

## **Behold Your God: Gracious and Merciful**

A debate was being held at a conference in Britain on comparative religion. The wise and scholarly were debating the differences between religions. And then the question came up, what makes Christianity unique? Incarnation? No, other religions had some version of Incarnation. Resurrection? No other religions had some version of resurrection.

At this point, C.S. Lewis wandered into the room, a little early for his presentation. He asked, "What's all this arguing about?" They told him they were trying to find the difference between Christianity and other religions. Lewis looked at them and said, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace." The room fell silent. Lewis continued that Christianity uniquely claims God's love comes free of charge, no strings attached. No other religion makes that claim. After a moment someone commented that Lewis had a point, Buddhists, for example, follow an eight-fold path to enlightenment. It's not a free ride. Hindus believe in karma, that your actions continually affect the way the world will treat you; that there is nothing that comes to you not set in motion by your actions. Moslems teach that strict submission to Allah will bring an eternal reward. Christianity teaches this unique idea of grace.

To understand the idea of grace, or mercy, or kindness, we turn to an incident in David's life. Now make no mistake, the passage here is about David's grace, but it illustrates God's grace. God's mercy, God's kindness.

King David's path to the throne was not an easy one. He was probably about eleven years old when Samuel secretly anoints him in front of his family. But he would be fifteen when he killed Goliath. He joins Saul's service at that time. But less than two years later, and Saul's jealousy of David has become murderous, and David has to flee, flee from his best friend Jonathan, flee from home and family. And for not less than ten years, David is a fugitive, while Saul hunts him down. Finally, Saul and his son Jonathan are killed in a battle with the Philistines. David becomes king of Judah. He captures Jerusalem, makes it his capital, at age 30, and within seven years, he is king over the whole nation. He begins laying down plans for the building of the Temple. He is really at the zenith of his power at this time of 2 Samuel 9 around 997 B.C. About 13 years after Saul's death, six years into his reign as king, David is around 43.

Because of all the intrigue and plots that surrounded the kings of the ancient Near-East, it was fairly common for a new king, if he had deposed the former king, to put to death any of the former king's relatives and loyalists. In fact, many years later, David would give Solomon a list of people who had earned the death penalty for their treachery, and were a threat to Solomon's throne.

In David's case, he had every reason to wish to destroy all memory of Saul. Saul had ruthlessly hounded him right throughout the country. Saul slandered his name, tore his marriage apart, forced him to live as a vagabond and even as a refugee in the land of the Philistines. Many of David's strongest Psalms of lamentation and sorrow were written during this period of Saul hounding him. Psalms 18, 52, 54, 57, and 59 have titles that describe some way Saul was trying to kill him. Saul was a jealous madman, possessed of the idea that David was a threat to national security, and only his death would suffice.

You may remember, David twice had the opportunity to kill Saul. Once, Saul entered a cave and David could have killed him, and a second time, he and Abishai were right next to Saul's sleeping body. In both cases, David said that Saul was God's anointed and it was not his prerogative to kill him.

But Saul is now dead, slain by Philistine hands. Surely, David would now secure his throne with a manhunt for any who belong to the house of Saul. It is now in David's power as king to seek out and destroy Saul's relatives, Saul's servants. But what David did instead has become one of the ultimate illustrations of grace, mercy, and lovingkindness.

*Now David said, "Is there still anyone who is left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan's sake?"*

The word kindness, is the Hebrew word *hesed*. This is a hugely important word, used 255 times in the Hebrew Bible. It is often translated *lovingkindness*, sometimes it is translated *mercy*, sometimes it is translated *steadfast love*. It is the idea of kind and faithful benevolence.

This Hebrew word combines the ideas of grace, mercy and benevolence in one. It even includes the idea we will look at next week: faithfulness. What this means is God seeks the benefit and happiness of His creatures. He is disposed to seek the good of those He makes. In fact, God seeks the maximum happiness of everyone He makes.

Now once you have moral agents in the universe, not all are going to submit to God's plan for their happiness. And the entrance of sin has brought the curse, pain, and of course, God's justice. But it was, and is in the nature of the Creator to create what is very good, and to bless His creatures.

But this account shows us the difference between God's general goodness and His grace. Notice who David wants to show kindness to, and why.

*Now David said, "Is there still anyone who is left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan's sake?"*

Whom does David want to show kindness to? He wants to show kindness to the descendants of his worst enemy, Saul.

To find out, David finds a man, who was probably the steward of the house of Saul. If anyone would still know of people related to Saul and Jonathan, perhaps in hiding, it would be Ziba.

*And there was a servant of the house of Saul whose name was Ziba. So when they had called him to David, the king said to him, "Are you Ziba?" And he said, "At your service!"<sup>3</sup> Then the king said, "Is there not still someone of the house of Saul, to whom I may show the kindness of God?" And Ziba said to the king, "There is still a son of Jonathan who is lame in his feet."<sup>4</sup> So the king said to him, "Where is he?" And Ziba said to the king, "Indeed he is in the house of Machir the son of Ammiel, in Lo Debar."<sup>5</sup> Then King David sent and brought him out of the house of Machir the son of Ammiel, from Lo Debar.*

David's desire to do good to Jonathan's descendants was not casual. He is taking the time, and probably the financial expense, of locating Ziba. He is researching, and seeking.

Ziba's response does not even tell David the name of this living relative – he simply records his condition. He says “*There is still a son of Jonathan who is lame in his feet.*” From man's point of view, this son was not even worth naming. He was lame. He was without ability to stand in the king's presence – for that is a pre-requisite. No one slouches, reclines, or sits in the presence of the king. Perhaps Ziba was trying to show that he was no threat to King David, and that he should not be killed. Surely, Ziba thought, David would not want to show kindness to one so unfitting.

David learns of the last remaining relative of Jonathan, and at his own expense, has this relative, Mephibosheth, brought into his throne room.

David did not wait till lame Mephibosheth began a journey toward his throne. He sent and fetched him. Indeed, the grace here is that Mephibosheth would have been totally unable to make it to David's court by himself. He needed assistance.

## **I. God's Grace is His Kindness to Those Who Do Not Deserve It**

Grace is entirely optional. David had no obligation to do this for Mephibosheth. It would not have been unjust had he left him in the house of Machir. Everything here is completely free, unmerited kindness.

Not only was David not obligated to do this, there were plenty of reasons Mephibosheth did not deserve kindness. He was the grandson of David's enemy. He was not in any way a benefit to David's court – he was a lame man who would need to be cared for perpetually – a drain on David's money and resources. He would never be able to earn his keep at David's house, never provide any services to David, never become a soldier or a bodyguard, or a wise counselor.

God's grace is God extending kindness to those who have no claim on God, those who have actually offended God, those who deserve the opposite of kindness.

*For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup> For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. <sup>8</sup> But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom. 5:6-8)*

We, like Mephibosheth, were without strength to come to God, and not only were we without strength, we were in debt to God. God had a right to expect kindness and gratitude from us, but instead received enmity and hostility.

*among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.*

The Bible says we were enemies, it says we were dead to God's goodness, it says we were by nature children of wrath, provoking God's justice to destroy us.

Sometimes people tend to think of God's justice and His grace like two sides of a coin, as if they are opposites which balance each other out but the truth is, God's justice is good and perfect on its own. If God were simply just with all His creatures, then all good souls should rejoice and praise Him for being fair and balanced, and punishing evil, and rewarding good. But just as David did not simply enforce justice in his kingdom, he showed gracious kindness to one who had not merited it, one who had de-merit, one who had no power to earn merit, so God's grace shows kindness to us.

*For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. <sup>4</sup> But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, <sup>5</sup> not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, (Tit. 3:3-5)*

And very importantly, God's grace is not merely a sentiment, but an active action of seeking out, drawing, pursuing the objects of His love. David sought Mephibosheth out, and so God's grace seeks us out, drawing us, relentlessly going after us, though our hard hearts might hide, and run, and refuse, and reject, and blaspheme, and disbelieve, and deny.

*The LORD has appeared of old to me, saying: "Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; Therefore*

*with lovingkindness I have drawn you. (Jer. 31:3)*

*But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us,<sup>5</sup> even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), (Eph. 2:3-5)*

*Now when Mephibosheth the son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, had come to David, he fell on his face and prostrated himself. Then David said, "Mephibosheth?" And he answered, "Here is your servant!"*

Mephibosheth is brought in, undoubtedly carried in. He is about eighteen years old at this time, a young man. He has no idea what is in David's heart. He is likely expecting David to carry out the tradition and execute him that very day. He is carried into David's throne-room, almost certainly fearing for his life. He falls on his face, seeking to show David he is no threat to his kingdom. He is seeking mercy. He hears only one word – David saying his name. Mephibosheth cries out – Here is your servant. I am not your enemy, but your servant!

*So David said to him, "Do not fear, for I will surely show you kindness for Jonathan your father's sake, and will restore to you all the land of Saul your grandfather; and you shall eat bread at my table continually."<sup>8</sup> Then he bowed himself, and said, "What is your servant, that you should look upon such a dead dog as I?"*

David says, don't fear. I will show you hesed. I myself will provide for you at my own table, and I will give you back your inheritance and your financial stability. Your own family and children will have hope. Why will I do this hesed – this unearned, undeserved kindness? For your father Jonathan's sake.

The complicated situation for David was that his best friend was the son of his worst enemy. Jonathan was his loyal friend, and Jonathan was the son of Saul. But David and Jonathan had sworn oaths to each other, and one of those oaths was when Jonathan called on David to swear that he would be kind to Jonathan's house once king.

*And you shall not only show me the kindness of the LORD while I still live, that I may not die<sup>15</sup> "but you shall not cut off your kindness from my house forever, no, not when the LORD has cut off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth. (1 Sam. 20:14-15)*

This grace is not something Mephibosheth has earned or merited. This is because of David's faithfulness to an oath he made. Now, he would not have made that oath if he were an evil man. Nor would he keep his oath if he were an evil man. But flowing out of his godly heart is the desire to keep his promise to Jonathan.

God does not show us grace because of us. God does not find anything in us to show kindness to. But for His own sake, for the sake of the covenant within the Trinity, the plan before all ages, God lavishes kindness on the undeserving. When Scripture speak of God's choice before the foundation of the world, when we read of Christ foreordained before the foundation of the world (1 Pet 1:21), names written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, we are reading about God's oath within Himself. And that is huge cause for rejoicing, because if God is determined to love you in spite of you, nothing you do can make him love you more, and nothing you do can make him love you less.

But see something else.

*And the king called to Ziba, Saul's servant, and said to him, "I have given to your master's son all that belonged to Saul and to all his house."<sup>10</sup> "You therefore, and your sons and your servants, shall work the land for him, and you shall bring in the harvest, that your master's son may have food to eat. But Mephibosheth your master's son shall eat bread at my table always." Now Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty*

servants. <sup>11</sup> Then Ziba said to the king, "According to all that my lord the king has commanded his servant, so will your servant do." "As for Mephibosheth," said the king, "he shall eat at my table like one of the king's sons." <sup>12</sup> Mephibosheth had a young son whose name was Micha. And all who dwelt in the house of Ziba were servants of Mephibosheth.

It was not Mephibosheth's fault to be born son of Jonathan. Nor was it his fault that he was lame. *He was five years old when the news about Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel; and his nurse took him up and fled. And it happened, as she made haste to flee, that he fell and became lame. His name was Mephibosheth. (2 Sam. 4:4)*

Whether it is his fault or not, Mephibosheth is really in a miserable condition. He is dependent on others. He has lost his inheritance. He is lame and unable to work, defend himself, or improve his life. He is poor, he is probably in hiding, he has lived as if he is in danger from David. All, in all, his condition is pitiable.

But then hear David's words – "Fear not". Grace calms our anxious hearts. It soothes us. The words spoken most often by Jesus as recorded in the Gospels are the words "Fear not". David calls on the whimpering Mephibosheth to lift up his eyes to see a kind face, a gentle countenance that has good in his heart, not evil. David effectively says "I am not only going to spare your life, but give you what is mine, and invite you to an honoured seat at my table, and give you the land that belongs to me." David's action then shows us the other side of *hesed*.

## **II. God's Mercy is His Kindness to Those Who Desperately Need It**

Grace shows kindness to those who do not deserve it. But mercy shows kindness to those who not only do not deserve it, but who desperately need it. Mercy deals with misery, with suffering, with pain, with all the opposites of happiness. That misery and suffering is there, partly by one's own choices, and partly through being in a sinful world.

**Rom 8:22** *For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.*

*For what has man for all his labor, and for the striving of his heart with which he has toiled under the sun?  
<sup>23</sup> For all his days are sorrowful, and his work burdensome; even in the night his heart takes no rest. This also is vanity. (Eccl. 2:22-23)*

But being part of the human family means there is shared guilt, shared suffering, and shared pain. We live lives of frustration, of weakness, afflicted by disease, want, necessity, oppression, unfairness, haunted every step by the threat of death.

And the human condition is a sad one. The Gospels record repeatedly Jesus looking upon crowds, looking upon the bereaved, looking upon the diseased, the demon-possessed, the spiritually lost, and it says He was moved with compassion. Human misery, whether brought upon by individual guilt, or whether brought about by Adamic guilt does not leave God indifferent, hardened, callous.

*As a father pities his children, So the LORD pities those who fear Him. <sup>14</sup> For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust. (Ps. 103:13-14)*

Mercy is God reaching out to bring life where there is death, healing where there is disease, blessing where there is curse, joy where there are tears. Not because He has to, but because He is a God of *hesed* – grace and mercy, kindness to those who do not deserve it, but desperately need it.

*So Mephibosheth dwelt in Jerusalem, for he ate continually at the king's table. And he was lame in both his feet.*

David essentially adopted Mephibosheth as his own son. He had all the rights that the princes, the sons of David had. He could have continual fellowship with the king, and eat at his table. Here is what is interesting. Justice is a great beauty of God's. But the Bible never speaks of the riches of His justice.

*Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, (Rom. 2:4)*

*In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace (Eph. 1:7)*

*that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 2:7)*

In the treasure-chest of the glories of God, grace and mercy is the stone that God most loves to hold up to the light. Justice is beautiful, but mercy triumphs over justice in beauty and glory. Grace, mercy, lovingkindness glorifies God beyond what justice does, for it is all optional, all overflowing, all the unnecessary, unmerited, unearned, undeserved goodness of God to those who are in misery by their own hand.

Mephibosheth is shocked: "What is thy servant?" – Our pride recoils when confronted with grace. We are still working on a worthy- unworthy mindset. We cannot imagine or explain why God would do this. And so we should. Grace is amazing. If we are shocked by our sin, we should be staggered by God's grace.

Perhaps every time Mephibosheth was helped up to that table, he shook his head with a smile, still bewildered at David's grace. And perhaps he would time to time look over at David's face to see if he had changed his mind, only to see that same kind countenance. Loving-kindness.

Paul Washer was a missionary to Peru for many years, and he tells the story of a very poor mother who lived in Brazil, and she had one very beautiful daughter in their poor home, with mud floor. Her greatest fear was that her daughter would leave home and go to Rio de Janeiro. One day, her worst fear was realised. She came home and found a note, "Gone to Rio to find a new life." The mother gathered up all her money, left home and went to Rio. The first thing she did was to spend a great deal of money at a photo booth making hundreds of copies of a photo of herself. She then spent months going from nightclub to nightclub, hotel to hotel, restaurant to restaurant, to the places of great wickedness searching for her daughter, handing out this photo of herself, with a message printed on the back. But after months of doing this, she used up all her money and had to go home. One night, that daughter was walking down the stairs of a hotel with a man. She had become a prostitute. She saw herself in the mirror and she saw again that she had aged fifteen years. As they descended the stairs, her eyes caught a small photo stuck on the mirror. She couldn't believe her eyes – it was a picture of her mother. She took it off the mirror, and on the back was written, "I don't care what you've done. I don't care what you've become. Please come home."

And I say to you that throughout Scripture, the holy God, who hates sin and will judge it in fiery hell forever says to every sinner: "I don't care what you have done. I don't care what you have become. My Son has paid for it all on the cross. Justice is taken care of. You need not live in the misery of your sin or suffer for it now or forever. Now come home, and eat at My table.