he was rescued by another ship's captain sent by John's father to Africa to find and rescue him.

On the way back to England the ship ran into a great storm (just as Jonah had encountered), the ship's hull was holed and the sea poured in. It seemed hopeless and all on board feared they would be drowned but John, not at all a religious person, prayed in desperation to God, asking to be saved. It was said in one of the world wars that there were no atheists in foxholes. Jonah proved that saying true. Miraculously the vessel listed over to one side and the cargo in the hold shifted, blocking the hole in the hull and allowing the ship to limp into an English port.

As a result of this experience Newton took up reading the Bible and later he entered into studies for the ministry, completed them and sought ordination as a member of the clergy. He approached the Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians but they had no vacant parishes. He was then offered a small Church of England parish in Buckinghamshire which he was happy to accept.

He was a minister there for 16 years and so popular a preacher was he that they had to add an annex to the church building to accommodate the crowds that attended his Sunday sermons. It was during this period that Rev Newton collaborated with the poet William Cowper and the hymn "Amazing Grace" was written along with many other hymns. Together they put together a hymn book of popular church hymns and this became the basis for the hymn books in most protestant churches today. Later he was given a parish London and his fame as an orator spread.

In 1788 (the same year the First Fleet was landing in Sydney Cove) he had printed a pamphlet decrying the practice of slavery which he had first hand knowledge of and sent a copy to every Member of the British Parliament.

He joined forces with William Wilberforce and the Prime Minister, Pitt the Younger, and together they successfully had slave trading banned in the British Empire and eventually the entire world.

He earned his Doctrate in Divinity in 1789 and died in 1807 aged 82

So, next time you are called upon to sing the words:

“Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost but now am found, was blind and now I see”.

I hope you’ll remember the man behind the words.

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**But** what is this ‘grace’ Jonah said saved the Ninevahrians when they repented of their evil ways and the ‘grace’ Rev Newton lauded in his hymn?

The word ‘grace’ has many uses in the English language:

In Ephesians Ch 2 vs 4 and 5 we read.....

“But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved”.



|| And in verses 8 and 9 of the same chapter in Ephesians it says.....

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves; it is the gift of God – not by works; so that no one can boast”.

So it would appear that in the eternal scheme of things this grace God extends to mankind is pretty important.

The English Dictionary says grace is “the capacity to tolerate, accommodate and forgive people”. How true this is of God. Sometimes I stand in wonder at His capacity to tolerate mankind. We are a bit of a motley mob.....or, at least, I’m motley. How about you?

Grace is the gift from God to humanity of infinite love, favour, mercy and goodwill extended to us despite man’s sinfulness. Grace is like a ‘get out of hell’ card in that grand game we call life. Like Monopoly, you cast your dice and take your chance. Thank heavens we have a merciful God to pick up the pieces we drop when we make perilous choices.

There are many uses of the word ‘grace’ and its derivatives in everyday speech – For example, we say a man is in a state of grace when he is free from sin. we talk of someone falling from grace when he is in a out of favour.

We say there but for the grace of God go I when someone suffers a misfortune that fortunately bypasses us. And many of us say grace before we eat a meal. We say we are grateful for another's kindness. We are gratified to hear good news. We congratulate someone for a job well done. We leave a gratuity or tip in a restaurant for good service. (Not sure if Presbyterians do this very often.) We address members of royalty as your grace. Our lawmakers may pardon a criminal as an act of grace. We describe a scoundrel as being without any saving grace. And I worked for years as a banker and accountant and had occasion to handle bills of exchange and promissory notes that fell due in 30, 60 or 90 days plus three days grace.

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Now we know that our God is a god of love but his love is tempered by his mercy, his sense of justice, his holiness and his forgiveness. Some Christian churches are teaching that God's love is so all-embracing that the Heaven the Bible says he is preparing for the righteous is also big enough to accommodate all mankind.....saints and sinners alike. The Judgment hardly ever rates a mention from the pulpit of these churches.

Where, however, is the justice in allotting a heavenly place to both the just and the unjust, regardless of their lack of repentance and with no consideration of their sinfulness.

However, Paul in his epistle to the Corinthians (1 Cor 6:9-10) says –

“Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the Kingdom of God”.

Anyone who does not repent of the sins that the Apostle Paul mentions here will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

And yet we have the Uniting Church endorsing same-sex marriages just this last month in their General Assembly, authorising their Assembly to formulate the wording for a marriage ceremony that embraces same sex couples, Have they lost their way or have they lost their way? Whatever happened to the dictum that the Holy Bible, as the inspired word of God, should be the source of all truth and the authority for Christ’s church here on the earth.

If certain unrepentant sinners are not to be allowed to inherit the Kingdom of God, then there has to be a Judgment.

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It was said that the Sadducees of Christ’s time were a sad, morose mob.

They didn’t believe in the resurrection.....and that’s enough to make anyone sad.

I am indebted to Philip Yancey and what he said in his book about grace

entitled "What's So Amazing About Grace" for the following story –

He says "In church the other Sunday I was intent on a small child who was turning around and smiling at everyone. He wasn't gurgling, spitting, humming, kicking, tearing hymnbooks or rummaging through his mother's handbag.

He was just smiling. Suddenly his mother jerked him around and in a whisper that could have been heard out on the street she said "Stop that grinning. You're in church!" With that she gave him a belt and, as the tears rolled down his cheeks, added "That's better!" and returned to her prayers."

He goes on to say "Suddenly I was angry.....I wanted to grab this child with the tear-stained face close to me and tell him about my God. The happy God. The smiling God. The God who had to have a sense of humour to have created the likes of us. By tradition the Sadducees wore their faith with all the solemnity of someone in mourning. Even today there are some people who treat going to church on Sunday like attending a funeral service. It shouldn't be! God wants us to be happy.

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However, sometimes we are our own greatest enemies. As we are all sinners, we all have something to be ashamed of.....even the most saintly of us. Sometimes Christians feel the weight of guilt weighing us down.

What we all need is to have a feeling that God accepts us, owns us, holds us, affirms us and will never let go of us, even if he is not too impressed with what he has on his hands in the people we call mankind. What we all need is the assurance that God's gift of grace would give us.

Well, romantic love is the closest emotion I can think of that comes anywhere near God's grace. I'm hoping some of you have had the experience of this emotional roller coaster ride. When someone truly loves you, you feel like you are the most desirable, attractive, companionable creature on the planet. You feel like there's someone who just might be lying awake at night thinking of you, that there's someone who orders their life around your life and loves you just the way you are for who you are. That's how God's grace works and how it should affect you. You should feel very special and very privileged. God's grace should give you a warm, fuzzy feeling.

That great defender of the Christian faith, C S Lewis (probably best known by you all as the author of 'The Chronicles of Narnia') was once asked what Christianity's unique contribution to the world's religions was and he replied: "Oh, that's easy. It's grace!"

And the psalmist in Psalm 103 verses 8 to 11 makes it plain for even the shallowest thinkers amongst us when he writes –

“The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbour his anger forever, he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him.”

Is there anyone here today who is not a sinner. Now don't be bashful, raise your hand and I'll come down of the pulpit and shake it. No takers? Well, I'm not surprised!

Only Lord Jesus has lived a sinless life in this world and it is because of his sinless state that his sacrifice on the cross at Calvary brought about the forgiveness we can each avail ourselves of through and by the grace which God the Father offers us. This grace is priceless, It is incomparable. It is also undeserved. But still it is ours to have as a free gift if only we will repent of our sins and in faith approach the throne of God with Jesus as our mediator.

It is my prayer that all of us will seek this goal in the name of Jesus Christ.  
Amen.