

Grace



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Grace

A series of meditations on the Grace of God as we experience it throughout the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation.

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Grace in the Garden

Genesis 1:29-2:1-14

In this series, I will endeavour to give you a glimpse of something of God's great grace. Over the next few weeks, we are going to scroll through the Bible to see how His grace seeps into almost every situation throughout history. We start right at the beginning, Genesis 1, the creation and the touching garden story.

God's creation was perfect. But here our first question already begins because, what is perfect? For most visitors to the Kruger park, it is to be able to see how a lion catches and eats a buck, or a leopard lifts its bloody prey up the tree! For Isaiah, the messianic kingdom of peace is the perfect, where the wolf and the lamb live together and the leopard lies among the goats, where lions eat grass and babies play with snakes. It's perfect! (Is. 11)

But wasn't the original creation perfect? Oh, it certainly was! Originally, God provided enough for man and beast and God gave the first people fruits and seeds to eat.

There was therefore a kingdom of peace on earth just like the kingdom of peace that is described to us after the return of Jesus. The author of Genesis comments: "Then God looked at everything He had made, and it was very good!"

Then comes the surprising. Day six is over and day seven is upon us. We want to think that creation is now over. But it isn't. On day seven, God creates one last thing. However, it is not a concrete thing that we can see, but He creates a day of rest. With that, God begins a cycle of work and rest, something that has been followed through the ages and that is essential to any human being. Moreover, God declares it to be a holy day, a day that had to be different from other days and set apart for God. It was never intended as a day that had to be a burden for man, but

it had to be wholesome for him. In other words, it is pure GRACE for man!

When Genesis 1 was written during the exile, in response to the Babylonian creation story the Enuma Elish Epic, this day of rest began to take on a new meaning for Israel. It is linked to their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. They began to realize that it is not just a day of rest and doing nothing, but that the day is connected to God. It wants to say something about God. First, it declares that God is indeed the Creator and that He is still in control of everything, despite the fact that they are in exile. By the way, large parts of the then existing Old Testament were reinterpreted and rewritten by the priests during the exile.

This day of rest also had to serve as a mark of distinction, because God's people were different from the other peoples. To spend the day holy and in honour of the Creator God, they had to show everyone that they worshipped God and that they were in a

relationship with Him.

The creation was complete. It was a long process that started with nothing and darkness and chaos. It ended with a cosmos, perfection and light. There was order in God's creation. He made the crown of His creation, man, and planted something of Himself in man. Now the interaction between God and His very special creature could begin.

Genesis 2, the garden story already existed in Solomon's time, 1'000 BC and views creation from a different angle. Genesis 1 tells of the Creator and His works, while Genesis 2 tells of the creature, man, and how he responds to God's creation.

The focus shifts to one small part of creation somewhere in the middle east where God creates man from the dust of the earth. Although he is the crown of creation, he is still insignificant and of the earth. But God personally blew the breath of life into his nostrils. He becomes God's representative

with God's breath in his body, but he is still part of the earth. Yet God places great value on this insignificant creature.

God gives this special creature of His only the best. He creates a paradise garden where everything is perfect and intact, especially for man to live in. Everything was there in abundance, delicious fruit to eat, breathtaking beauty of nature and crystal clear fresh water and a large variety of beautiful trees. Two of the trees are very pertinently mentioned, the tree of life and the tree of knowledge.

A river has its origin in this breathtaking garden. The river divides to form four major rivers that flow through various regions. There is casual mention of gold and precious stones in one of the rivers. This garden's influence is therefore not limited to the part where man lives, but its influence extends over many regions and even brings wealth.

The garden is therefore the symbol of absolute bliss, abundance and joy and what

flows from it gives fertility and prosperity. It pulses with life!

The joy and happiness that comes from God's presence spills over into other places. When you meet God that day, you yourself become a source of life!

However, we must realize one thing very clearly: everything, EVERYTHING is purely God's great grace!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for Your great grace that we also see in the story of creation. Thank you for giving me the source of life too!

Banished, but there is Hope!

Genesis 1-3

Yesterday we saw that the garden story is interwoven with God's great grace, and it fills us with wonder. This is the story of God who in great love creates man and richly blesses him by making him far superior to any other creature. He gives him only the very best in life. The task that God gives to man is simple and not at all a burden on his shoulders. Then He comes and gives man the perfect partner, one created from man himself.

These were wonderful times in which God often personally visited them in the early evening and talked with them. Everything was perfect! But then the terrible thing happened and the wonderful relationship between God and man soured when man wanted to follow his own head.

All hope is lost because man has chosen to listen to the serpent rather than to God. But

before man is finally banished from the garden, God gives hope again. Despite the breach of trust that man has created, God decides out of His great mercy that He will not hand man over to his own fate. In addition, He also gives a wonderful promise that one day He would send Someone to "bruise the serpent's head." That One would come and restore everything that man had messed up. So there is the promise of hope for a better tomorrow!

If we now turn to the last three chapters in the Bible, in Revelation, then this hope is confirmed. Thousands of years passed between this first message of hope and its final confirmation.

In Revelation 20 we read of the end of Satan and the evil one. John sees in his vision an angel coming from God. He has access to the subterranean depth or the abode of evil. The angel binds Satan with a large chain, symbolic of limiting his power. He is kept in the subterranean depths for a thousand

years, and then he is released for a short time. We cannot interpret the thousand years as a literal time. This is a symbolic number that indicates that he is bound for the full period that God has determined for him. In the light of the message of Revelation as a whole, we can understand from this that Satan is bound for the period between Jesus' first coming 2000 years ago and His second coming. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, Satan was defeated by Him and was bound. The short time he is released indicates the terrible intensity of his attack shortly before the end.

In Revelation 21, John describes the wonderful sight he experiences, of the renewal of heaven and earth, where perfect communion with God has now arrived. Yes, the old dispensation is gone. The first heaven and earth were created perfectly by God. So we read in Genesis 1 to 3. However, it was totally destroyed by man and Satan's sin. The old earth where pain and suffering, which was only the result of sin, is such a

terrible reality, is now being recreated and replaced with a brand new state of everlasting, perfect glory with God. In other words, it is restored to the same state as prevailed in the Garden of Eden before man fell into sin. In a figurative sense, even the sea disappears, because in ancient times it was considered the abode of evil. The evil is now destroyed, and with it his dwelling place.

Along with this event there is of course the second coming of Jesus. This is the day when all are judged. Adam and Eve will be there to hear God's judgment. And so also all the people after them, including you and me. Adam will have to answer as to why he decided to reject God's grace and love. But more importantly, he will have to say if he ever came to his senses after that. Did he ever ask for forgiveness? Was there ever again a relationship between him and God? That perfect relationship of yesteryear would surely no longer be possible. But there could still be a relationship again if Adam would only open his heart to the Lord.

Is there anything for me as a believer today to be afraid of at the second coming? To this I can answer unequivocally that I have nothing to fear because I have already been absolved from judgment, and therefore I can cry out with a huge crowd of believers: "Come Lord Jesus, come quickly!" On what basis was I acquitted? Based on Jesus' redemption. Along with that, because I opened my heart to Him and allowed Him to be in a relationship with me. He did everything; I just had to accept it. Everything is purely God's grace!

However, my question to you this morning is whether you feel the same way about it? Do you also look forward to Jesus' return with great longing? Or maybe you sit with fear in your heart because you don't know if you will see the inside of heaven? If you are sitting with that terrible fear, then Jesus begs you to come and drink of the water of life - it's free! You don't have to pay anything for it! I also want to urgently invite you to contact me if you have that problem.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for saving me out of grace despite my sin!

Mercy for Noah

Genesis 6:5-12

Adam and Eve were banished from the garden because of their sin. Nevertheless, God was merciful, and Eve gave birth to two sons, Cain and Abel. There was however, a great tragedy when Cain killed his brother. Even after this abominable act of Cain, God was still merciful, and He spared Cain's life. Then followed the birth of Seth, and Genesis 4:26 tells that after the birth of Seth's son, people began to "call on the name of the Lord."

Then followed a long history characterized by the total decay of humanity, where violence and wickedness were prominent. Only a few bright incidents stood out, like Enoch who "lived close to God" (Gen. 5:24). However, the rest were dark times that got worse, until finally it was unbearable. Genesis 6:5,6 tells that the people only thought up bad things and that the Lord was saddened by the

terrible decay. He even considered destroying all the inhabitants of the earth!

But again it was God's great grace that weighed more heavily. There was one single person who was still righteous, Noah, and God had mercy on him.

He tells Noah of His plan to wipe out corrupt humanity, but that He will spare Noah. Then He gives Noah an instruction: "The end of all people has arrived, according to My decision; for by their doing the earth is full of violence. Look, I am going to destroy them along with the earth. Make yourself an ark of gopher wood." Gen. 6:13-14)

Possibly the story went something like this:

"Noah, I want you to build a ship."

"A ship, Lord? Why? I do not understand....."

"I decided to put an end to all people, because the earth has degenerated into a boiling pot of violence."

Noah sighed heavily as he pondered over the words of the Lord. "Yes, it certainly can't go

on like this!" he thought. "The Lord is right: The earth must be cleaned once and for all, because everything has become bad!"

Noah wonders what the people's reaction will be if he starts building a ship here in the middle of the desert. They will think that he has finally started to become cynical. After all, he is already 600 years old, one of the last of the very old men left.

But suddenly a thought struck Noah: how does one build a ship? I'm not a shipbuilder? Where do you start? What do you make it out of?

"Lord, I don't know how!" he pleads with God. "And besides, why a ship in the desert? There isn't any water here? Lord, I don't understand at all...."

Then the Lord answered him: "I am going to send a flood over the earth to destroy everything that lives on it, every living thing under heaven. All life on earth will be destroyed!"

"And the ship, Lord, who will be in the ship?"

"Noah, I am going to make a covenant with you. I want you and your wife and children to get on the ship. I will preserve you so that you may continue to live."

Noah is very relieved. At least now he knows that he and his family will be safe. Wow, but it's going to be terrible if all the people have to drown! But then a new thought strikes Noah: What about the animals? When this water the Lord speaks of has receded, the earth will really be a very lonely place if there are not a few animals left too. "Lord..." Noah begins.

But God has long known about his worries even before Noah thought about them: "Noah, you don't have to worry about the animals. It will be your task to collect two of every kind of animal on earth and take them with you on the ship."

That which was originally good has been ruined by man. Now only one thing remains: to flatten the ruins and start over.

We therefore clearly see that man himself was responsible for the flood. It was their own doing, and God's decision to destroy everything was simply the result of man's terrible actions.

You and I also live in a bitterly confused world today. Crime, violence, injustice, fraud, murder, rape - all these things are very familiar to us. Many people have grown tired of all this rubbish, even unbelievers. Everyone is looking for a little "Noah" who can bring peace. But every "Noah" who is born also has feet of clay. And the injustice rolls on full steam ahead!

But there is hope, because Jesus brings salvation where everything seems totally lost. Yes, and indeed He conquered death! He only asks of you and me to stand in a personal relationship with Him and live close to God like Noah of old.

And then, on top of that, there is also the great hope that all believers eagerly look forward to, that great hope that John writes

about in Revelation. And that great hope that the angel spoke of during Jesus' ascension. When Jesus returns on that day, everything will be made brand new. There will be a new heaven and a new earth where everything will be absolutely perfect and spotless, without the slightest sign of sin. Are you looking forward to it too?

Prayer:

Lord, today there are many questions in our minds about this story. But then we can find comfort that Your grace is more than enough for us. And on top of that there is the prospect of the second coming! Thank you for that, Lord!

A Babylonian Confusion

Genesis 11

God kept His promise to Noah, and the great flood came to wipe out everything. But out of His great mercy, God preserved Noah and with him, his wife, three sons and their wives. Thus a small handful of eight people who served God.

Ham was the first of this group to stumble and show that sin was still an inherent part of their lives.

We further read that God richly blessed these three sons of Noah and their wives with fertility so that over a relatively short period of time a very large offspring was born. And as it happens, when a large number of people stay together and start stepping on each other's toes, they decide to move into the big wide world.

A large group of these emigrants discovered the wonderful, fertile plains in Shinar,

somewhere between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Here they could make a very good living because the earth gave them plenty.

However, there is a small problem: unlike Canaan where they come from with its abundance of stones to build houses with, there is not a single stone in sight. To simply build houses out of mud is not very practical because every time it rains, the house washes away!

Then one fellow discovered that if you bake clay in the fire, it becomes rock hard. Now why not build a house with such "imitation stones"? And thus humanity takes another step forward in its technological development. The news spreads quickly, and all of a sudden everyone is baking bricks to build their houses. Asphalt is used to bond the clay bricks into walls, which then make for excellent, very sturdy construction. The people are very excited about their new invention!

Because the earth here is so fertile, a large number of people settled here together. The result is finally, after a good number of years, that a city is born here. It's nice to have so many people around you and things start to go very well. We can only assume that trade made it worthwhile for the people to settle together in a city. No one wanted to move away from here because more and more amenities arose as needs were noticed.

And then this city's people started to become vain. They were better than the other strugglers out there who only farmed for a living. They were making a name for themselves here!

One day the city elders sat around again as usual loafing and talking about all their wonderful achievements. Then a clever fellow came forward with a big idea. Here they were with the amazing technology to be able to build structures without first having to cut rocks, which in any case did not exist in this world. How about if they now use this

technology and build themselves a tower?

“A tower? And what for?” one veteran wanted to know.

Then he explained that this tower must be the symbol of what they have achieved in life. With this they will make a big name for themselves. But this shouldn't be just any old turret. Their tower must reach to the top of the sky, to where God is.

Slowly, a great excitement began to come over the men and ideas were thrown around. Mockingly, someone remarked that if they could build up to the inside of heaven, then they would be just as good and powerful as God at any time. Who then still needs Him? This will be the biggest project anyone could ever imagine!

And so began the biggest building project anyone could dream of. It is calculated that it was almost 110m high!

But the great Almighty God saw that something was going on. He was compelled

to descend to see what the people were doing, because as great as it seemed to man, so small was it in God's eyes. We must see our breathtaking human achievements in perspective with what God has accomplished! Only when we see God's great deeds do we realize how insignificant we and all our wonderful achievements really are!

God realized that man was building a monster for themselves, and this could lead to horrible things. So He intervened. He confused their language, so that one could not understand what the other was saying. There was a huge communication gap, and eventually the people scattered and were spread over the earth.

Again, it is only God's great grace that we see here. He does not destroy the people who devise evil things, but scatters them so that they populate the earth.

With this incident the so-called primeval history in the Bible ends. Now we see a shift

in emphasis, because the focus is now specifically on one single family from which the people of God are born, the family of Shem and his descendants. The focus falls specifically on the great hero of faith, Abraham, someone who can especially testify to God's grace!

Prayer:

Lord, please keep me humble and open my eyes to all Your great wonders!

An Incomprehensible Promise

Genesis 12:1-3

Abraham's words echoed in Sarai's head: "Come, we must pack up!" At first she wanted to be happy, because she thought that maybe they were going to visit the family in Ur, but then she saw the look in her husband's eyes, and she knew: this "packing up" means that everything, but EVERYTHING must be packed up, and that they are going to move away.

Abraham was born in Ur in the east, present-day Iraq, near the Persian Gulf. Originally his name was Abram, but God later renamed him Abraham. Later his father Tera decided to move to Haran, somewhere on the border between modern Turkey and Syria. One of the tributaries of the Euphrates River originates here, and it forms a leafy green region that today is completely covered with fertile fields. In this land, Abraham became wealthy with numerous slaves and large

herds of livestock.

One day God spoke to Abraham: "Go away from your country, away from your family and your parents' house, to the land that I will show you." (Gen. 12:1)

That night Abraham cannot sleep. He lies tossing and turning all night. Sarai is lying next to him and she refuses to talk to him. "I will make you a great nation," echoes the Lord's promise through Abraham's head. "I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." What would all this mean anyway? Is he going to get even richer there in the new country? Are they going to crown him king over the whole country? No, he doesn't want to be king - kings only make war! He is a man of peace!

Suddenly Abraham sat up on his sleeping mat, his eyes wide open. "Sarai. Sarai!" He shook his other half awake. She is in any case just pretending to be sleeping. "I suddenly remembered the last part of God's message." Sarai does not exactly share in

Abraham's enthusiasm. In any case, she is still angry with him about his sudden craze for moving. "What is this about now, Abraham?"

The Lord said: "through you all the great families of the earth will be blessed." What would that mean? Now Abraham is wide awake. He got up and sat outside his tent and looked at the stars. "Lord, what does it all mean? Where do you want to send me? How can I become a great nation if my beautiful Sarai is barren?" But no answer comes. "Lord, this thing is far too great for my mind to comprehend." Above him hangs the universe, filled from corner to corner with miracles, a giant canvas, painted with living elements that move and flicker and beckon to Abraham. "I don't understand the firmament here above me either," he sighed to the Lord. "But I believe that every little light is the work of Your hands." Tears run down his cheeks as he confesses: "Lord, and I believe with all my heart that I am in Your hands, and that You will guide me wherever I have to go."

One star stands out brighter than all the other stars in the sky tonight.

One night, two thousand years later, when Abraham's descendants were already more than the sand grains of the desert, here also flickered a bright star - one that was much brighter than all the other stars. Wise men from the East followed it to a small town in the heart of the promised land, and there they found a Baby in a stable. They gave Him gold and frankincense and myrrh as gifts, because He was born as King. Not just any old king, but the King of all kings of all time.

But His birth was not to take over kingship on earth. The circumstances of His birth - the dirty stable and the smelly animals around Him - everything indicated that His life would not be easy, to say the least! He tragically died at the young age of thirty-three. He was innocently executed in the most cruel way possible. Even the judge found Him innocent!

But then the miracle happened: three days later He rose from the dead. And everyone

who believes in Him gets eternal life, not only Jews, but also Greeks and Romans and Assyrians - and even South Africans. In Him rests immeasurable blessing.

He was a direct descendant of Abraham!

Yes, Abraham would have to wait a full two thousand years to see the promise that God gave him that day come true. Even if he were to become as old as his great-grandfather Methuselah, he would not experience it. But hope was not ashamed, and on the day when the wise men gave their gifts in Bethlehem, Abraham sang songs of praise and rejoiced and danced there by the feet of the Holy God who had once promised him that this would happen. Then he didn't understand anything about it, but he continued to believe.

You and I often wonder about the incredible promises that the same God has given us in His Word. The new heaven and earth and the new Jerusalem with its golden streets and eternal life. God keeps His promises!

Prayer:

Lord, today I cling to every promise You give me. Thank you for being faithful!

Take a Leap of Faith

Genesis 12:4-9

Everything is in turmoil in the Abraham household. Years and years of things that Sarai has collected are being packed up for the big move (yes, maybe Abraham also had a small share in it!) There is a lot of ordering around: "Be careful with that jar, it's precious!" Family and friends come from far and wide to say goodbye for the last time. They shake their heads sympathetically: What possessed the old man to want to go and move at the age of seventy-five? Not that he is planning to go to a retirement resort. No, he wants to discover new worlds in his old age. They say that he doesn't even know which direction he's going to take, only believes somewhere south.....

The family is upset with Abraham, because a decent man doesn't leave his family just like that! But Abraham is as excited as a little boy on his way to Margate!

Cousen Lot came through the packing up to the old man: "Uncle Abraham, how about it, can't I go along?" He sees only excitement ahead. Abraham looked his nephew up and down. Will the young man ever be up to this sort of thing? He is just a bit of a rake. You never know what you're going to have to deal with out there. There are indeed rumours of giants and all kinds of terrifying barbarians there alongside the Dead Sea. And then there are the rumours of the wickedness of the people, believe me something very extreme! "Yes, then, pack up. We leave in a week!"

It was a huge trek! There were camels and more camels, all loaded to breaking point. The slaves walked in long rows, and then there were Abraham's livestock, large herds that he had gathered for himself in Haran. Yes, Abraham could certainly have been satisfied with this wealth he had built up. The Lord was very good to him.

It took almost half a day for everyone to get

into motion. At the gates of Haran, crowds of relatives and friends stand and weep for Abraham. It is a great loss.

The Bible does not tell us how long it took Abraham to get to the place the Lord would show him, but his journey must have lasted a month or three. As the crow flies, it is more than six hundred kilometers from Haran to Shechem, where Abraham outspanned for the first time. There at the great divination tree the Lord spoke to Abraham. There Abraham heard that voice again in his heart, clear as a bell, as if the Lord was standing right here in front of him: "To your descendants I give this land!"

Abraham's mouth fell open: "To me, Lord? Will You give all this land to me and my descendants?" Abraham never in his wildest dreams expected this. First there was the promise that the Lord would give him offspring, and this while his dear Sarai was barren. And now this promise!

Abraham fell down in worship before God. It

is a beautiful country. What did he do to deserve it? "Thank you Lord, thank you," he muttered as he began gathering rocks. "Here I must build an altar," he decided, "an altar for God. Here I will make a sacrifice to the Lord who brought me safely through the dangerous, inhospitable wilderness to here."

God's mercy is great indeed! God builds a community of faith. How does He do it? He calls and He promises. No force, man must choose for himself. He is given a choice: he can stay in Haran, in paradise, the land of plenty, where he could accumulate so much wealth. There he can continue with his old life, where all his friends and family were probably idolaters. Or he can take this terrible risk, to venture into the inhospitable wilderness on his way to a destination that is totally unknown to him. Would he trust God enough to take this daring step?

He decides to trust God unconditionally. And when he does this, the big surprise comes: there is a second promise waiting for him, the

promise of an entire large country that would belong to him.

Abraham responds by calling on the Lord (with words), and by building an altar (with actions). And then he begins to travel throughout the country and pitch his tent everywhere. In this way he symbolically takes possession of the land. No, he does not conquer the country with a great noise, but merely receives it symbolically. It is a gift from God!

How far am I willing to trust God? I have often seen people enter the mission field with only a promise from God. Just yesterday morning, someone told how they went to do missionary work in the Amazon, purely in trust in God! Often they are willing to give up and risk everything. And then the family and friends shake their heads in sympathy. But if you run into him a while later, and you see that his clothes are tattered, but the joy radiates from him, then you know that it was never a gamble, but that he only trusted in

God. And God was faithful! His mercy is great!

Prayer:

Lord, so often my trust is so little. Please strengthen my lame knees!

God's Sacrificial Lamb

Genesis 22:8-19

Grey-haired old Abraham climbs the mountain with heavy steps, the mountain that the Lord pointed out to him where he must sacrifice his son. Every step is a torture for him. No, not because of his advanced age, but because of the prospect of seeing his only beloved son there on the altar, split open and slaughtered. Tears ran down his cheeks. "Lord, God Almighty, do I really have to do this?" But the Voice of God is silent. In front of him, little Isaac hops over the stones with the heavy load of wood on his back, excited about the new adventure that lies ahead, little knowing what really awaits him!

More than 37 years before, God made a promise to Abraham, that He would give him a great offspring. In this period, Abraham repeatedly experiences God's mercy and forgiveness, even when he stumbles. However, God's promise lingered for a long

time and only took shape when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah 90. It was a wonderful day! Twelve years later, however, Abraham is instructed to sacrifice little Isaac! Abraham was crushed! Nevertheless, he obeyed God and took Isaac to the place of sacrifice.

Finally they are at the top, and with all seriousness they begin to build an altar of stones. Twelve-year-old Isaac begins to wonder about the lamb that must be sacrificed. Dad always takes a sacrificial lamb with him from home, but today he doesn't have anything with him. "Dad?" There is a big question mark in Isaac's voice. "Father, we have the wood, and we have the fire and the altar and everything, but where are we going to get a sacrificial lamb?" Yes, he had asked that question before, but Dad did not give him a satisfactory answer. Now why is Dad looking at him in such a funny way? And why is Dad crying so much this morning?

The altar is the most beautiful one that Abraham has ever built. In particular, he makes sure that the surface is level at the top, and that there are no awkward sharp points. One must be able to lie comfortably on it. The wood is carefully packed onto the altar, just big enough for a young boy to lie on. Isaac senses that something is off. Dad's face is getting longer and more stern, and he can see that something is weighing heavily on his heart.

"Come here my son." The old man is now sobbing his heart out, as he begins to tie up the protesting boy. With great compassion he lays his only son on the altar. Then little Isaac begins to realize that he is the one who will be sacrificed! He has heard that the heathens do it. They often sacrifice their children to the gods. Dad says it's terribly wrong, but here he is now doing the exact same thing! With horror, he sees Dad pick up the big knife. The tears stream down his father's face and little Isaac begins to cry hysterically. "Dad's going to kill me!" His little

mind just simply cannot process it.

At that moment, a strange voice echoes from heaven: "Abraham, Abraham!"

Dad looks up confused: "Here I am!"

Only much later, when little Isaac had already become a big man, did he understand Whose voice this was. "The Angel of the Lord," Dad explained to him, but actually it was God Himself! This event was so important that God personally came from heaven to stop Abraham and be with him. That morning He knew that two thousand years later He Himself would also be sacrificed like little Isaac - hung on a cross altar. And there would be no one to stop the sacrifice from continuing.

"Do not lay your hand on the boy, and do not do anything to him! Because now I know that you fear God. You did not withhold your son, your only one, from Me." The Voice of God resounds from heaven. Only then does Abraham see the ram standing behind him against the bush, its horns tangled in the

branches. Abraham laughs and cries, all confused as he unties the very relieved little Isaac and takes him off the pile. "Do you ever think that God would allow me to sacrifice you my son?" Abraham hugs his boy tightly to his chest. The sheep is sacrificed in Isaac's place. "The Lord has provided!" Abraham's whole being rejoices as he sacrifices the sheep ram with enthusiasm. "The Lord has provided! His mercy is so great!"

The ram was slaughtered and sacrificed in place of Abraham's only son, so that he could live. God's only Son was slaughtered and sacrificed in the place of you and me, so that we can live!

Are we sometimes tried or tested by God? I don't think so because James 1:13 says: "God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself tempts no one." James therefore wants to say that the test of our faith does not come from God, but that God can use it positively to strengthen our faith. After all,

Jesus said: "If you who are bad know how to do good things for your children, how much more will our heavenly Father do it!"

Once again, we just have to realize how immeasurably great God's love and mercy is! He can even turn the negative around to make it work out positively for us!

Prayer:

Oh Lord, this touching story tugs at my heart. How much am I willing to sacrifice for You? This morning I bow my head in shame. Please forgive me, Lord!

The Girl at the Well

Genesis 24:9-27

The slave is given the impossible command: "Go find a wife for my son!" The poor man probably felt sorry for himself all the way on his long journey to Mesopotamia where Nahor lives. With his caravan of ten camels, he takes the long road, while Abraham and Isaac sees him off excitedly. Abraham is full of self-confidence where he leans on his cane with a smile. "The Lord will send His angel ahead to prepare matters so long. He will send the right woman for Isaac! After all, he has never disappointed me!" Isaac, on the other hand, is jumping up and down with excitement. He is torn between two desires: one to go with and choose his own wife, and the other to stay here with his father and wait for the big day and to get everything ready. "Say now the slave makes a wrong choice?" His stomach lurches! "Suppose he arrives here with a real old dragon?" But then he

pushes the thought out of his head: "That man knows his story! He's going to bring me the most beautiful little thing imaginable, one with fine gold rings on her nose and such long pitch black eyelashes that shyly peek out from under her veil." Isaac's heart skips a few beats when he paints for himself the picture of what this bride will actually look like.

Abraham's slave had a lot of time to think about everything Abraham told him. There were explicit instructions about Isaac's bride-to-be. As the crow flies, it is about 900 kilometers, but he would surely have chosen a detour because this route is almost impassable. It could then be closer to 1300km! It is a gruelling journey through barren desert land. "He expects an impossible thing from me," thought the poor man. But then he remembers that Abraham always put his trust in his God. He knows what he will do: He will follow Abraham's example and pray.

Two months later, the slave casts anchors at a well just outside Mesopotamia. He feels like an excited schoolboy when he gets off his dusty camel and goes to kneel by the well. Then he prays: "Lord, God of Abraham, whose slave I am, let something happen to me today." He worked out exactly what he was going to ask the Lord. How will he know which girl is meant for Isaac? He will ask the Lord to show him the right girl. The girl who comes to the well to draw water and offer him, a stranger, water and also take care of his camels, she will be the one who belongs to Isaac. So he asked the Lord to show her to him.

Then, when he opened his eyes, he saw her standing there, the most beautiful young girl he had ever seen. The slave's heart gives a few wild leaps: "It just has to be her! This is definitely Isaac's wife!" With great interest and beating heart, he watched her descend into the fountain. Some time later she climbs the steps with a heavy jug on her shoulder. "Can I have some water, please?" dares the

slave.

"Have a drink! I'll just go and fetch water for your camels too," she adds. And then he knew: the Lord was faithful! He once again provided just as He had provided for his master Abraham each time over the past 130 years. While she was still carrying water for his camels, he hurriedly ran to one of the animals. From a saddle bag he takes a carved box. When he opens it, the pure gold shines in the bright sunlight. Two gold bracelets and a gold nose ring are carefully taken out. The girl is stunned when he puts the precious jewels on her.

"Whose daughter are you?" he wants to know. She explains that her father's name is Betuel. Grandpa's name is Nahor.....

That was the confirmation! God has truly provided! Didn't Abraham then say that he wished that one of his brother Nahor's granddaughters would be a wife for Isaac? What are the chances that a man travels 1300km, and that the exact girl he asked for

will be the first to meet him outside a city at a well? Moreover, she would say exactly the right things! It is a total impossibility! But with God nothing is impossible. Right there he falls down in worship before the Lord, and thanks Him for His guidance.

"A miracle!" we want to cry out. "But miracles like that don't happen today anymore..."

Really? If you open your eyes just slightly, you see miracles happening every day, things that simply cannot be described otherwise as totally inexplicable. In my own life, I see "everyday" miracles happen daily. However, the fact is that I can see God's hand in each of them.

It is only when you truly become totally dependent on God, that you begin to notice the miracles, and that you know: God provides!

However, the story of Isaac and Rebecca involves much more than just a miracle. It also tells once again of God's great mercy, because from this family's offspring the

Saviour, Jesus Christ, is born so that salvation from eternal destruction is available to anyone who says "Yes" to God's mercy!

Prayer:

Lord, this morning I also want to fall down in worship before You like that slave. I recognize Your wonderful hand in everything in my life!

Emmanuel – God-With-Us!

Genesis 28:11-22

Jacob is physically and emotionally completely exhausted when he lays his tired body on the hard ground, his head on a flat stone. Mercifully, sleep comes almost instantaneously.

Twins were born from Isaac and Rebecca's dream marriage. Esau was first, and close on his heels was Jacob, with his little hand firmly around brother Esau's heel. "Heel grabber" he was called. Later he would become known as "Deceiver" because he fraudulently stole his brother's birthright and blessing. Then he had to flee for his life!

Hardly had he laid his head down on the stone, then Jacob began to dream, a crystal clear dream with every little detail as clear as reality itself. He is standing in front of a set of stairs that reach right into heaven! Then he notices the crowds of angels ascending and

descending the stairs.

While Jacob is still standing there marvelling at this strange teaching, God Himself is standing at the top of the stairs in person. Did God come from heaven to condemn Him, Jacob, heel grabber, deceiver? He may have been able to escape Esau's revenge, but now God has found him to pay for his sins! He stole from his brother, lied to his father and in addition treacherously deceived him. He sowed division in the family of God. Today is the day that God's judgment will consume him!

But then comes the surprising: God does not condemn: "I am the Lord, the God of your ancestor Abraham, and the God of Isaac. The ground on which you lie - to you and your descendants I give it. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth. You will expand to the west, the east, the north and the south. Through you and your descendants all the great families of the earth will be blessed. Behold, I am with you,

and I will protect you wherever you go. I will let you return to this land, because I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you." (Gen. 13:13-15)

Jacob discovers that God is far greater than our human minds can comprehend. He discovers that God does not only look where He can punish and condemn people. We want to visualize God in terms of our own human values, but God can never be measured in human terms. He is so different from us and He thinks so surprisingly differently. He knows us through and through. Yes, God knew exactly about Jacob's struggle and of course that Jacob was already paying the high price for his misdeeds. That's why he doesn't deal further blows. On the contrary, He comes to encourage Jacob when he needs it most. Isn't that mercy?

Jacob suddenly wakes up. It's pitch dark. He jumps up. The stairs to heaven are gone, also the thousands of angels. And God? He

gropes in the dark, but there is nothing! Just the deafening silence! Jacob's heart beat in his throat. He trembled with fear. "I met God! I never realized that God is here too. I thought that He was right there with Father Isaac!"

Then Jacob comes to the conclusion: "This is nothing but the house of God. This is the gateway to heaven!" (Gen. 13:17).

When the sun's first rays turn the sky red, Jacob builds a monument to the Lord. Full of awe, he took the stone that had been under his head that night, and put it down upright. His little precious oil is used to anoint the stone. Solemnly he calls the place "Beth-El" - house of God. This stone pillar will be a witness of his very first meeting with God. Then Jacob falls down in prayer before God: "If You will be with me and protect me on this road I am now going, and give me food to eat and clothes to wear, and I return unharmed to my family, then the Lord will be my God, and this stone that I set up as a memorial

stone will be a house of God; and I will faithfully give you tithes of everything you give me."

After an encounter with God, no person is ever the same again. Jacob, the refugee became Jacob the pilgrim, a man with a mission. The man who first lived indifferently towards God and his fellow-man, now makes a vow to God!

Life suddenly takes on new meaning when you meet the Lord. Everything changes, and you start looking at things through brand new eyes. You discover that God is not just trapped in a church building, but that He is everywhere you are. Jacob discovered that God is "Immanuel", God-With-Us. On his long journey to Haran, God would walk with him step-by-step. Two thousand years later it becomes even clearer when Jesus is born, and for a short while people could physically experience this Immanuel concept. Today we know that Jesus is always Immanuel, and even if we cannot understand it, we can still

know and experience that He walks with us every step of the way of life. In Matt 1:23 it is spelled out clearly, and throughout the New Testament we read it, up to Revelation 21:3. Just as Jacob experienced it that night, so Jesus is with us today!

Prayer:

Lord, as Jacob fell before You in worship, I also want to fall before You today. But not in fear and trembling, but in gratitude and joy because You are Immanuel, God-With-Us!

Forgiveness

Genesis 33:1-20

Jakob walks with a limp to catch up with his family from behind. Throughout the night he wrestled with God at the Jabbokspruit. It was an extremely traumatic experience! He leans heavily on his cane because he is in great pain in his side, where God knocked his hip out of its socket!

But his pain is suddenly forgotten when he sees a large cloud of dust approaching in the distance. In his heart, Jacob knows: "It's Big Brother Esau on the warpath!" As the dust cloud approaches, Jacob's anxiety grows: "Today is the day my brother will feed my body to the vultures!" Jacob hastily joins his family and starts organizing to lessen the impact. The handmaids and their children are placed at the front of the line, then come Leah and her children, and at the very back Rachel with her children. And then Jacob stands at the very front and waits with a

beating heart for his end.....

For twenty years, Esau's anger towards his brother who treated him like this had built up, and here he is now rushing with four hundred soldiers to wipe out Jacob with his "army" of defenseless women and children! For a fleeting moment, Jacob wonders if Esau at least got the gifts he sent ahead? As he knows Esau, he would surely have killed the whole lot out of pure anger for his brother, sheep, goats, camels and slaves! He will never forget that day when Esau swore that he was going to crush him! Was it not for Father Isaac....

After years of hard work for father-in-law Laban, Jacob could no longer take it, and the moment Laban left to go and shear the sheep, Jacob simply had to quickly pack up and move back to Canaan with his wives, children and all his possessions without even saying goodbye!

In a cloud of dust, Esau brings his horse to a halt and he jumps off. Jacob bows deeply.

Maybe it will soften his brother's heart a little. Big-eyed, Jacob watches as his ferocious red-headed brother comes charging at him. He bows again, very deeply. His hip hurts excruciatingly, but he perseveres! Just to be sure, he bows again - seven times. When Esau comes to him he grabs him and **KISSES** him! Jacob cannot believe his eyes: his wild, ferocious, cruel brother Esau **kisses** him! Why doesn't he kill him?

Jacob bursts into tears. He hugs his brother whom he has not seen for twenty years. Together, the two tough men weep endlessly.

When they calm down, Esau wants to know: "And all these people with you? Who are the women and little children?" And then Jacob explains that they are all his. The Lord gave them in His great love for Jacob.

I think you could knock Esau over with a feather. When he last saw Jacob, he was still a real mama's boy, clinging to Mom's skirt. And now? Now he's got a harem of women and a dozen small children! Yes, he had still

thought that it was Jacob's end when he ran away that day like a scared dog with only his cane. What happened to Jacob that he farmed so far ahead?

"And those many gifts you sent me?" Esau wants to know. "Why?" Jacob explains that he sent the flocks of sheep, goats and camels to let Esau know that he is coming in peace. "Look, I'm a rich man myself," Esau wants to argue, "I really don't need such big gifts!" But Jacob insists that Esau accept his gift. And so the two brothers are separated again, this time in love and peace.

For many years, Jacob walked around with feelings of guilt in his heart towards his brother Esau. Esau, on the other hand, did not allow revenge to dominate his life. He had long since come to terms with the fact that Jacob had cheated on him. If Jacob had only known! This is why Jacob was so terribly formal at the meeting, but Esau came to greet him as a true brother should do.

At Succot, not far from his Jabbok stream

experience, Jacob set up camp, and there he built himself a house. Later he moved further south to Shechem. He bought himself a piece of land and built an altar, just as Grandpa Abraham did before him. His wanderings has come to an end. Jacob finally arrived in the promised land. Once again we see God's great mercy, this time towards someone who was notorious for deceiving people. God forgave him and made him a great nation!

It is so sad when brothers and sisters live in enmity with each other for years. I hear about it daily. If you might be one of them, I want to beg you today to forgive and make peace. The love that Jesus speaks of is not only intended for your fellow man, but especially also for your own blood family, your brothers and sisters. Maybe they harmed you deeply - please forgive! Esau had every reason to kill Jacob right there. But the one from whom we least expected it forgave his brother. Let us follow the example of the wild, savage Esau, and go and make peace.

Prayer:

Lord, my prayer goes out to so many believers who today live in hatred with their own brothers and sisters. Please teach everyone who lives this way to forgive and reconcile!

Joseph in the Well

Genesis 37:12-36

The stage is set for a play full of intrigue. Only - it's not a play, but a story with real people, and it makes your hair stand on end! In the main role, the youngster who told on his brothers and also regards himself in charge of his whole family. His haughty attitude mean that no one likes him anymore, that even his own brothers hate him with a passion!

Jacob's sons took the cattle to far pastures for them to graze. It is now, all his sons except the favourite, spoilt Joseph. Why he is not with them, we can only guess. Is it because he did not want to deign himself to be with them in the field, or is it because Father Jacob treated him with favour?

The boys are in the vicinity of Shechem with the livestock. Jacob is worried, because it is in Shechem where his sons killed the men

who raped their sister Dinah. The inhabitants of Shechem are still bitterly upset about their actions, so there can only be trouble. Finally, Joseph is sent to see if his brothers are doing well.

When Joseph gets to Shechem, they are nowhere to be found. On inquiry, Joseph learns that they are going to Dothan, and Joseph continues on his journey. Now he is already a hundred kilometers from his home in Hebron.

Jacob's sons are sitting with their sheep under the shade of a tree. "Just look who's coming up here", remarked one of them in surprise. "I will recognize those clothes anywhere!" Joseph is still very far away when they see him, and immediately tempers rise. "What is he doing here? Is he spying on us again? I feel like cutting his throat!" The idea began to take hold among the men. "Let's get rid of him for good, we don't need his kind!" You don't mess with Jacob's sons, they have already proven that

anyone who offend them will definitely come off second best!

"Hey, listen guys, after all he's our brother! We can't just eliminate him!" Ruben's conscience bothers him. He had already brought such shame on the family when he seduced his father's slave wife. He does not want fratricide on his conscience as well. But the men laugh at him: "Have you become soft-headed now, Ruben?" Ruben still wants to protest, but then he thinks of a plan to save his little brother: "Let's throw him in that dry well," he suggests. "He will never get out of there alive!" Such a well was usually bottle-shaped, with a small opening at the top, on which a stone was placed. If you end up in it, then it's the end of you, because no one can climb out of there without help. Ruben plans to go rescue Joseph later, when no one sees him.

But things work out differently than he or his brothers planned. A group of nomadic traders pass by, and suddenly it opens up new

prospects for the men. "Let's sell him! Then we'll be rid of the nuisance for good, and then at least we'll get some money for him too!" Everyone likes the idea, and the Midianites are beckoned over for the deal. They obtain twenty pieces of silver for Joseph, a common price for a young slave. Selling a family member as a slave was considered a very serious crime at the time, and it deserved the death penalty. But it did not bother these men little.

Joseph's beautiful clothes are smeared with the blood of a lamb. With long faces, his brothers arrive at Father Jakob's a week or two later with the clothes they "picked up in the field". With innocent faces, they want to know from Father Jakob: "Could it perhaps be Joseph's blood?"

Jacob is devastated by the death of his son, his darling son. "It could only have been a predator," he sobs. And his sons agree!

It's interesting how history repeats itself: Jacob cheated his father with a goat, and

now his own sons cheat him again with a goat's blood. Jacob gets his own medicine back. His sons hypocritically try to comfort him, but he is inconsolable. His little boy was eaten by a predator. How dreadful!

Meanwhile, Joseph was sold to Potiphar in Egypt. Just look at how a series of small things from carrying news and behaving arrogantly, have piled up into a giant mountain of complicated intrigues. No plot is simple, and it's not just one party at fault. People often create their own miseries!

We almost want to ask: "But how could God allow these terrible things to happen to Joseph and Jacob?" To understand this, however, we must read the whole story as it would unfold over many years. The whole picture makes us see in wonder the breathtaking providence of Almighty God, how He made even despicable human intrigues work to achieve His great purpose.

Despite Joseph's initial snobbery and despite his brothers' hatred, God comes in His great

mercy and eventually uses the thorny situation to save the whole family from certain death by starvation. God's grace works very differently to what we often plan!

Prayer:

Lord, this story filled with human intrigues, let's realize once again that You are fully in control, even if things sometimes seem so obscure to us!

Jacob moves to Egypt

Genesis 46

Jakob (aka Israel) is as excited as a little boy on his way to Margate. "Joseph lives!" He just can't stop dancing and singing. "My son, Joseph is truly alive. And he rules over all of Egypt! How is that even possible?"

After the traumatic reunion of Joseph and his brothers, they are sent back to Jacob to tell him the news that Joseph is alive. They have to explain repeatedly to him about Joseph and his dreams, and how he interpreted the Pharaoh's dream. "And tell me one more time about that ugly prank that Joseph pulled on you." And they must tell of how they had to bow low before Joseph, and of his stern face which betrayed absolutely nothing. And then the old man howls with laughter, and the tears run down his cheeks from sheer delight. "At least he caught you guys out, didn't he?" And then Jacob remembers the dreams that Joseph had before he

disappeared, and the other one when the sun, moon and stars had to bow before him. "Now everything makes sense!" Jacob realized. "Twenty years ago, God made Joseph understand that everyone, even his own family, would bow before him! Now everything becomes clear!"

In Jacob's yard there is much hustling and bustling, because they have to prepare for the big move to Egypt, where they will stay for the next five years until the drought is over. Little do they know, however, that those five years would eventually become a full four hundred years!

Getting Jacob and his little family to move is not exactly a small task. His children and grandchildren and their children add up to a full seventy, and then there are all their wives and a multitude of slaves. If all are counted together, there are several hundreds of them. But that's not where the logistical problems end either, because their herds fill the whole of Canaan. There are literally thousands of

sheep, goats and cattle, although all emaciated from the drought, but they are still there.

Then, one night, the wonderful thing happened to Jacob again: In a vision, the Lord came to him: "I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, because I will make you a great nation there. I myself will go down to Egypt with you." Now Jacob knows that he is doing the Lord's will, so he can leave with a calm heart. Little did Jacob know how tremendously true the Lord's word was to him that night. The Lord promised to make Jacob a great nation in Egypt. Jacob's seventy descendants would grow to more than three million people by the time they would finally leave Egypt again.

All his life Jacob was used to going where he wanted to go, on foot. But this time they rode in style. Joseph specially arranged for wagons to be sent to transport the women and children. Judah was sent ahead to let Joseph know that the great trek has begun.

Jacob is on his way! When Joseph gets this message, he decides that his father should at least be treated a little better than riding on a plain old wagon. "Harness my personal chariot!" Now we are not told in the Bible what his chariot looked like, but I can imagine that the second in command in Egypt must have at least had a very large chariot. It should have been at least a Rolls Royce, with air conditioning and soft seats and all the luxuries that befit a royal!

When Joseph's shiny chariot stopped in front of Jacob's tent, Jacob couldn't believe it at first. Everyone marvelled at all the glitter and gold and luxury. Then Joseph appeared. The crowd gasped for breath: an Egyptian prince! He ran to his father and hugged him. And the tears flowed, because the joy was great. For twenty years his darling son had been dead, and here he now stood before him in the flesh. "Now I'm satisfied," Jacob sobbed, "now I can die, my son is back."

And so Jacob and his retinue left for Egypt.

Jacob rode with Joseph in his luxurious carriage, and for the first time in his long, long life he sank into the fluffy cushions of a royal carriage. "God is good," it rejoiced in him. "God is great, and He is merciful and almighty!"

Everything has now come full circle - well almost! Abraham's descendant was a great and powerful ruler. His offspring were growing in astronomical numbers. His grandson was adorable. There was only one thing left to happen: His descendants had to take possession of the land of Canaan. But for that they would have to wait another four hundred years, because here in Egypt this family first had to grow into a great nation. And here they finally found the great leader, Moses who had to lead them to take possession of the promised land on behalf of God.

Throughout the book of Genesis, we see God's great mercy, even when people often stumble. After Genesis, a brand new era

dawns. Would God's grace still last?

Prayer:

Lord, this wonderful history of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob just enriched me once again. Thank you that Your Word is so fresh and new every time I read it, and speaks to my heart every time, even through ancient history. And thank you that I can see Your great grace through it all!

The Burning Thorn Bush

Exodus 3:1-7

The prince from Egypt, Moses is tending sheep! Humiliating! Years later, the greatest king in the history of Israel, David, is also initially a shepherd. A humble job indeed! But it doesn't end here either, because when Jesus, the Son of God descends to earth, He describes Himself as a Shepherd, and He then also gives the great apostle Peter the order to go "take care of sheep".

What is it about this humble profession that it is connected to the very biggest names in history? Is it perhaps the fact that there in the solitude of the field, where you have lots of time to think, it brings you very close to God? Just think of the most beautiful of the Psalms written by David, "The Lord is my Shepherd..."

Moses was "discovered" by the Pharaoh's daughter, where he was hidden as a baby in

a basket among the reeds. He was "adopted" by her and raised as an Egyptian prince. However, he had to flee for his life after he killed an Egyptian, and that's how he ended up in the desert where he had to do the humiliating job of tending sheep!

Indeed this work brought him very close to God, much closer than he could have ever dreamed! It happened while he was travelling with his father-in-law's flock to Mount Horeb to find enough pasture for them, the same mountain that would later be called Sinai.

Meanwhile, we read in Exodus 2:23: "The Israelites suffered under the slave labour and cried for help. Their cry for help about the slave labour went up to God. God heard their groaning."

Indeed, God planned to send a great leader to save this people, a man who was very well acquainted with the royal house in Egypt. However, this great leader who had to save the people of Israel was quietly wandering around in the desert, chasing a flock of

sheep! Later we see it time and time again that great leaders are first isolated in the solitude of the desert before their great task. Even Jesus had to go through this!

And then it happens: While Moses is sitting with his sheep at the foot of Mount Horeb, he notices a peculiar phenomenon - a burning thorn bush. The burning bush is not so unusual, but when it is still burning after a long time, and does not burn out, Moses starts to become suspicious. Curious to see what is going on here, he ascends the mountain. And then, when he gets close to the bush, Moses is startled when a voice from the bush addresses him.

In Gen 3:2 it is stated that the Angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in the flames. "Angel" literally means "Messenger". Many theologians agree that the "Angel of the Lord" refers to the Second Person of the Divine Trinity, the Son, or Jesus as He is revealed in the New Testament.

God appears audibly and visibly to Moses,

not in a holy temple, but somewhere in the veldt And not to a dedicated priest or "saint" either, but to a fugitive murderer. God's actions are most definitely not determined by people or circumstances!

God's overwhelming presence turns the dust and stones of the Midian desert into a sanctuary, and Moses is ordered to take off his shoes. So overwhelming is the presence of God, that Moses covers his face. He is too afraid to behold the holiness of God!

"I am the God of your ancestor, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob." This is how the Lord introduces Himself to Moses. "I have clearly seen the misery of my people who are in Egypt. I have heard their cry of distress about their slave drivers. Yes, I know their suffering." Then the Lord says that He came down to save them. But He wants to use Moses to perform the act of salvation.

In the first two chapters of Exodus, the Name of God is not even mentioned. And then you

wonder: Where is God in the midst of all the hardships? From what we read later in the story, we can assume that the people forgot about God and that many of them worshipped the Egyptian gods. And suddenly, at a moment when you least expect it, God appears overwhelmingly, breathtakingly.

Haven't you experienced this in your own life? I have! The day when you start to think that God has forgotten about you and your misery, then He appears in a surprising, and often overwhelming way, when you least expect it. No, He is never gone, and He does not forget about you. But God's time is different from ours. We must realize this. We cannot prescribe to Him.

However, we also see His great mercy in this story, because even though the people have forgotten about Him, He sees their need and He uses the best leader that exists to save them.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you that we can learn from the story of Moses that you never forget us - that you are always there, and that you have a plan for our lives!

Moses' Commission

Exodus 3:7-22

Moses stood barefoot on the burning desert pebbles in fear and trembling before God on the slopes of Mount Horeb. His face is covered, because he is too afraid to see God, this God he does not know at all. In the palace he was brought up to worship Ra, Isis and Osiris, the gods of Egypt, dead gods kept in temples and served by priests. No one has ever heard them speak, even though the priests sometimes want to pretend that they were in conversation with the gods. But Moses knows that sly bunch of priests very well!

Here, however, suddenly out of the blue he has to deal with a Living God, One who speaks to him! "I have clearly seen the misery of my people who are in Egypt. I have heard their cry of distress about their slave drivers. Yes, I know their suffering."

Unlike the callous, often cruel gods of Egypt, this God cares! He sees the suffering!

Then God explains to Moses that He is going to free the people from Egypt and that He is going to let them move to a vast land overflowing with milk and honey. Moses listens in wonder. He decided a long time ago that he was definitely no longer an Egyptian, but that he was actually part of that people who suffered so much under his step-grandfather's stone-hard hand. Indeed, the reports reached Moses that the old man was dead, and that there was a new Pharaoh in his place.

As an Egyptian prince, Moses learned about this land that God speaks of, and he knows all too well that this is definitely not an uninhabited land. Now God also reminds him of all the different peoples who live there or who have a share in the land. Yes, not only are there the Semitic peoples who have inhabited the land for many years, but there are also peoples like the mighty Hittites of

Asia Minor who have a share there.

And then Moses was startled when he heard God say: "That's why I'm sending **YOU** to the Pharaoh so that you can free my people, the Israelites, from Egypt."

Moses felt his knees buckle: "Me Lord? No, it can't be! So who am I now? I don't even dare to come near the Pharaoh!" Suddenly the picture looms before Moses, of three million unruly Israelites on one side, and an angry Pharaoh on the other side who is robbed of his forced laborers. This is looking for trouble!

"I will be with you." assured God to Moses, when He saw how afraid Moses suddenly became.

Then Moses realizes that he doesn't even know who this God is. All he knows is that it is the God of his ancestors. But Who is He? "What shall I say to the people - who is it that sent me? I don't even know your name!"

Then God answered Moses: "I Am Who I Am." Tell the Israelites, 'I Am has sent me to

you.'" Moses must explain to the Israelites that He is the God of their ancestors, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - they will understand! He must also tell them that God has never forgotten them, and that He is very well aware of what the Egyptians are doing to them, and that He has decided that He is going to let them move away from that misery to the wonderful land of milk and honey. "The leaders of Israel will listen to you," God assures Moses.

Convincing the Israelites is only the first part. But then comes the big task - to convince the Egyptian Pharaoh! God then also prepares Moses, that the Pharaoh will definitely refuse! But Moses should not worry, because God is in control, and He will see to it that the Pharaoh will eventually let them go.

For Moses, this command from God must have seemed much bigger to him than the mountain Hermon here in front of him. Don't you and I also often face such "impossible" assignments from God? Then we want to try

to pull it out, because we will never be able to manage it.

God provided wonderfully! We all know the story of the Pharaoh's refusal, the seven plagues and the exodus. Despite Moses' reluctance and his lack of speech, God made him one of the greatest leaders ever! He learned to trust God fully, even when they were stuck against the Sea of Reeds, and it seemed as if there was no way out! God's mercy for Moses as well as the people of Israel was immeasurably great, despite their recalcitrance and constant grumbling.

And what about the assignment that God gave you? Are you still standing around making excuses to get out? Did you perhaps not hear when God told you that He would provide you with the wisdom and strength for that? Be assured today that God's immeasurable grace is still there for you in abundance!

Prayer:

Lord, please make me willing to do what You

ask of me. This morning I realize once again that You will not leave me alone, but that You will carry me through Your task.

Joshua's Commission

Joshua 1:1-18

"I will be with you." Aren't these the most encouraging words you know? Jeremiah received that assurance from the Lord when he had to carry out his difficult assignment (Jeremiah 1:8). Jesus also said this to the disciples at His ascension (Mat 28:20). And here He promises it to Joshua (Jos. 1:5).

Forty years earlier, Moses had been instructed to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt to the promised land. However, due to the people's recalcitrance, they never got there. When Moses was 120 years old, he was instructed by the Lord to appoint Joshua, a man full of the Holy Spirit, as the new leader of Israel. Moses had to lay hands on him and bless him for the huge task that would rest on his shoulders, to finally lead the people into the land.

Some time later Moses left for the plains of

Moab where he climbed to the peak of Mount Nebo near Jericho. From here he could see the entire Promised Land. Moses was now ready to enter eternity. He died and the Lord personally buried him somewhere on the plains of Moab, but his grave was never found (Deut. 34).

And so the stage is set for Joshua to take possession of the Promised Land for Israel.

Joshua takes over from Moses, and immediately he receives an order from the Lord to cross the Jordan River with the people and claim the land. It sounds so simple! But Joshua does not go alone, the Lord is with him - so He promises Joshua. In addition, the Lord gives Joshua the assurance: "I will give you every place where you come." Then the Lord spells out for him exactly where the borders of this new land should be. All Joshua has to do is go and take possession of it.

However, this does not mean that Joshua could just sit in his armchair and everything

would fall into his lap. It would require hard work from him, and he would run into a brick walls Things would often seem totally impossible to him. So he had to be determined and brave and not let anything get him down when he came to these obstacles. Above all, he had to trust the Lord fully with his whole life.

Then the Lord gives him the assurance: "As long as you live, no one will be able to resist you. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not fail you, not forsake you." (Josh. 1:5).

However, there was another very important matter: "Be especially strong and very determined in carrying out the law that my servant Moses commanded you. Don't deviate from it to the left or to the right." (Josh. 1:7). The Law of the Lord must be the guide for their life as far as they go.

During the Great Trek, the old Voortrekkers had their Bibles in the wagon box at the front of the wagons. This would become the

guideline for their lives when they moved to a far off place. How could it be otherwise? Today, no believer can face the path of life without that important guideline for our lives. But your Bible should not just stay in your "wagon box". It should be used and you should make it a part of your everyday life. We can never get enough of God's Word.

When Joshua receives the command from God to take the land, he doesn't even spend months with preparations and planning. He instructs his officers to spread the word among the people: "Get provisions for the road - in three days we will enter the country." This does not mean just a group of soldiers, but the whole, great nation of Israel. It even includes those who were given permission to graze their cattle east of the Jordan, the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh. In three days! It's now! Joshua does not let grass grow under his feet!

However, we must understand that we read this story in context, and not simply assume

that we must blindly carry out God's instructions without any planning.

As believers we are part of a team that must work together. It starts in my congregation where I don't just form a clique with my other cell group mates, but where the team is the entire congregation. Making the congregation succeed means that we all put our shoulders to the wheel together. If one of the other groups tstart something, everyone supports it to make it succeed. But it goes much further than just our congregation. We are part of a much larger team that includes all the other denominations. And it doesn't matter if the "other team" is black or brown or pink - we are all part of the unit.

Everyone is immediately excited about this new "adventure" and I can imagine the scrambling around in the camp of the Israelites to get everything packed and ready in time. After all, they had waited forty years for this great day!

Prayer:

Lord, I am part of a very big team. Help me to take off my blinkers and become part of the others.

The Spies and the Prostitute

Joshua 2:1-24

In the camp of Israel, everything is in turmoil: "We are moving!" Meanwhile Joshua is hard at work planning the invasion. He decides that one cannot just blindly walk into a hostile country, and then he chooses two trusted men to go spy and explore Jericho first because it is the first city in his visor, right across the Jordan River.

And so the two spies cross the border. The city gates of Jericho are open and they slip in unseen. But they are strangers in a small town where everyone knows each other. With great dismay they see how the people look at them with distrust. "We'll have to make a plan!" the two said to each other. And then they see it: on a sign by one of the houses in the city wall is the invitation: "Visit Rahab for a good time!"

Desperate to get away from prying eyes, they

slip in there. And then, to their great dismay, they find themselves in a prostitute's brothel. "What now?" they wonder aloud.

I don't know which of them was scared the most, Rahab the prostitute or the two spies. "What are you doing here?" She recognized them immediately as Israelites. You can spot them a mile away! And the things she heard about Israelites is that they are a dangerous bunch. Their reputation preceded them. The miracle when they crossed the Sea of Reeds and when all the Egyptians drowned is still on everyone's lips forty years later. And just look at how they completely wiped out some of the other great enemy nations so that not a living soul remained. But these two don't look so cruel at all! They are ordinary men. "Are you spying on us?" she wants to know. "Are you going to wipe out Jericho too?"

The two men immediately realize that they have been caught. "Please, don't give us away!" they plead.

Her heart softens for them immediately.

Moreover, she heard about this God they worship and about the great miracles He did. She wanted to know more about Him, because she had already realized that the stone gods they worship are a myth. "You can hide here. Don't worry, I won't say anything!"

Then there's a knock on her door. "Quick! Run up to the roof!" she ordered them. There they hide under a big pile of flax.

It sounds as if the men want to break down her door. With a face overflowing with friendliness, she opens the door for her "customers".

"Where are they?" boomed the soldier. "Deliver those two men who are here with you immediately!"

"Oh, those two?" she asked innocently, and butter couldn't seem to melt in her mouth. "They just left. Is there a problem?"

"Where did they go?" he wants to know angrily. "They are spies and they want to

come and spy out our country!"

Acting surprised, she tells them that she never realized who they were, but that the two men left just before the city gates closed. If they hurry, they might catch up with the two! When the soldiers are gone, she locks the door and runs up to the roof where the two spies are still hiding under the flax.

"I know the Lord is giving you the land; we are terrified of you, all the inhabitants of the land tremble for fear of you." The woman is very scared. "I treated you well. Now take an oath for me before the Lord that you will also treat my family well!" The men promise her that she will be safe. She just has to make sure that her family is in the house with her and that she will leave a red braided rope hanging out of her window. In turn, she promises that she won't blurt out anything.

When everything has calmed down, she lowers the two men with a rope through her window outside the city wall with the instruction that they must first hide in the

mountains for three days to make sure they are not being pursued.

We know the story of the walls of Jericho that crumbled and tumbled down when Joshua and his men walked around the city. While everything was tumbling, Joshua looked up and he saw that one single segment of wall miraculously remained intact in the midst of everything that was collapsing around. it Very noticeable in the segment of the whole wall was a large bright red braided cloth hanging from a small window, that of the prostitute, Rahab! She was saved, and she became part of God's people. She also married one of the Israelites, Salmon, and a boy was born from the marriage. They named him Boaz. Does this ring a bell? Boaz is the one who married Ruth. Three generations later, the great King David was born from their line, and finally our Saviour, Jesus!

What a mercy for a simple prostitute! But the same grace overflows to us today, because we share in the grace that God showed to

Rahab the prostitute!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for the wonderful grace that
You have poured out through the ages, an
incomprehensible, inexplicable love!

Marriage from Heaven

Ruth 4:13-22

Boaz married Ruth. Briefly and powerfully, the author of the Ruth story gives only the most important facts. But do not think it happened so simply.

Ruth was a Moabite girl. In Moab she married Kilyon, one of Naomi's sons. After a tragedy struck them, and Ruth's father-in-law as well as her husband died, Naomi decided to go back to Judea, her native land. However, Ruth decided to go along. Naomi tried to persuade her to stay behind in Moab, but Ruth refused. Then Ruth, a pagan girl, said these striking words: "Where you go, I will go; where you stay, I will stay; your people are my people; your God is my God; where you die, I will die and there I will be buried. I swear an oath before the Lord: only death will separate us."

It was not easy back in Bethlehem in Judea,

and the two widows struggled to survive. It was especially difficult for Ruth because she was a Moabite and was not accepted by the Israelites. But God's mercy is much greater than people's rejection, and so He foresees that a certain man named Boaz takes her under his wing, by allowing her to pick up ears where he was harvesting. That way they could get enough to live on. Does the name Boaz ring a bell? Of course! He was the son of Rahab, the prostitute we heard about yesterday!

To cut a long story short, Ruth and Boaz got married after plenty of intrigue and drama.

Nine months had barely passed, when the time arrived for Ruth and Boaz's first child to be born. The author of the Ruth story states it clearly and unequivocally: "The Lord made Ruth pregnant." Such things do not just happen! The hand of God is clearly recognized in this. And once again the whole of Bethlehem is of course in turmoil. The men don't really pay attention to such things as

babies, but among the women it's quite a buzz. "Is it going to be a boy?" Like a swarm of bees, they swarm around the house.

And then came the most beautiful sound that man has probably ever heard – a new-born baby crying. "It's a boy!" the midwife shouts excitedly to the onlookers. "It's a healthy boy! Praise the great Name of the Lord!"

"All praise to the Lord," said one of the women to Naomi, who wanted to burst with pride, "because He gave you a redeemer today."

"Yes," agreed another woman, "may the redeemer's name be known in Israel."

"And may he bring you joy and take care of you in your old age!" adds another as she performs a few happy dance moves.

"Naomi, that daughter-in-law of yours may be a Moabite, but she is worth more to you than seven sons. We can all see how much she loves you." Naomi is very touched by all this attention!

While Ruth rests after giving birth, the midwife brings the little bundle of joy to Naomi, in the presence of brooding women "Oeeeeing" and "Aaaahing". Tears of joy flow down her cheeks as she takes the fragile baby on her lap. "Today I adopt you as my own child!" the women heard her say.

"Obed, that's what you should call him Naomi, Obed. A son was born to Naomi." The women have spoken, and Naomi was satisfied.

And so the story of Ruth and Naomi comes to an end. But between the beginning and the end of this short story, there are many things locked up. If you read the touching story, you see how Naomi and Ruth did not sit still when the accident hit them, and how creatively they went about it and did everything to resolve the matter. They were even willing to take great risks. And when Boaz came into the picture, he acted just as creatively.

Between everything, however, we see that it

was actually God who gave the solutions and ultimately also gave the descendants. Throughout the story we see the hand of God in it.

But Ruth's story actually does not end here at all. In a postscript we see a short genealogy. Little Obed becomes the father of Jesse years later. Jesse's son, David becomes the greatest king Israel has ever had. But more importantly: 1200 years later, in the same town where little Obed was born, Bethlehem, another Baby is born. He is from the descendants of David - Jesus the Messiah! A Moabite girl from a pagan country, who was not part of God's people, and who was once rejected by the inhabitants, is included in the lineage of Jesus. Ruth's story is therefore truly the Marriage from Heaven!

Today the miracle is that you and I can also be part of Jesus' family. Everything, everything is grace!

Feel free to read the full wonderful story of Ruth at the link below.

<http://bit.ly/ebRutAfr> (Afrikaans)

<http://bit.ly/ebRuth> (English)

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for this wonderful story of Ruth and Naomi and for your great grace!

The Gideon Band

Judges 7:8-25

Gideon stands stunned. With him are only three hundred frightened men. "How are we few men going to take on the overwhelming great numbers of the Midianites?" Across the valley the tents of the enemy are pitched. Everywhere the eye can see there are soldiers - it is crawling with them like a busy hive. "They are like the sand of the sea!" remarked one of the men with a trembling voice.

Gideon initially gathered a strong army of 32,000 men for himself, but God decided otherwise. 300 men were enough to defeat the mighty army of the Midianites!

"Don't worry, God will give them into our hands!" Gideon assures the men, but deep down he himself is not so sure. His knees are actually knocking together! He tries hard to hide his concern, but he hears the fear of his

handful of men:

“Just look at all the camels! There must be thousands - I can't even count them.”

"Tomorrow is our last day!"

That night Gideon cannot sleep, and he keeps tossing and turning. Then he is woken up by a voice: “Gideon! Gideon, get up! I want you to go to the camp of the Midianites. Take your slave Pura and sneak quietly into the camp. Don't be afraid - no one will notice you. There is something I want you to hear in the camp.” The Lord knew how afraid Gideon was, and He first wanted to give him some courage.

"Pura, Pura wake up!" Gideon shook the slave to wake him up. "Come on, we have work to do."

After a while the two men sneak stealthily into the camp of the Midianites. As they sneak past one of the tents, Gideon is startled by his heart beating in his throat when someone inside suddenly sits up.

Gideon and Pura freeze, and then they hear the man shaking his partner awake. "What is it?" the partner wants to know.

"Man, I just had a terrible dream. I dreamt that a round barley loaf rolled down the mountain into the camp. And then the bread rolled straight towards our tent, and it knocked the tent over so that everything tumbled down! Wow, that was scary!"

The partner remains silent for a while, and then he answers with a trembling voice: "You know what? This is the sword of that Israelite Gideon! I'm already telling you: Their God is going to wipe out our entire army so that there is nothing left of us! It's an omen, I'm telling you now!"

Outside the tent, Gideon murmurs, "Thank you Lord!" He takes his slave by the arm and motions for him to go. And as quickly as they sneaked into the camp, they disappear again. When they return to the Israelites' camp, he wakes up all the men. "Come on men, the Lord has just handed the Midianites

over to us!"

He divides the men into three groups, and each man gets a ram's horn, an empty earthen jar and a torch. "Now you must listen carefully", he tells them. He explains how they are going to surround the camp. The torches must be carried inside the jars so that no one can see the light.

They sneak right up to the camp in pitch darkness. They see the guards being changed, and then Gideon just waits until the last guard disappears into his tent before giving the sign. An unearthly, bloodcurdling sound suddenly fills the air as Gideon blows his ram's horn. As one man, all three hundred men blow their ram's horns in unison all around the camp. They break the jars, and suddenly there are only torches and bloodcurdling cries of the Gideonites everywhere.

Total chaos breaks out in the camp. The men grab their swords in the pitch dark and begin to fight furiously with an enemy they cannot

see. Everywhere people are running around screaming in fear, because the forces of Gideon and his God are upon them. In the chaos, the soldiers kill each other in great numbers. Eventually they start to get some direction, and realize that the upper hand is totally too big for them. They take to flight and they don't stop running until they are far across the Jordan River!

Then Gideon sends messengers to the men of Naphtali, Asher and Manasseh to come and help chase the Midianites. The men of Ephraim were also called up - they had to come and occupy the Jordan area. There the men also captured and killed two of the great leaders of the Midianites.

This was truly a victory that showed everyone that it was not a strong army, but that it was God who saved Israel, as He had done so many times before.

Do we really trust the Lord? I think it is necessary that we ask ourselves the question daily whether we trust the Lord with

our heart and soul and mind and all our strength, and whether we also love Him so unconditionally.

Our theme for the series is "Grace". In the touching story of Gideon, we see God's great mercy once again. Gideon is initially reluctant to take the task on his shoulders, but God shows him and the people that it is not their strength that drives out the enemy, but God who acts in mercy, despite their shortcomings.

Prayer:

Lord, today I want to confirm that I trust You unconditionally with everything inside of me!

From Shepherd-boy to King

1 Samuel 16:1-11

"Jesse, are these all your sons?"

Israel was headed for disaster, because the country's very first king, Saul, did not rule according to God's instructions. If his son were to succeed him, he would walk the same path as his father, maybe even worse! Samuel was a very worried man, because he saw where it was going. He tried to fix where Saul had failed, but it was an impossible task!

One thing that Samuel did not take into account was that the Lord had been preparing and training a new king for a long time. Not in the palace and council chambers, but in the field - there the foundation was laid for the next king of Israel. This aspiring king first had to learn to love the Lord. He had to learn to know and trust Him in the little things. But he also had to learn to

be tough, and not be afraid of anything. In addition, he had to learn to be a warrior, because the people of God suffered a lot among all the pagan peoples who bullied them, especially the Philistines.

And then one fine day, Samuel gets a command from the Lord that makes him go ice cold. "Samuel, fill a horn with oil and go to Bethlehem. You must go there and anoint a new king for Me."

Poor Samuel's knees buckled under him, because if Saul were to hear that he was going to make someone else king, Saul would definitely kill him! The Lord reassured him, however, that he had to go to Bethlehem under the guise that he was going to make a sacrifice, and then had to invite Jesse to sacrifice with him. The new king would be Jesse's son.

When Samuel arrived at Jesse, he asked Jesse to bring his sons for the sacrifice.

With great satisfaction, Samuel looked at the lithe young man who came to stand before

him. "Eliab" he introduces himself to the prophet. "Ideal!" thought Samuel with a smile, "This man definitely has the character and attitude and muscular body that a king should have." Samuel quietly prays: "Lord, should I just anoint him now?"

But then comes the Lord's shocking answer: "No Samuel, this is not the new king! Don't look at his appearance, or his height - he is not the one I chose."

Naturally, Samuel is disappointed, but the next son, Abinadab impresses him as well. But again he must hear that this is not the chosen one either. With a heart that sinks into his leather sandals, Samuel finally sees the seventh boy standing in front of him. "Lord, please tell me it's this one!" he prays. But the Lord's answer still comes that it is not him. "Now I don't understand at all Lord," Samuel sighed, "Who is it then?"

"Jesse, are these all your sons?"

"No, there's still the young boy, little David - he looks after sheep."

"Lord, it can't be the little shepherd boy, can it? Surely I can't anoint a shepherd as king?" But then Samuel knows: The Lord works very differently from people. "Send for that boy - we're not eating tonight until he's here!"

The slave had to run far to find David among the sheep: "They are urgently looking for you at home! The great prophet, Samuel is there."

Fragile as a reebuck, David runs excitedly over the ridges to Bethlehem. At home the old prophet is waiting for him, and when this muscular young fellow comes to stand before Samuel, he clearly hears God's voice: "Samuel, stand up and anoint him, for it is he."

Before the surprised eyes of David's father and brothers, the grey-haired old Samuel took out the horn and poured the oil over David's head. It's so quiet in the room that you can hear a pin drop. "David, son of Jesse, in the name of the Lord, God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, I anoint you

king over Israel."

However, David would not take over the kingship until Saul died.

David's life changed irrevocably. No, he wasn't suddenly elevated - he was still the youngest son and he always had to look after sheep while his older brothers could go to war and do all sorts of other exciting things. But one thing happened to David that they were not destined for - the Spirit of the Lord worked powerfully in him from that day on. God was busy preparing him now in all seriousness for his kingship!

One day he was summoned from his sheep: "The king needs you! Bring your lyre with you - you are going to make music for King Saul."

David's name preceded him, because in the palace there was a buzz about this handsome young man, long before his arrival: "They say that he is a good warrior - although he has never been involved in the war, but he apparently killed a lion with his bare hands! And on top of that, the little guy

is apparently very good at languages - he even writes songs and poems!"

Thus we once again see God's great mercy. After Israel's apostasy and their king who lives far from God, He graciously provides a powerful king who lifts them out of their misery and makes them a great nation!

Prayer:

Lord, thank You for being so faithful and merciful and for providing everything that is necessary for me to carry out Your task!

God Is In Control

Daniel 1:1-21

Daniel's story begins when King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon laid siege to the city of Jerusalem. The people of Judah had no resistance against this mighty empire, and they were overwhelmed. The beautiful temple articles were looted, and on top of that they abducted some of the people to Babylon. It is noticeable that the author here says that they were taken to Shinar, but there was a purpose to that. In Gen. 10:8-10 it is told about Nimrod, the brave hunter of Shinar, and later, in Gen. 11 the story of the tower of Babel is told. The author wanted to remind his readers of these things, and he also wanted to make it clear that Daniel and his friends found themselves in a city with a great reputation. What would become of them? Would these young men ever survive? Are they not going to succumb to the pressure of this famous city?

Four young men who stand out above the other noble prisoners of war are selected by Ashpenaz, the chief palace officer. They must be instructed in the Babylonian script and language for three years, and they must be fed royal food so that they can become strong mentally and physically. However, the big reason is to make everyone equal: they had to become like the other young men of Babylon. They are even given new names so that their Jewish background will disappear into oblivion, and they will become estranged from their Jewish roots. Yes, in Nebuchadnezzar's palace you lose your identity and behave like a Babylonian. "In Rome you do as the Romans do", goes the well-known proverb. If you want to be different, you're in trouble!

Daniel therefore risks his life by requesting that they get other food. It would go absolutely against his grain as a Jew to now have to eat unclean meat, and especially idol sacrifices on top of that probably! It is something that the law of Moses expressly

forbids. Smart man that he is, he suggests a "trial period", and Ashpenaz falls for it. The great risk that Daniel and his friends are willing to take reflects something of their religious devotion. For you and me, the message in this is: Live your convictions. Don't just go with the flow!

The story concludes with the thought that these four men excelled above the rest, after their three years of training. And Daniel? He was in the service of the palace until the end of the first year of the reign of King Cyrus, i.e. from 604 BC to 539 BC - a full 65 years.

If we look behind the scenes of this story, we find some remarkable things. The author tells us that the LORD delivered King Jehoiakim into Nebuchadnezzar's hand. With this he wants to say that God is in control, even if sometimes unpleasant things happen in your life. In an mysterious way, He is always present, even in moments of tribulation, and something good can flow forth from it. Later (in verse 9) he writes again that it is GOD

who caused sympathy towards Daniel's request. And in verse 17 we once again see the hand of God, because it is HE who gave these four young men the mind, insight and wisdom. With this, the author wants to emphasize that God blesses believers who faithfully live out their religious beliefs, so that they rise above others.

However, we clearly see that these men did not just sit back and accept their fate with resignation, but that they made work of their situation. Spiritual growth comes from putting your own shoulder to the wheel. Gary Player once hit a very good golf shot, and someone remarked that he was "lucky", to which Gary's reply was that the harder you practice, the "luckier" your shots become. When we read the story of Daniel, we see all the time that it took persistence and hard work from him to be able to stay standing in Babilon, and moreover to rise up above all. We also see that he had to trust God unconditionally - the stories of the fiery furnace and the lion's den emphasize this. But we also see God's

protection when he puts all his trust in God.

Daniel's message for you and me today is that we must not stare blindly at the challenges we must face, but that we must trust God unconditionally, and calmly continue to live our faith to the fullest. God is faithful - He will provide - often in the most breathtaking way!

We also see God's great grace in Daniel's story. When Daniel and his friends are taken away into exile, they are not simply forgotten as prisoners, but they are lifted from their circumstances. Daniel is eventually even appointed prime minister in the foreign kingdom, and he survives several kings and empires. There is no end to God's mercy!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for this assurance this morning, that You are in control in all circumstances, and that Your mercy over me is so enormously great!

Whiter than Snow!

Isaiah 1

Isaiah 1:1 is the heading for the first 39 chapters of the book. Isaiah acted as a prophet in Judah from Uzziah's time until Hezekiah, so 748 to 698 BC.

Right from verse 1, Isaiah makes it very clear that it is not he as a person who writes these things, but that they come from God. "Hear, heavens, pay attention, earth, for the Lord has spoken:" he writes in verse 2. He therefore writes on God's instructions. Today we can say that the Holy Spirit led him to put the words down on paper.

In the first few verses, Isaiah lays a charge against the people, and he calls heaven and earth as witnesses, so the whole cosmos is witness to what Judah is doing. This people rejected God! Harsh words!

Just think: the Lord made a covenant with His people. He made them His own when He

said to Abraham, "I will be a God to you and you will be a people to Me." He made them His own children. And what do they do? They turn their backs on Him, their loving Father! They reject His love! They reject His grace! They reject Him! They don't want to know Him!

"But it's terrifying!" we want to say in horror. But wait a minute, let's look at our own situation. The Lord speaks just as loudly to us today. South Africa is a so-called "Christian country". 75% of our country adheres to the Christian religion, calling themselves Christians. But does it really look that way in practice?

Jesus' command on several occasions was that we should love one another, but there is little talk of love in our country. There is a war raging on the Cape Flats, as gangs shoot at each other, and in the process also shoot innocent people, even children. Farm attacks and farm murders have become commonplace. Domestic violence is a

household name, and many die in the process, or are permanently maimed, physically and mentally!

Corruption, state capture, theft, money laundering, nepotism, police violence, xenophobia, homophobia, racism – all household names!

And what about legal murder? Oh yes, it is completely legal to commit a murder, without there being any repercussions. The state even helps you with that! What else is abortion, but murder of an innocent, unborn baby? Babies are murdered by the thousands in our country, and no one blinks an eye0!

"But wait a minute, now you're only talking about unbelievers!" you want to protest. "At least the church is different!"

In verse 13, Isaiah writes to the church: "I abhor your incense offerings. New moon festivals, sabbath celebrations, the proclamation of feast days: I do not tolerate celebration with injustice."

Yes, He is saying this to you and me, because many believers have become soft, accepting the injustice with submission. We do not actively live out the loving command of Jesus. We are not carrying out His command from Matthew 28, to make disciples. Often we ourselves are part of the corruption and murder. "Even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen, because your hands are stained with blood." he writes in verse 15.

Wow!

False religion is NOT service to God! If you go to church, give your tithe, read the Bible, pray, run a soup kitchen etc. and this happens without the true love relationship with the Lord, then everything is only a sham religion!

But God is merciful! He gives us another chance: "Wash yourselves, cleanse yourselves. Stop doing evil. Learn to do good again, see to it that justice is done, oppose the oppressor. Let justice be done to the

orphans, handle the legal affairs of the widows." (vv. 16-17)

And then that breathtaking news, if we heed God's plea, God is willing to forgive completely! "Come on, let's settle the matter with each other, says the Lord: Even if you were scarlet with sin, you will become white as snow. Even if you were crimson, you will become white as wool."

Our loving, patient, merciful Father's forgiveness is complete! He doesn't even think about it again, and He lets you start anew on a bright, clean, pure white page! It doesn't matter how big your sin was, He forgives completely and makes you white as snow.

Here are four actions involved in God's wonderful forgiveness. The first is that I must accept the Lord's invitation of forgiveness. Then I have to turn around, away from the wrong things I'm doing. The third is to live in a loving relationship, in complete trust with Him. The fourth, to allow the Holy Spirit to

direct my life.

Prayer:

Wonderful Father, thank you for your great mercy and forgiveness. Guide me and help me to fulfill my part!

The King Comes to Visit!

John 1:14-18

We have only looked at a few examples of God's grace in the Old Testament. But let's move now to the New Testament.

Does the date 27th May 1947 mean anything special to anyone? Probably not, but in the Kruger National Park it was a very special day. For a very long time there were preparations for this great day. In the Pretoriuskop rest camp there were even special cabins, royal cabins built for a very special visitor who would visit the wildlife park that day and spend the night there, none other than the King of England, King George VI.

When the big day arrived, the gates of the game park were closed to all other visitors, and only the king and his entourage had the incredible privilege of having the entire Kruger Game Park to themselves. The British

government had a request: it would be appreciated if King George and one of the princesses could each shoot a lion! Stevenson-Hamilton, the park chief, almost fell off his chair when he heard that request. No, that wouldn't do, even if he were the king! George and his daughters had to leave their hunting rifles at home. For a full day, this royal procession traversed the wildlife park, and arrived at Pretoriuskop in the evening, dead tired, for a night in the African bush.

However, the organizers of the royal household decided that it would be too dangerous. The king might just contract malaria. He had to be content with sleeping in his train at White River that night. So he never slept in the rondavel, which was specially built for him!

Actually, it is an absurd story of a king for whom the world was not good enough. Remember, South Africa was then still a British colony, and therefore part of King George's kingdom.

How wonderful, refreshingly different is the news that John gives! The Word (Jesus), King of all kings, Owner and Creator of the entire universe became man and came to live amongst us. It literally says that He came to pitch a tent amongst us. We must read this in the context of the people of Israel, when they roamed the desert as a nomadic people and lived in tents. The tent of the Lord (the tabernacle) was pitched amongst the people and the Lord lived there. So unlike King George, who was so exalted that no one else was allowed near him in the game park, Jesus became one of us and mingled with ordinary people, even publicans, Samaritans, sinners and fishermen! Unlike King George, for whom even a brand new, very special hut in Pretoriuskop was not even good enough, Jesus often slept outside in the veldt on the hard ground. After all, he was born in a dirty, smelly stable! He knew hardships and diseases and dangerous situations did not deter Him.

King George distanced himself from

commoners. After all, he was the king! King Jesus, on the other hand, was humanly approachable, and even little children could come to Him with boldness, even though they were considered unclean and mere property.

However, we must not assume for a moment that Jesus was "ordinary"! John makes it very clear that we have beheld His glory and grace. In everything He did during those three years of His ministry on earth, people were amazed at His power, wisdom and majesty. No miracle was too great for Him, and even the forces of nature obeyed Him. Heaven opened for Him at His baptism. He dispensed grace in abundance. We see this when he forgives the woman who committed adultery. Also when He sends the Samaritan woman with the dark history to preach, and sends the demon-possessed man in the cemetery on a mission to spread the gospel.

In verse 18 John comes to the culminating point of this beautiful song. He makes the

claim that no one has ever seen God. But then comes the surprising: Jesus came to introduce God to us. He is God himself, so the people of 2000 years ago had the unique privilege of witnessing God in the flesh.

Today, the only thing that has changed is the fact that Jesus has a glorified body and that He is no longer physically visible to us. However, He still lives among us in the sense that He is omnipresent, and He personally deals with each one of us, no matter who or what you are. Jesus does not consider Himself too exalted to be with you and talk to you, even though He is God almighty, the Creator of the universe and King of all kings. Indeed, I still have to give Him the respect and honour that a King of His stature should get, but at the same time I can also talk to Him boldly about my own needs and my sorrows. I can share my joys and happiness with Him. It is indeed grace upon grace!

Jesus is not like any other king, He is truly unique! There is only ONE like Him! For that,

let's worship Him!

Prayer:

Jesus, we honour You, resurrected Lord,
Prince of Life and King, You who triumph!

Conversation in the Night

John 3:1-4

We can describe Nicodemus as a highly learned teacher, one of the most respected leaders of his time. He was a Pharisee who was devoted to the law of God and therefore a very important man. But he was also a member of the Jewish Council, where he had to make important decisions together with the other leaders. John writes about Nicodemus three times. The first time he tells how Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, so that his fellow council members might not see him with Jesus. So despite all his great titles we see that this leader was afraid. Later, when Jesus experienced a great crisis and the church leaders wanted to arrest Him, it was Nicodemus who tried to stand up for Jesus. And after Jesus' crucifixion, when all His disciples disappeared, it was once again Nicodemus, the Pharisee and Jewish Councilor who stepped forward and provided

the necessary means to embalm Jesus' body. So we see that not all the church leaders and Pharisees were corrupt and that help often comes from the most unexpected place!

But what happened that night?

Nicodemus heard about the new Rabbi who attracted so much attention. The miracles he heard about were strange to him. A little voice inside him kept telling him that there was much more to this Rabbi than he wanted to admit. However, Jesus was totally unknown in Israel at that stage and Nicodemus simply had to find out for himself what was going on. It was a bit of an embarrassment for him to openly go to Jesus, because how would it look if a respected teacher wanted to go and learn from a Rabbi that no one had even heard of? And then there were things he heard about this Man, which were not so kosher. What would his Pharisee friends say? No, he had rather go to Him at night so that there would

not be too many questions. And then of course he would have to choose his words very carefully so as not to show his own insecurity!

When Nicodemus found Jesus that night where He was discussing the day's events with His disciples, Nicodemus felt extremely uncomfortable among all the rough fishermen and ordinary people. At least he had to show that he wasn't just an ignorant old man! Very pompously he began his argument: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, because no one can perform these signs that you perform unless God is with him."

Nicodemus may have secretly hoped that Jesus would answer him and confirm that He was the Messiah - the One about whom he had read so much in the Scriptures, and about whom he had taught his disciples so much. A tingle went through Nicodemus' body: just say now he had finally discovered the Messiah!

However, Jesus saw through Nicodemus and noticed his deepest need, a need that Nicodemus himself did not even know about. His answer was not at all what Nicodemus expected. "I tell you: Unless someone is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus was dumbfounded! What kind of answer was this? This Rabbi speaks in riddles! You can't be born again! What exactly did He mean by that?

Nicodemus was very serious about his meeting with Jesus, and we can assume that he was really honest about the things he said. If it had only been a superficial provocation as often came from the Pharisees, he would have gone to Jesus openly during the day. So Nicodemus hoped to really learn something from Jesus, and he was certainly not disappointed!

Jesus' first answer did hit him between the eyes, but Nicodemus could just feel that a very deep conversation could take place

here. Almost immediately he had to find out that Jesus was not only the Miracle Worker who could turn water into wine, but that there was much more about Him. Nicodemus definitely misunderstood Jesus' first answer! When Jesus said that someone had to be born again, He used an ambiguous word, "born from above" which implies that it is a birth from God.

Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus about the new birth would change this man's whole life. This is the most important event in any person's life. Nicodemus' ears were pricked, he wanted to drink in every word of this conversation!

For you and me, this conversation is equally important and we must read it repeatedly so that we can be reminded of that important event in our lives, that day when God's wonderful grace was poured out on us! We therefore have no choice but to dwell a little on this conversation for the next few days.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you that together with Nicodemus
I can be excited about that new life that only
You can give out of Your great grace through
the Holy Spirit!

Water And Spirit

John 3:4-8

In Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus tells him that you must be born again. Nicodemus gets it totally wrong! He thinks that Jesus means that he had to literally get back into his mother's womb as an old man and that the birth process had to be repeated. It's absurd! With such a nonsensical statement, Jesus stimulates Nicodemus' curiosity and this gives Him the opportunity to take the conversation further. Jesus explains that you had to be born of "Water and Spirit".

What exactly did Jesus mean by these two words? "Spirit" is not a problem, we all understand that the Holy Spirit is involved in regeneration. But what did He mean by "Water?" Much has been argued about the meaning of this. One school of thought says that it points to baptism as an occasion when one enters God's Kingdom. However, if we

read further in chapter 4, we see that Jesus refers to Himself as the "Living Water" to the Samaritan woman.

Water plays a very important role in the symbolism of the saving work of Jesus and I think we can assume with reasonable safety that Jesus is referring here to Himself and the Holy Spirit when He says that you must be born of "Water and Spirit". In other words, this would mean that you can only be saved when two things happen to you: Jesus gives you new life through His reconciliation and at the same time the Holy Spirit convinces you of this and He comes to live in you.

These things are very difficult to understand because we want to think in concrete, human terms. However, we are dealing here with a spiritual world that is invisible to us. The great miracle happens the day of your rebirth. Then this spiritual world becomes a reality for you for the simple reason that you become part of it. At the same time, you become sensitive to the spiritual things happening around you.

You therefore become a citizen of the spiritual world. Actually, you have dual citizenship, because you are still earthbound with a mortal body, but you are no longer limited to the earthly. It means that you can now rise above these oppressive earthly things.

Do I speak in riddles? For Nicodemus this was also a mystery, and Jesus realized it all too well. That is why He uses the image of the wind to explain to him. You can't see the wind. Nor can you explain where it comes from and where it goes. Still, you know it's there! After all, you can feel its effects on your skin and see how it makes the leaves rustle. In a storm you can experience its power where it is even capable of uprooting giant trees. However, you do not need to have answers to all the questions and you do not need to understand them to be sure that the wind is indeed there.

It is the same with the Spirit. You don't need to understand everything about Him and

have all the answers, such as how it is possible for Him to live in you. When we enter the spiritual world, it's as if your mind comes to a standstill, because everything is so much bigger and more incomprehensible than the simple worldly that we are used to. But just like with the wind, you also experience the effects of the Holy Spirit in a tangible way. You see how He works in people's lives and performs wonderful things. Is it ever possible for an ordinary farmer to get a million people together to listen to a sermon without even a rugby match being involved? No! Very definitely not! Then the absolutely impossible happens, and we can only attribute it to the powerful work of the Holy Spirit that uses a simple farmer. I can name numerous similar examples, which simply cannot be explained otherwise.

Someone asked me one day: "How does one hear God's voice? Many people hear Him speak to them, and I want to hear that too." Your first reaction is to laugh at this question, but it's actually a very deep question. Yes, I

can also say unequivocally that I am one of those people who hear God speak. He talks to me every day! Have I ever physically heard His voice - like a voice from heaven? No! So how does it work?

The day when the Holy Spirit comes into your life, He opens new doors for you. Where the Bible was once a book full of stories, laws and rituals, the same Bible now becomes a guideline for you for your life and a book in which you see God's grace and love. If you allow Him to speak to you through the Word, this becomes a living Word, and you "hear" God's voice through what you read. In the same way, you experience His voice during a worship service when someone preaches. You just know that it is the voice of God. How exactly do I know this? No, I can't tell you that, and each person experiences it differently. The great secret is that we must become sensitive to recognize His voice when He speaks. This can only happen when we constantly work to live closer and closer to Him.

However, something we must realize very clearly is that all these things are pure grace from our wonderful God!

Prayer:

Lord, I thank You that Your grace is so great over me, that I can experience Your presence and Your voice!

Eternal Life

John 3:9-15

Jesus explained so beautifully to Nicodemus about the wind and the rebirth, but the clever teacher still does not understand! He is dumbfounded: "But how can these things happen?"

The way Jesus reveals these wonderful truths to Nicodemus is absolutely brilliant. He says just enough to make the man think, but He says it in such a way that it leaves Nicodemus with a burning desire to want to know more. It is not spelled out for him but almost in riddles, Jesus makes him hungry to want to find out even more.

Yesterday we saw that it is about the birth from Above or the rebirth. However, that's only half the story. It is also about the way you should know God. In order to truly get to know Him, you must be spiritually sensitive - something that does happen when the Holy

Spirit comes into you and intervenes in your life.

Nicodemus was the learned Pharisee who lived strictly according to the guidelines of the law and carefully observed every prescribed tradition in order to gain salvation and honour God. To him this new idea was totally incomprehensible. Why then would he need another new birth?

However, Jesus deepens the mystery even more! He mentions to Nicodemus of the "earthly and heavenly" things and then He asks how these two come together and what do they have to do with each other? With the earthly Jesus is probably referring to the new birth or rebirth that does take place here on earth. If Nicodemus has a problem with that or cannot understand it, how will he still be able to understand the wonderful things that happen afterwards? The wonders of eternal life, and the way the Holy Spirit totally changes people's lives, is something that is totally beyond your understanding!

Actually, the earthly and heavenly come together at the cross on Calvary. It is here where everything changed completely and where the Jewish law and traditions were replaced with Jesus' atonement. Jesus uses the image of the brass serpent to explain to Nicodemus. During the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, they once again fell into one of their infamous whining and wailing sessions. It was the umpteenth time, and definitely the last straw. They got what they were looking for - the wrath of God! He sent snakes and many of the moaning Israelites were bitten and killed by them. But again, God's mercy is much greater than His punishment. He ordered Moses to make an image of a snake out of copper and put it on a pole. Anyone bitten by a snake could only look to the brass snake to be healed.

Jesus makes a beautiful comparison here, because as that copper snake hung on a pole, he would later also hang on a "pole". Just as those who looked at the copper serpent would continue to live, so the people

who "looked" at Jesus on the cross will continue to live. However, the copper snake was a symbolic and very temporary solution, because people still died afterwards. However, the new dispensation brings something wonderful, because to believe in Jesus you don't only live, but you get ETERNAL LIFE! It is something radically different from ordinary earthly life and its quality is indescribably much better. Moreover, it is something that will not happen only one day when you die, but it is something that already happens with your rebirth.

From that moment there is a very important difference. Now you no longer live alone, but God is with you. Now the Holy Spirit lives in you, and Jesus is with you from that moment. In Philippians, Paul describes what kind of effect this has on the quality of your life. Because God is in you, you now have a bubbling joy that fills your life, even in the worst conditions. This is what made Paul and Silas sing jubilantly as they lay beaten and

bound in iron chains in the stinking prison in Philippi. Their fellow prisoners could not understand why these two could manage to sing so happily!

Today there are many believers who can testify to such a bubbling life filled with joy. It is one of many wonderful gifts of eternal life, and only God's grace can give it to you!

You may be asking this morning: "But why don't I have that joy in my life?" Perhaps it is simply because you do not allow the Holy Spirit to fill and control your life in such a way that you can experience that joy.

Eternal Life has two phases, the earthly and the heavenly. During the earthly phase, it depends on yourself what you do with it. The closer to God you live and the more you allow Him to control your life, the more you experience God's grace, and the more meaningful and joyful it will be. Everyone who believes in Jesus always has eternal life. So live that eternal life here on earth already to the fullest!

Prayer:

Lord, I cannot thank You enough for the wonderful gift of eternal life that You also gave me. Thank you for the wonderful joy that also goes with it!

What Is Love?

John 3:16-18

John 3:16 can rightly be seen as the centre of the Bible - perhaps not geographically, but certainly in a spiritual sense. This single verse places everything we read about Jesus in the four gospels in a divine perspective. God's love for the world is so great that He was willing to sacrifice His Son, Jesus for it. It's definitely the greatest gift ever!

What is meant in John by that word "love"? From all the different descriptions of it across a wide spectrum of scriptures, we can clearly conclude that love is not an emotional matter. For example, falling in love that struck each of us as teenagers was pure emotion, or perhaps our hormones running havoc with us. Unfortunately, it is that same infatuation that often also makes people get married, and a year or two later, when the emotion has dried up, they part ways again!

True love can perhaps be better translated with the word "loyalty". What is it that keeps two people together happily for fifty or sixty years, even through the hard times and the times when they were angry with each other? It is an indescribable love bond, of which intense loyalty forms an inseparable part. This includes, among other things, an obligation towards each other, that one will look after the other and that they will help and assist each other through thick and thin.

Perhaps we can see something of this in the love of God for man. He was willing to sacrifice everything to save us. However, in a love relationship there are two sides. God has already given His side, and now it is man's turn to answer it. Your answer is not an emotional decision, but a sober decision to accept God's offer of love. That is all He asks of you. What follows is that the love relationship is built, as in any stable marriage relationship. Of course there is also emotion involved - with some people much more than others.

Making any love relationship succeed takes hard work. The two parties must get to know each other thoroughly. God already knows me and now it's my turn. I get to know Him by studying the revelation written about Him, the Bible. Communication is of the utmost importance in any relationship, as well as in my relationship with God. He speaks to me through the Word, therefore I must read it. I talk to Him again through prayer. Prayer is therefore not only something that is obligatory for every Christian, but it is your communication with God.

Love also means that two parties are willing to do things for each other. From God's side, the floodgates of heaven are open, with everything He does for me. What am I willing to do for Him?

But let's look at some of the things He is willing to do for me. In John 3:16 we read that if I believe in Jesus, I will not perish but gain eternal life. To be lost means to be cut off from the presence of the Living God. This

means that you have to do without His gifts and His love. If we just think carefully about everything we get from Him, then the implications of this are too terrible to think about. However, if you decide to enter into a love relationship with Him, this possibility is completely excluded. But the bonus is that you get the wonderful eternal life on top of that. This means that the earthly phase of your life is extended forever beyond the death of your old body, your temporary "tent dwelling" as Paul describes it. And in Revelation we get a small glimpse into the wonder of life beyond those gates. It's something that every believer looks forward to with great hope and excitement!

However, there is a further aspect to this love relationship: Judgment! We often get the idea that we should be afraid of God, especially when we read the Old Testament, where He is often described as someone who punishes. Indeed, God cannot tolerate injustice, and unlike our own political system where corruption and injustice are often

swept under the rug, He is just, and it is punished. However, he does not want to "bully" us into heaven by threatening us with punishment. On the contrary: He wants to call us into His arms of love. Jesus was not sent to punish, but to save those who have already been condemned. I was doomed to eternal punishment, until I recognized Jesus' call, and responded by accepting His offer. For years He has been whispering, but I have been deaf to His voice. Until that wonderful day.....

Against the background of the dark clouds of damnation and eternal destruction, the positive light of Jesus' mission to come and save people like you and me shines, not on the basis of our merits, but purely out of grace! It is like someone who sacrifices his own life and jumps into the raging waves of a stormy sea to save drowning people who are doomed!

Prayer:

Lord, Your love and mercy for me is so

indescribably great. I confess that my love for
You is scant - please help me live out my
love to the fullest!

The Possessed of Gadara

Luke 8:26-39

Grace means to be freed from the chains with which the devil binds you. When you experience such a grace, it changes your life completely, as well as the people you come into contact with!

Jesus and the twelve sailed from Capernaum, on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, in a fishing boat to the southern end of the lake where the region of Gadara was located. Hardly had they set foot on shore, then a big "storm" hits them in the form of a possessed man who rushed at them, naked.

Jesus and his disciples found themselves here in a pagan area in the land of the Gerasenes, part of the so-called Decapolis, or "Ten Cities". The Jewish laws therefore did not apply here at all, and the people even farmed with pigs, something that would fill

every good Jew with disgust!

Wide-eyed, the disciples see these outcasts of society pouncing on them. Because no one wanted him near them, he had to make his lair among the graves. His unruly behaviour caused the residents to try to handcuff him with chains to restrain him, but he simply broke the chains!

The twelve apostles recoil in terror from the fearsome man with his wild eyes and matted hair and beard. In stark contrast to this, we see Jesus who acts dead calm towards him and simply asks him what his name is. For the disciples it is a traumatic experience. In addition, they must hear that the man addresses Jesus as "Son of God, the Most High". They themselves are still swallowing hard at this thought, and now a possessed heathen comes and blurts it out! What they don't realize, however, is that it was the devilish demons inside the man speaking to Jesus using the man's body. Of course the devil and all his demonic followers know

Jesus very well. They know exactly who He is! However, they will never serve Him, because the devil himself wants to sit on the throne!

The question is, can someone know Jesus but still be damned to eternal destruction? Indeed yes! You do not have salvation before you have entrusted your life to Jesus and believe in Him as your personal Saviour! Even if you know everything about Him!

The man, or the demon who took possession of him, replies that his name is "Legio", which means "Many". The Latin word "legion" refers to a division or legion of between 3,000 and 6,000 soldiers in the Roman army. The man's life is therefore dominated by a large number of demons.

The demons want nothing to do with Jesus. They just want to be left alone and Jesus' presence is a great threat to them. However, when they are driven into a corner, they beg to be banished to the pigs instead. The pig herd suddenly stops walking when the

demons crash into them, and the people of the area have to watch in horror as their whole herd falls over an abyss and drowns in the sea.

Once again we see God's great mercy when He snatches this pagan from the clutches of Satan and frees him from the bonds of the Evil One! His first reaction is to ask if he can join their group to follow Jesus. However, Jesus does not grant his request, because He has an important task for him. He must go back to his own people to tell them about Jesus!

However, the inhabitants of the region beg Jesus to rather leave their country! They are more concerned about their financial loss than about the insane who are being healed here before their eyes and given a brand new life!

This story leaves us with many questions. However, there are many questions in the Bible about which we can only guess, because we do not know God's full counsel

plan. Why He did not send the demons directly into damnation is still a mystery. What we can say is that it was a partial victory over the devil, but that the final blow will still be delivered, and then it will be a very big slaughter for the devil and his demons!

This man had a very big task at hand to spread the gospel to the people of his area. And what a task it was! He now had to convince the people who had previously run away from him in fear that Jesus is the Saviour! A few years later, when the persecution of Christians in Jerusalem was at its worst, the believers fled. Many of them found refuge in this very region and they were welcomed there with open arms. Why? I believe that the crazy man who once remained naked in the cemetery did such good missionary work that everyone there was ripe for the Gospel when the great stream of Christians arrived.

God's counsel is infinitely greater than our thoughts! God's grace is much greater than

we will ever be able to comprehend!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you that we could once again witness Your omnipotence this morning! But even more, that we can only once again realize how great and incomprehensible Your grace is!

Two Dramas

Luke 8:40-56

Yesterday we saw how God's wonderful grace was not limited to His people, but that even a possessed heathen could experience it. However, the inhabitants of Gadara did not want to receive Him, and they returned to Galilee, where they were already being awaited by a large crowd. Then two dramas played out that were woven together and made for an exciting scene.

It all starts when a respected church leader and council member of the synagogue, Jairus came running and fell down before Jesus' feet. In itself, this was an exceptional situation, because the spiritual leaders were not at all kind to Jesus! The man was very distressed because his daughter was dying. With a trembling voice he begged Jesus to come with him.

Excited, the crowd made room for Jesus to

follow Jairus. But then suddenly everything was brutally interrupted. Jesus stopped and turned around: "Who touched me?"

We almost want to say to Jesus: "Lord, now is not the time to want to know who touched You, the girl is dying!"

Peter himself became impatient with Jesus who could not get on His way. After all, there was a huge crowd of people who pushed them around the whole time. What was wrong with his Master?

Behind Jesus there was a woman in great distress. She suffered from a persistent menstrual flow, a very uncomfortable situation. According to Jewish customs, however, this was damning because it caused her to be permanently unclean! So she could not come into direct contact with anyone. For twelve years she lived in this unbearable situation, and Jesus was her last and only hope!

According to Jewish laws of Lev. 15:19-30 she did not dare touch Jesus because it

would have made Him unclean for seven days. So she only touched the furthest edge of the hem of His garment's hem.

Peter urged Jesus to please continue to Jairus' house, but Jesus remained standing! He first wanted to know who it was that touched His clothes.

The tension built as time was running out for the dying little girl. But for Jesus the drama that unfolded here was more important. When the woman realized that Jesus knew it was her, she fell down before Him trembling with fear and confessed her deed. She told of her terrible dilemma, but the most amazing thing was that she felt how her body was healed the moment she touched Jesus!

Affectionately, Jesus addressed her as "daughter." Suddenly the twelve years in which she was rejected and cast out by the whole society were over. She realized that for the first time in years she was part of society and even her own family again!

Jesus refused to let His redemptive work be

limited by any social or political boundaries!

But then the story returns to Jairus' twelve-year-old daughter. From home came word that it was too late - she had already died!

We want to ask Jesus: "Lord, how could you? Could the woman not have waited a bit?" Humanly speaking, any further action by Jesus was pointless. But Jesus comforted Jairus: "Don't worry. Just believe, and she will be saved." Shocking words!

"But she's dead, Lord!" we want to say to Jesus, "Don't make the man's suffering any worse!"

However, for those who have just seen how the woman's terrible illness was suddenly cured, Jesus' words give new hope! Her faith was miraculously rewarded! Could Jairus' faith also be rewarded in this way?

At Jairus' house, Jesus encounters a bleak picture of people crying and lamenting over a child who has died. They did not expect anything from Jesus any more because all

hope was lost. It's understandable that they reacted that way. But when Jesus told them that the child was only sleeping, they laughed at Him! After all, they themselves saw that she was dead, and that was final! Jesus' simple response was to simply take the girl's hand and command her to stand up. Her parents couldn't believe their eyes when she reacted immediately. This just emphasizes once again the fact that Jesus has all power, even over death!

Indeed, we know today that death for a believer is no longer final at all. Jesus not only showed that He is ruler over death with this child's healing, but a few years later He finally conquered death when He, after paying the full price of salvation on the cross, rose up from the grave rose up that Sunday morning. You and I also share in this if we only believe in Him. Jesus' words to Jairus: "Just believe and she will be saved." later gets so much greater meaning when Paul says in Hand 16:31: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." Or when

Jesus says to Nicodemus in Joh 3:16:
"Everyone who believes in Him ... will have eternal life".

This is grace of the highest degree! By thus believing, you are saved!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you that You also saved me and that death no longer has a hold on me! Thank you for your great mercy, Lord!

Good News - Gospel!

Romans 1:2-5

“Euangelion! Euangelion!” it echoes down the street. “Gospel! Good news! A son was born to the Emperor! We have an heir to the throne!” The Emperor is sometimes known as the “son of god.” That is precisely why this is so much more of a wonderful event. Long before the birth, long genealogies were drawn up to show exactly where this child descended from, and exactly where he fit into the royal bloodline. The astrologers studied their predictions carefully so that they might not make a mistake somewhere. A special alignment of the planets confirmed that this particular child would be the heir to the throne. “Euangelion! Euangelion....”

Paul writes a “birth telegram” in the same vein. However, the announcement he makes is not from a false god like that of the Romans. No, it is about the Son of the True, Eternal, Almighty God, Jesus Christ. He then

also aptly calls Jesus the Son of God, and he confirms His royal origin. He was born from the line of David, the greatest of Israel's kings! He confirms that the birth of this King's child was foretold a long time in advance by the prophets in the Holy Scriptures. He also says that an extremely extraordinary sign serves as proof that He is truly the Son of God, His death and resurrection. Moreover, He is clothed with great power, power given to Him by none other than the Holy Spirit.

This is part of the opening of Paul's letter to the Romans, and it is therefore Paul's very first words to the people of Rome. They are therefore surprising and revolutionary in a special way. He announces this new "Emperor" who, according to all the requirements of the time, was credible and endowed with all power. And He was ready to rule! However, it is not the name of Nero that he mentions, but of Jesus Christ, the Lord. And so the Christmas message arrives in Rome! And the wonderful news is that God's kingdom and grace now extends to the

capital of the whole world.

Grace was a very rare word in the world of the Romans. Films about that era show an unapproachable and cruel world. If you ended up on the wrong side of the law, you could expect absolutely no mercy. The law was especially totally merciless towards the Christians in particular. They were considered the enemy of the state. From history you learn about the horrific cruelty of the Romans. Even their recreational opportunities were accompanied by gruesome cruelty. Today, the Colosseum still stands as a monument to the many people who were torn apart by wild animals, or crushed by gladiators for the pleasure of the Romans. Death screams still echo through the hollow corridors of the building, from people who were sent into eternity by a single hand gesture from the emperor. Mercy? Certainly not in Rome!

And now Paul comes and he preaches precisely this terribly rare commodity, grace!

Not only does he preach about grace, but grace in abundance to the believers in Rome! Grace is certainly the main concept of the letter that Paul writes. It appears no less than 22 times in it. Paul emphasizes that this grace, God's surprising, accommodating, forgiving goodness, is absolutely free!

It is striking that Paul first applies grace to himself, when he says that it is only through grace that he can be an apostle, i.e. sent among the heathen nations. When I bring God's Word to other people, I dare not forget for a moment that I myself owe everything to grace, otherwise I can so easily fall into pride and self-exaltation!

First of all, it is pure grace that enabled me do this work. And secondly, when I have received that grace, I must realize that it is God who calls or sends me. Just think back a little in your own life, about how much grace was needed to bring you to such a point. Just think how many people have helped to prepare you to preach the Word. There were

the youth leaders, catechists, teachers, your parents, friends - all grace! But this grace actually comes a very long way, because these people in our lives are the result of two thousand years of uninterrupted preaching of the Word of God by apostles, lay preachers, church fathers, ministers and ordinary believers who never did forsake God's wonderful, incomprehensible grace. Now this grace has come to you and me. We never dare let it die! You and I have the task to, in obedience to God, diligently put our shoulder to the wheel so that all people can hear about God's grace, and can share in it.

Prayer:

Lord, make me obedient and willing to not keep Your wonderful grace to myself, but pass it on to others!

Mercy for Rome!

Romans 1:6,7

In the early Christian church, the names of two cities stand directly opposite each other. At one pole we have Jerusalem, the cradle of the Jewish as well as the Christian faith. Jerusalem has come a long way with God's people. It was the great King David who masterfully captured this invincible city for Israel. Here the king of love, Solomon later also built the temple. This magnificent building would serve as a symbol of God's presence on earth and the Israelites would see it as the absolute centre of the world and universe which would be, as it were, the umbilical cord between heaven and earth. Jews would come from all over the world so as to worship right here.

However, many years later, Jerusalem would also become the place where the long-awaited Messiah, Jesus, would come and make the greatest sacrifice of all time with

His own life. It is in Jerusalem itself where He died on the cross so that all believers could have Eternal Life, and it is here where He conquered death forever by rising from the grave.

At the other pole we have the world capital of Rome. Wonderful Rome, the intellectual, cultural and political centre of the world. At the same time, however, it is also the capital of idolatry and moral decay. Although there was relative peace at the time when Paul wrote this letter, Christianity was later very cruelly persecuted in Rome, and Christians were even brought from elsewhere to pay and die for their faith here in Rome. According to tradition, even Paul was later executed here as well. No wonder Christians renamed Rome Babylon! Revelation describes to us how horrible the city eventually became, and in what a serious light God regarded the horrible sins of this city.

However, on the eve of the horror of

persecution of the believers, a wonderful thing happens in Rome. God shows His love to all the inhabitants of this city, and He extends an invitation to them to become His children. And to all those whom He loves and whom He has called to belong to Him, He proves His love moreover in that He also has this letter written for them. This is a letter that contains the complete exposition of the Christian doctrine of faith. Many believers would be equipped with this to, even with giving up their lives, still show that they belong to God above all else.

Indeed, God has a special task for the believers in Rome, no matter how dire their circumstances. Moreover, he thoroughly equipped them for this.

Yes, in South Africa today circumstances are often very difficult, but He also has a task here for you and me! He calls us and He wants to use us! The Romans letter was not only an equipping course for the believers in Paul's time, but God is also now, today,

equipping you and me through this letter. He wants to teach us that no circumstances can separate you from God's love! In Romans 8:35 to 39 the thought is fully recorded. Circumstances, whether they are good or bad, are precisely opportunities that God gives to make His grace and love visible, and above all to show that you belong to Him.

Paul concludes his introduction to this letter with a blessing in which he prays for God's grace and peace for everyone who reads this letter. At that stage, peace was still part of the Roman polity, because they had everything under control. If you were accused, you could even plead for mercy to the emperor. But it is not this kind of grace and peace that Paul is praying for. This is a totally different kind of grace that only God can give! In fact, he actually confirms with his statement that God's grace and peace are already there for believers, and that you don't have to plead for them still. It is just as great a reality as the reign of Jesus Christ and the fact of His second coming. Even today, it's still a reality

for you and me, even if we don't even deserve it.

So experience that inner calm and peace that God gives you, because He has a perfect relationship with us. God is not like the Roman emperor who only overlooked your mistakes if he decided that day to have mercy on you. No, He personally corrected the mistakes! Jesus Christ paid in full - the full price - for my mistakes and yours! Our prayer can only be that the Holy Spirit will lead us to see more and more the reality of Jesus' Kingship, to honour it and to give Him, as the King of all kings all the honour. In this manner, the grace and peace that He gives will gain more stature in our lives every day.

Prayer:

Lord, let Your peace flow through me, and make me more aware of Your grace and rule every day!

Peace to Corinth!

1 Corinthians 1:1-3

Spring blossoms adorn the world in a lovely wonder of colours while Paul looks out the window over the port city of Ephesus where he has been establishing a congregation for the past year or two. While he lets his worried thoughts go about what is happening across the Aegean sea, in yet another port city, Corinth, his secretary sits ready to write his letter to the congregation in Corinth. It is the year 54AD. Paul has recently received all kinds of alarming reports from Corinth. The time has come for him to speak to them very seriously. It simply cannot go on like this!

"From Paul," the old man began to dictate worriedly. The secretary dips his sharpened quill into the pot of ink and begins to painstakingly neatly write down the words in ornamental script. "who was called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus."

Only the scratching sound of the quill is audible, as Paul's mind wanders back to that day outside Damascus, that day when he met the Risen Jesus. What an indescribable influence that traumatic day had on his life! Jesus touched him personally and made him an emissary, an apostle. "We must not forget about Sosthenes", says Paulus to the secretary, "after all, he thought about this letter with me! Add that the letter also comes from brother Sosthenes."

"Exactly how should I word the letter?" wondered Paul. It's a sensitive situation, and he doesn't want to drive the new believers from Corinth away from the Gospel by writing insensitively. On the other hand, horrible things are happening in that congregation, and he dare not just leave it there! He shuddered at the mere thought of some of the reports that had reached his ears. Whatever the case - that congregation still belongs to God! "To the church of God in Corinth," Paul dictates, and then he thinks very carefully before adding the following:

"which he has set apart for himself in Christ Jesus and called to belong to Him."

"What a wonderful thought!" Paul talks to his secretary, "Isn't it wonderful to know that you and I and also the congregation in Corinth are set apart for our Master? We are holy! He personally took us out of the sinful world and made us holy! And this despite all our sin! Mercy! It's pure grace!

But the things that are going on in Corinth have just gotten too bad! Many of them are full of gnosticism. It's a disgusting thing! That mystery cult is undoing all the work we did there. Can you believe that they would actually think that you could gain immortality through some initiation rite?" Paul is upset immediately. "We must spell it out very clearly that these so-called 'pneumatikos' they speak of are pure nonsense. They really want to claim that you can do whatever you want with your body, as long as you are a 'pneumatikos', a spiritually enlightened person, and are freed from the physical. In

short, this means that as long as you are a believer, it does not matter how badly you live in sin. No, it doesn't work like that! We must live holy!"

"I think you should insert another little sentence for me in the introduction: 'And further to all, wherever they may be, who call on the name of Jesus Christ, their Lord and our Lord.'" Paul saw the question mark on the secretary's forehead. "This letter is going to make headlines! Perhaps many more people will read it than just the church members in Corinth!"

Paulus smiles: "I wonder how many people will ever read this letter? If a few hundred can see it, I will be a very happy man! Who knows, maybe this letter will still be doing its rounds among congregations for the next year or three. Indeed, all the congregations can learn something from this!"

Yes, little did Paul know that for the next two thousand years this letter would still make its rounds and many millions of people would

read it and learn from it. Those few hundred he might have had in mind exceeded his wildest expectations! Would he have worded the letter differently if he had known? I doubt it!

"Let's close the introduction with a blessing: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!"

Paul ponders deeply: "I feel so sorry for those poor people who are so deceived," he sighs. "The moral decay in Corinth is shocking! Then, on top of that, there is the terrible division. There are even court cases between parishioners! Is it allowed? And they badly need this blessing precisely right now. How terribly in need are the poor people for the peace of God. And of course His glorious grace! It is my fervent prayer that they will truly experience it, and that all the other people who read this letter will experience it too!"

Prayer:

Lord, my heart overflows with gratitude that

this letter of Paul has been preserved for us today, and that we can still draw strength and wisdom from it today. Thank you that we can have Your wonderful peace in our hearts today. And above all, that we can experience Your grace every day!

But Now.....

Romans 3:21-31

During the next week we look at what Paul wrote to the Romans about grace. We start with the well-known Romans 3:23, where Paul says that all have sinned but that God has acquitted those who believe by grace. But let's start from the beginning.

"But now" - this is how Paul begins this pericope. In the preceding section he writes about sin, misery and lostness: "No one is righteous..... the poison of vipers is on their lips..... destruction and misery are in their paths..... no fear for God....." These words: "But now" bring us to the second part of his letter, and it heralds a total new dispensation for the whole creation, namely a **NEW TIME**, and that time is **NOW!**

Just think: where would you and I be today if God's grace, God's **"But now"** had not arrived? We might, like the Jews of old, still

have to struggle with the most terrible laws in order to earn our salvation. **BUT NOW** God intervened in this hopeless situation. He gave the "**But now**" so that you and I, and every person on earth, can also share in God's indescribable grace today.

The Scripture passage we are going to look at today is probably the part that is used most by "soul seekers" (that's the people who lead others to Jesus.) Romans 3:23-24 is the gospel in a nutshell, and those few words have already led to the salvation of many people. But this invigorating little fountain in the Bible really only comes into its own when you have struggled through the previous part about sin!

In the previous chapters, you are driven more and more into a corner, when Paul asks penetrating questions about you with finely calculated arguments, questions that expose your life to the bone. The terrible consequences of a life without God are spelled out word for word, until you cry out in

despair: **"Woe is me! I am lost!"**

Then Paul comes with the incomprehensible, all-dominant news of God's acquittal. But before we might think that God simply forgives all sin and forgets about it, we must realize very clearly that God is absolutely holy, and that sin is a terrible thing for Him that dares not go unpunished. **GOD PUNISHES SIN!** The incredible news, however, is that God's acquittal involves his innocent Son, Jesus Christ, bearing all the punishment for our sins. My debt, and yours have indeed been paid....by Jesus!

A wonderful exchange transaction is actually taking place here. Jesus takes away your sin, and you receive His innocence. Jesus dies, and in return you live. Jesus is humbled while you are exalted to share in God's glory. Jesus is declared guilty, and you are free. But not just free, **GLORIOUSLY FREE!**

But how do you get a share in this acquittal? Only one single thing is needed: **BELIEVE.** Paul repeats it over and over in this chapter,

verses 22, 26, 28 and 30. If you believe in Jesus you get that delightful acquittal!

Many people have asked me this teasing question: "But how can I really be sure of my salvation? Did God ever really accept me?" If this is your question this morning - read this pericope a few times until the full truth of it has sunk into your heart and mind.

God only asks of you a simple, childlike faith. That's it! Then you will probably also say: "But surely that can't be enough? I have to keep the law too!"

Paul rubs it in thoroughly when he writes the next few verses. The observance of the law can never, ever give you salvation, only faith! You do good works and keep the law, to thank God for the acquittal you have always received. Keeping the law as part of your effort to gain acquittal is like someone falling overboard in rough seas and yelling "Help, I'm drowning!" Someone then throws him a life belt, but then he shouts: "Never mind, I'll manage myself!"

When you have experienced the miracle of God's acquittal - does that make you better than the unsaved out there? Then you are a step higher, and closer to God, aren't you?

Indeed no! No one has anything of himself to boast of. "Those unbelievers", whom we as saved people want to look down on, are only people who are still on the waiting list for God's acquittal. Remember: you and I were also on that very same waiting list! Those people, no matter how bad they are, need my prayer, rather than my haughty rejection or contempt. Regard every unbeliever as a potential believer, someone who has not yet discovered the gift of faith.

Prayer:

Thank you, Lord, for saving me too! Please let me truly care for everyone who does not yet believe, and give me the zeal, wisdom and strength to trumpet this wonderful message of the Gospel to everyone who can hear!

Heroes of faith

Romans 4:1-8

When I was a little boy, Tarzan was my big hero. That monkey-man who was swinging around in the branches yodeling through the jungles of dark Africa, totally captured my imagination! After all, he could talk to the elephants and lions and gophers! When I started to realize that it was all fiction, Paul Kruger became my hero. His history lay knee deep in the world where I grew up. I considered him the father of civilization in South Africa, a man of noble birth. After all, he was the one responsible for the creation of the Kruger Wildlife Park! But the history books misled me, because even the great Paul Kruger had feet of clay! My pretty picture of him has finally completely crumbled!

If I really had to choose a hero from the past today, it would certainly be Paulus. Yes, indeed he did not hesitate to share the

gospel with whoever came his way, but the great thing about Paul was his absolute unwavering faith in Jesus Christ. No man or danger, torture, prison, even death threats would shake his faith.

Hero worship was not uncommon at the time. For the Jews, David was the great hero, but so was Moses. However, there was one hero who indisputably stood out above all, the progenitor Abraham. He was a hero without equal, and a role model that every Israeli could look up to. It's actually so ironic, that Abraham was also the progenitor of Israel's greatest enemies at the same time!

Hero worship can be dangerous, especially if you are blind to their faults. For example, look at the great heroes from the Bible: David committed adultery and murder. Even Abraham stumbled badly a few times. Still, you can learn a lot and take courage from the lives of those great heroes of faith. Many such heroes from history overcame enormous obstacles. Heroes like Samson

and Gideon achieved victory through the grace that God gave them when, humanly speaking, there was no chance for them.

Paul uses the example of Abraham as a hero to gain a connection with the Jewish believers. The point he is trying to make is that acquittal has nothing to do with law keeping or rituals. The Holy Spirit uses this passage today to convince us that God loves us and that He gives us all His grace, without taking into account anything we do, have done, or will do! Our acquittal is unconditional and free, and it's within everyone's reach! God does not love us because of who or what we are, but only because He is God! Our achievements have absolutely nothing to do with our acquittal. It is simply pure grace.

Maybe this morning you will say to me: "But my faith is too weak to get God's acquittal." Faith is indeed the prerequisite for God's acquittal! However, the question is whether faith is now one of the "good works" that you must do first? No, because even your faith is

a gift from God that He gives you out of grace. Acquittal rests entirely on what Jesus did, and not even one little bit of what you do is going to get you into heaven.

But isn't there a contradiction? James then writes it so clearly that faith without works is dead! (James 2:21-26).

We can understand it this way: good works have everything to do with the fruits of your acquittal, but it has nothing to do with the ground of it. In other words, when you have faith, it should only be natural that good works will result from it. Keeping the law cannot give you salvation, but because you have already obtained salvation, you will keep God's law out of gratitude and love.

If I walk into an art store, and the salesman shows me a picture scribbled with crayons on a piece of crumpled paper, and he tries to sell it to me for an astronomical sum, I will very quickly tell him what he can make with his old picture! However, if my child comes to me with the exact same picture, and says,

"Daddy, I drew this for you," then I will definitely cherish it, maybe even frame it and display it in my office!

Our most beautiful "pictures" with which we want to buy salvation from God are worthless and totally unacceptable to Him, because He is, after all, the artistic Creator of everything that exists. But even our imperfect old "pictures" that we draw for Him out of love and gratitude, He cherishes them, because we are His children whom He loves! For such unselfish "pictures" God will even reward us out of pure grace! Since then we have received the gift of faith and acquittal, let us bear the fruits that match it today.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for your acquittal. Please help me to bear the fruits of faith today.

Freedom and Joy of Life

Romans 5:1-11

One day a minister gets a call to a new congregation. A few weeks after his arrival, he decided to explore the city a bit. He catches the local bus, pays for his ticket, and sits down to enjoy the ride. But then he realized that the bus driver had accidentally given him too much change.

For a while he sat and wondered what to do. Should he return the money? Of course that would be the right thing to do! Keeping the change is wrong. On the other hand, it is such a small amount, the bus company will never miss it! In any case, they charge way too much for their service! "Ah, I'll just consider it a gift from God and shut up about it," he finally decides, and he comfortably sinks back into the seat and enjoys the ride. Ministers struggle financially, and every old windfall helps to make the hardship a little softer.

Then the bus reaches its destination, and the minister gets off. On the bottom step, he turned around on the spur of the moment: "You gave me too much change." With that he holds out the money to the bus driver.

The man laughs: "You are the new minister, aren't you? You know Reverend, I wanted to join a church for a long time, but I couldn't decide where to go. I just wanted to see what your reaction would be if I gave you too much change. See you Sunday Reverend!"

When the bus left, the minister held on to a lamp post. He feels sick! "Lord," he murmured, "I almost sold Your Son for a few cents!"

Believers are watched with hawk eyes by the world! Just look, for example, at the fuss made by the media if a teacher were to stumble. If it was a worldling then no one would have even batted an eye. Christian believers' lives are often the only Bible many people ever read. This places a tremendous responsibility on our shoulders, and we must

be on guard over our lives every moment of the day. However, it goes much deeper than just not sinning, it is especially about the joy of life.

Paul begins with a new section in his letter to the Romans, which deals with grace in particular, and how believers should live out God's grace? Often hardships are part of our lives, and even there we must also see God's grace, because hardships usually bring us closer to God! We can compare hardship to a silversmith's gas flame that burns out all the impurities until only the purest silver remains. That pastor had to find out that there were still many impurities in his life. He was even willing to steal!

In the first pericope we are introduced to acquittal and what it entails. Many believers struggle with the problem of not having certainty of faith. Sometimes it is a cancer that eats away at them for years, and they simply do not have joy in their religious life, because they are unsure if they have ever

been saved. Paul states unequivocally that if you have faith, you have God's acquittal! Then there is peace between you and God based on Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Plus, there's a bonus: free access to God's grace! And you get a share in the glory of God!

What a wonderful thought! Once you understand the full extent of this, even a little hardship will not rob you of your joy in life. Now look at how Paul himself, through the greatest hardships and tortures, rejoiced and bubbled with the joy of life.

You may be asking why acquittal can get you so excited. There are many things behind this seemingly simple concept. First, we must remember that Jesus paid the ransom. He did not die for His friends the terrible death on the cross, but for lost sinners, people who were His enemies. Even the thief on the cross next to him and the soldier who crucified Him!

He also paid for you and me when we still indifferently worshiped the idols of the world.

This sacrifice of Jesus has reconciled us to God, and that alone is reason enough to make us bubbling with joy. But that's not all - He also gave us the Holy Spirit as an inexhaustible Source of inspiration, strength, wisdom and joy.

But there is more: Jesus has not only paid the sacrifice for you, but He in His omnipotence and omnipresence is also with you to hold your hand and carry you, even through the darkest hour of need. This is what made Paul and Silas able to sing joyful songs of praise while they were broken in chains in the stinking prison.

This wonderful joy of life is also available to you and me. Grab it and practice it! Not only will it put you on a cloud, but also the people who come into contact with you.

Prayer:

Lord, this morning I want to exult: It bubbles in me, because I am so happy! Please let my joy of life overflow, because You have acquitted me.

Jack's Luck

Romans 6:12-23

Old Jack was just a struggler, and it seemed as if the accident was driving the poor fellow away. He didn't have many opportunities in his life, as a result he barely made it past the bottom rung of the ladder, yet to reach the top of that ladder! Hard worker, old Jack, but if a thing could go wrong, it did despite all his bravest efforts. Countless times he lost his job. Once because his mothers seduced him, and he arrived at work in the morning still half drunk. Another time someone slandered him to his boss, and once again he lost his job. Then the economy suffered a slump, and for the most part he had to be unemployed. However, the last straw was load shedding, and their factory is forced to a standstill. Jack was on the verge of losing heart. The harder he tried, the heavier it got.

Then, one day, Jack received a call from a lawyer. At first the poor fellow wonders what

kind of trouble he finds himself in this time, but the man tells him that his uncle, Ryk Piet, left his business to Jack in his estate. He felt sorry for Jack for all his misfortune, and an established company with great potential was Jack's to take over. He was in the clouds. Jack took the boss's luxurious leather chair with great pride, and the money rolled in without him having to lift a finger. There was enough money to throw regular parties and even to keep a very expensive collection of whiskey in his office, just for a bit of fun during the day. There was always just an old sound of tiger's milk in his breath.

But over time, Jack realizes that everything is not quite so easy. When the profits began to fall sharply, he realized that he would have to do something. He enrolls in a course in business management, and there he learns about marketing, personnel management, self-discipline, personal relationships and many other things. The business was his, and he could do what he wanted, but to be successful, he had to make sacrifices and be

willing to work hard. Moreover, his extravagant life and his attachment to expensive whiskey began to give not only him, but also his business a bad name. If he wanted to stay on top, he realized, he would have to break with this!

In Jack we typically see the life of a sinful person (maybe me or you?) You try so hard to earn salvation, but the harder you work, the more you get into trouble. And when you realize that day that you are totally lost, God comes out of his great mercy and saves you without you deserving it.

It is at this stage where many "baby Christians" stumble badly, simply because they do not get the necessary support from fellow believers. Yes, his life has indeed changed, and he now lives under the grace of God, but that things always go smoothly is a myth! If one wants to lead a truly meaningful life of faith, hard work awaits you. The first step is to qualify yourself for the responsibility that now rests on your

shoulders. Yes, indeed you now have a big task, because as a believer you can't just sit back! The kingdom of God needs each of its citizens. It is not angels who expand the Kingdom, but ordinary believers! If you are in the dark about what to do, it's going to be a struggle, so it is essential that you get to know the Word. Bible study, courses, seminars, church attendance, cell groups - these are all ways to qualify yourself for the task.

The second very important factor is that you must break with sin. You naturally learn what sin is through the study you do of the Word. The next step is to apply what you have learned practically. It doesn't help if you have all the knowledge and keep plodding along in sin, because then you keep hanging, as it were, on the edge of death. "The wages of sin is death," Paul writes in Rom. 6:23. And if you continue to live in it, you descend lower and lower, until finally you are back exactly where you were before your conversion.

However, if you are willing to put your shoulder to the wheel, you begin to notice that the grace of God for you begins to become greater and greater. As you give more and more of yourself, you will be surprised to find that you receive back from God, many times more than you give yourself. Only then are the rest of Paul's words in Rom. 6:23 clearly for you: "The wages that sin gives is (yes) death, (but) the gift of grace that God gives is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." If God then gave us that huge gift of eternal life, wouldn't we also give everything to Him out of gratitude for it? And the bonus is that we ourselves are also enriched in the process! And remember: the Holy Spirit is there for us to guide us through all these things and give us strength! Allow Him to do it!

Prayer:

Lord, Your mercy on me is so great! Please give me the will and zeal to put everything in, and be a useful citizen of Your kingdom.

On the Potter's Wheel

Romans 9:19-29

The delicious aroma of fresh, wet clay hangs heavy in the air as I walk into the potter's workshop. I'm excited - what is he going to do this morning? In the showroom, the most elegant works of art are on display, and there is plenty to choose from. All the colors of the rainbow are represented there, and there are, from tiny to mammoth, cups, bowls, bowls, pots.

"Come and see," I am kindly invited behind the scenes, where the things happen. I step into a completely different world. Here it is messy, if one dares to use the word, because the floor is wet, and of all the glamor and glory of the showroom there is nothing to be detected here. Against one wall stands a giant oven, and I can already see how it glows from the inside with a heat that makes the hot place look like a filly. In the middle of the room stands the famous turntable, now

that's the place where the great miracle happens. Around this turntable it is anything but clean, I cringe when I step in a puddle of mud!

Suddenly my mind starts to wander to the time when I was a little boy, on Grandpa's farm at Waterfall Boven. There was a clay hole, just below the fountain. There was sticky, smooth blue clay, which my maters and I often dug out and got filthy dirty in the process. It was war clay, because clay battles were the order of the day. But sometimes it was also play clay, with which we made clay oxen and all kinds of wonderful things. I once tried to bake one of my works of art in Grandma's old coal stove oven, but it was a complete failure!

I am pulled back to reality when the potter takes a piece of clay and starts kneading it until it is wonderfully elastic and moldable. With opinion, he throws a piece of clay that he has carefully measured onto the wheel. As the wheel turns, his artful hands begin to

form something. "What's going to come out of this?" I wonder excitedly. His hands are wetted, and the clay makes them muddy, so that afterwards his hands and the clay on the wheel are one. Slowly the object takes shape, until he suddenly says: "There he is, it's done!"

I can't hide my disappointment. All he then made was a flat bowl. I wanted to see the potter make a complicated work of art, but now this! I do not understand! His talents are not being used! He reads the question mark on my face, and then he laughs: "This is going to be a colorful fruit bowl. I'm going to glaze it when the clay is dry, and then it's going to glow with the happiest colors."

In the preceding passage, Paul talks about election, and it leaves you with more questions than answers. Even Paul asks the question: "Is God then unjust?" Prof. Johan Heyns writes in his book: "Dogmatics" that God's grace is so great that He wants every person who believes in Him not to perish, but

to inherit eternal life. For this He chose man, and so you and I and every person who believes in Him are chosen. The sad thing - and I believe that the Lord shares the sadness - is that some people reject this incomprehensible, undeserved grace in Christ and choose their own way of self-justification through "good works."

The election, and with it many other issues, are incomprehensible to us, and we would like to dictate to God how things should happen. Paul compares God's actions to those of a potter. He has freedom to make with the clay what He wants, and shape it according to His hand. Sometimes what He does seems unfair to us. However, God's plan is so much bigger than our thoughts can ever process.

I sometimes want to ask: "But why didn't God make me a Billy Graham or an Angus Buchan?" But I soon forget that I was just a lump of dull clay before God began to shape me. He didn't need to do anything to me

because I was absolutely worthless to Him. Yet He graciously took this worthless piece of limp, muddy clay and fashioned something out of it that could be useful for His kingdom.

Of course, that shaping process wasn't always so fun, because I had to be made differently than I was used to, and to become usable I had to be glazed. I had to bake in a very hot oven (figuratively speaking). For me there was only one condition: that I had to be willing, because without my own consent God would not have started this process with me. What does this "consent" entail? To say "Yes" to God's call, and accept Jesus' gift of eternal life. But it also goes further: I must allow God to further shape me and make me useful. How do I do that? By leaving sin behind and qualifying myself for His service, but the most important thing is that I must be willing to submit to God's formation process, however painful it may be at times. It means that I trust Him, the Great Artist, with my life.

Prayer:

Lord, Creator of the universe - today I place myself unconditionally in Your artistic hands.

Tuesday 7 March

Grace and Peace to You

2 Corinthians 1:1,2

It is November 1973. Beneath my sheets, the cold, stony ground of Potchefstroom protrudes hard through my sleeping bag. The ground is bitterly hard and uncomfortable when I prop myself up on my elbow. But tonight I don't even think about the cold or the discomfort. All I see in my mind is my beloved. "In three weeks we'll get engaged," it bubbled inside me, "as soon as I get out of this military camp!" In the flickering light of the paraffin lamp, I draw my writing pad closer. How do you start a love letter? I have never written such a thing in my life! At school they taught me about business letters, not love letters! "My love," I begin. "We just landed in Potchefstroom, and I'm already missing you!" A stone under my elbow stung painfully, but I barely feel it. The only thing on my mind is the great love of my life. And then

I pour out my heart, all my yearning on the piece of paper.

Back then, pen and paper were the only means of communication! In Paul's time it was even worse: no telephones, mobile phones, whatsapp or e-mail. Not even a postal service! So when Paul begins to write his letter to the congregation in Corinth, he must make sure that every word is perfect, because someone will have to deliver it personally, and it will take that person weeks of travel.

"From Paul," he dictates. He struggles to see because his eyes are weak, and his handwriting leaves much to be desired. So someone has to do his writing, someone who can write well. And the recipients must also know that he is not writing this difficult letter on his own authority, but on the authority of God. The Holy Spirit laid it on his heart! "An apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God," he continues. Yes, not everyone accepts his apostleship, but he is firmly convinced that

he is very definitely an authorized ambassador of Jesus Christ! Didn't Jesus personally appoint him there on the road to Damascus? There he already received the instruction from Jesus to do what he is doing today! No, he was not appointed by man, but by God himself!

Moreover, at least he is not writing this letter on his own. Timothy also gives his input! Dear Timothy, what will he do without him? Every time there are problems somewhere, he can just rely on the young man to fix it. One day he will appoint Timothy as a pastor somewhere in a congregation. Yes, Timothy was with him when they founded the church in Corinth. That little man worked hard there in Corinth. Perhaps it would not be a bad idea to send Timothy to deliver this letter personally. Then he can also straighten things out a bit where things are now going completely awry. Or what about Titus? Yes, perhaps Titus is rather the right one to deliver the letter.....

"Also add: 'and from brother Timothy,' " Paul signifies to his secretary.

"To the congregation of God in Corinth," he continued dictating, as the secretary looked at him expectantly. Indeed it is God's church, even though there are so many problems. Sometimes it almost seems as if this congregation does not belong to the Lord at all, but He has a wonderful purpose fwith them, and Paul has to see again and again how the Lord provides and how He picks them up again, every time they fell. But more importantly, is the fact that this congregation, with all their flaws, is set apart for God. They are all saints, dedicated to the Lord. Isn't that what the church is anyway? Oh how great is God's mercy! If it were merely human, the congregation would have already fallen apart. But by God's great grace they were preserved, and it almost looks like they are at least now heading in the right direction again.

Paul suddenly remembers all the other congregations around Corinth: "and to all

who belong to the Lord in all Achaia." Everyone should read the letter, not just this one congregation. The other congregations must also take note, because it is not he, Paul, who writes the letter. He must be only writing it at the command of God, of the Holy Spirit who lays these thoughts on his heart!

"Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!" Indeed "Mercy" to the Greeks and "Peace" to the Jews! Thus begins this timeless letter, which is still extremely relevant to every congregation today, not just that of Corinth. Because it was inspired by the Holy Spirit, the letter is personally addressed to you and me too, and we must take to heart what Paul writes. So if he prays for me and you this morning for mercy and peace, it means that we can make it our own.

May that wonderful grace of the Lord, and the peace that passes all understanding, be yours today, you and me experience it very distinctly, every moment of the day.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for this wonderful letter, and that it is meant for me personally!

The Testament

Galatians 3:15-25

Uncle Richie draws up his last will with trembling hands. He was a successful businessman, and he built his company into an extremely profitable company over the years. But now Uncle Richie only has a short time left to live. He never married, so there is no one to inherit his wealth. However, there are quite a few hopefuls waiting to bait.

And then he dies. His will is locked in the lawyer's safe. One by one, the hopefuls visit the lawyer to find out how the will reads, but his lips are sealed. They try to persuade the lawyer to change the will in their favour, but he refuses. What is written is written. It's final!

One day the lawyer calls all the hopefuls together, and very dramatically he opens the sealed envelope with Uncle Richie's will. Inside is one sheet of paper with the words:

"To my nephew Benny I bequeath my entire business enterprise." That's it! Just that single sentence!

Benny is devastated: "What did I do to deserve this? I have never really done anything for Uncle Richie, I barely know him! I don't understand it!"

Everyone is outraged. They tried so hard to impress Uncle Richie, and they got nothing. "I'm going to sue!" shouted Jack. Suzie, a distant cousin, shouts in a shrill voice: "I'm going to fight it in the highest court!" Old Gilbert is enraged: "All my life I've slaved and toiled for old Richie. What do I get? Nothing!"

And Benny? He is bursting with gratitude! Then he makes a decision: "I'm going to try my best to make the company a huge success, and I'm going to plough the profits back into the poor community."

When we talk about the law and grace, a few people raise their eyebrows, because what was the purpose of the law of Moses then if it no longer applies to us today? Why did God

give the Law in the first place? Should we now completely, totally forget about the Law?

Paul put it very well when he compared it to a will. God revealed His will to Abraham. In it, among other things, He promised Abraham that all the nations would be blessed in his descendants. With this, God told Abraham (if you read between the lines) that He would make Jesus come from Abraham's descendants, and that Jesus would give complete acquittal.

As we have already seen, Abraham was a deeply religious person. Unfortunately, we cannot say this about all his descendants, and often they grieved the Lord very deeply. To cite one example: during God's rescue operation where He delivered them from the clutches of the Egyptians, Moses is on Mount Sinai in holy moments in God's presence, while the people wait in suspense at the foot of the mountain. The waiting becomes too much, and they begin idol worshipping while the sacred conversation between God and

Moses takes place. These people did not have an understanding of how to communicate with God, as their ancestor Abraham could do.

God had to intervene and lay down guidelines for them about what is expected of a person. He had to spell out to them how one should show honour to God, and how one should treat one's fellow-man. Still it was not enough, and later Moses had to introduce all kinds of religious rituals to focus the rebellious and stubborn Israelites' thoughts on God. Special festivals had to ensure that the people remember that it is God alone who can give salvation. After all, he saved them from the slavery of Egypt! Other rituals were to remind them of the holiness and purity of God.

Still, these things were not enough, and poor despondent Moses had to spell out every tittle and jot for the unruly bunch in fine detail, just as you have to lay down rules and regulations for a naughty child. They were

like a bunch of babies who had to be looked after every moment of the day. The purpose of the law was therefore to "babysit" this sinful bunch. The purpose of the law was never to give salvation. God's grace alone could give salvation. If the matter between you and God is right, then surely you will love God and automatically do the right things towards Him! The result of love means that it spills over to your fellow man, and that you will also give him the same love and respect.

In God's testament to Abraham, He promises Jesus. The law must serve as an "intermediary" until that promise is fulfilled. The promise has meanwhile been fulfilled and the promised Messiah has come. This obviously also makes the law "redundant". Does this mean that we no longer need to abide to the things contained in the law? No, certainly not to attain salvation! However, it must be a natural outcome to do these things naturally out of gratitude, because this is how one behaves towards God and one's fellow-man. The important point that Paul wanted to

bring home here is that the law is never a means of salvation, but that FAITH in CHRIST is the only way to salvation!

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for your work of salvation, because my best works would never have given me salvation!

From Lost to Saved

Ephesians 2:1-10

I was lost, actually even worse: DEAD! All as a result of my sins, but out of His great mercy God saved me and totally recreated me. For that reason I will live as God asks of me. In short, this is what is written in our Scripture passage. Sounds simple, but this short thought involves much more than meets the eye. Let me explain with an example.

A guy stops me at church with a memory stick in his hand: "Louis, I wrote a book. Won't you print it out for me quickly?" A simple request!

I push the stick into my computer, and already on the first page I see that it is full of spelling and language errors. This means that his writing must first be edited before it is at all publishable. It's my Mosbolletjie's big task to read the book word for word, red pen in hand and mark every mistake. It takes

weeks of painstaking, time-consuming hard-concentrating reading, because literally every comma has to be checked!

When she finally gets to the last page, I am pulled nearer. Now we go through the book together and discuss each mistake and rectify it. After this, it is printed out once more and then she reads him carefully a second time to look for mistakes that may have been missed somewhere. Only when she is done with this, can the final drafting of the book begin. Then comes the design of the cover that also takes a lot of time. Only after this can the printing process begin and the books be bound. After that, the books must be neatly cut with a giant paper-cutting machine. Trust me, it's hard work! "Print me a book quickly!" becomes a huge task that can easily last a month!

What all had to happen so that I, a lost sinner, could be transformed into a fruitful believer? It's like describing the process where raw cocoa beans are transformed into

heavenly Belgian chocolate! It doesn't just happen just like that! But the result..... Oh my gosh!

Think back a little about your own life: Before all these things happened, your life was very different. You had allowed yourself to be deceived by Satan, even though you might not want to admit it for a moment! Your sinful desires dominated your life so much that you simply did what you wanted. You faced damnation daily and often laughed at it. When you live in sin, you can't just give the devil all the credit for it, like Eve did. You sin because it's fun and because you let your desires deceive you. What were your true circumstances before your salvation?

You were dead because of your sins.

You followed the mainstream.

You were spiritually dead.

You were God's enemy.

You would be punished by God.

You were in the service of Satan.

You had been deceived by your sinful nature.

Yes, and then that wonderful thing happened in your life and out of God's great grace He saved you from this quagmire of lostness! Now the list looks somewhat different:

You are now the object of God's love.

You have been made alive with Christ.

You choose Christ's way.

You live forever.

You are a child of God.

You are saved by grace.

You are in the service of Christ.

You let the Spirit guide you.

However, to achieve this transition from one state to the other, it took a process that shook heaven to its foundations. It took the Creator of the universe to leave His throne and humble Himself among the filthy, sinful, Satan-serving brood. He, the One who holds the highest authority of all time, voluntarily

submitted Himself to ridicule, cursing and even torture to the point of death in order to be able to pay the full price for your and my salvation. It is pure grace, a gift from God that He gives freely and gratuitously. No person can ever boast of saying: "I changed my life from a lost, sinful life to a saved, God-centered life". Everything, everything is grace!

If I then see what God has done with my life, without me having earned anything from it, it can only lead to one thing: to say thank you again and again, not just with words, but with my whole life! It should be a natural reaction to serve and praise that God who saved me from the clutches of Satan, through everything I do. In other words, not to work for a reward, but purely because I want to say thank you and because I love Him deeply!

Prayer:

Thank you, thank you, thank you Jesus, for everything you have done for me, and for

saving me! Teach me to live out my gratitude practically!

God's Assignment

1 Timothy 1:1,2

To receive an assignment from God to perform a task is a wonderful privilege. Actually, that's putting it mildly, because it's pure grace! That the Lord chose me, while there are so many others who would probably do the job much better!

Oh, I can testify to loads of grace that I have already received from God, and I didn't deserve any of it! So 23 years ago I got the wonderful assignment to write devotionals, and I have never stopped. It was the most fun assignment ever, and I enjoyed every moment of it! Pure grace!

Many years ago, there was a young man who also experienced God's grace and received the most touching assignments. His name – Timothy. And here Paul writes a letter to him personally that would eventually be read by many millions of people. Isn't that

grace?!

Right from the start we read some very interesting things, and you immediately get the feeling of what the rest of the letter will be about. On the surface it is just a polite greeting, but there is much more to it than just a "Good morning!" We read in it of authority, love, calling, grace and hope.

Who was this young man, Timothy, to whom Paul actually wrote the very special letter? During Paul's second missionary journey, he stopped at Lystra, and there he met this young man. His mother was a Jew who converted, and his father a Greek. Timothy was already a believer then, and Paul saw right away that this man had a lot of potential as an evangelist. However, there was a small problem, call it an obstacle. Timothy was considered a Jew because of his Jewish mother, but with his Greek background he was never circumcised. He would therefore be refused entry to any synagogue, and Paul indeed began much of his missionary work in

synagogues. Timothy just had to close his eyes and undergo the operation. Then began his teaching under the guidance of the great master, Paul. What a wonderful privilege! And mercy! For Paul, Timothy was invaluable on his missionary journeys, and he was even later instructed to act as the teacher in Ephesus!

Getting an assignment from God involves, among other things, two very important elements, authority as well as love. We see this clearly in the opening of this letter. Paul writes about the great authority that God gave him in Jesus Christ. In the same breath, he speaks of Timothy as his "own child," and in his words we read of an intimate, caring and loving relationship between him and Timothy. So here we see an authoritative yet loving father-child relationship. If authority is not applied with love, it can be autocratic or bombastic!

Unfortunately, authority is mostly applied very differently. Authority often means that the

person who has it selfishly enriches himself and exploits those below him. From Paul's example we learn that you must exercise your authority selflessly and with great compassion and love, and that you must submit yourself to the same biblical precepts that you expect from those under your authority. And if you are under someone's authority, then you must always remember what Paul wrote to the Romans: "After all, there is no authority that does not come from God." (Rom. 13:1)

Something that goes hand in hand with authority is a calling. Leadership is a command from God, as we see very clearly in verse 1. You must also properly understand that if God calls you, you dare not refuse. Just ask Jonah! He wanted to refuse to carry out God's order! There are many different ways in which a believer can take leadership, and many areas in life where you can live it out. As parents, you have an assignment to take guidance over your children. In the church, you can lead as

minister, elder, cell group leader, service action leader, youth leader - the possibilities are endless. However, every form of leadership comes as a command from God.

The question is: how do I know that it is really God who has called me? Certainly the most important element is prayerful self-examination. The mere fact that you notice a void can mean that it is God who presses a matter on your heart. Along with that, God gives you the necessary gifts and equipment to carry out the task. Fellow Christians' recognition and encouragement will strengthen the certainty of God's calling or assignment.

However, leadership does not come from your own strength, but it is pure grace. God took the initiative with your salvation, and in the same way He takes the initiative with a calling or assignment to leadership. You must at all times realize that you are a leader only by grace, and that it has nothing to do with your good qualities, popularity or skills. So

pray for God's grace every time you act as a leader.

Finally, your leadership must portray HOPE. In your leadership, other people must always be able to see Jesus. Jesus' leadership must serve as the role model for your own leadership, and with it you must give hope to other people and portray God's wonderful grace!

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, thank you for the great grace that I may stand in Your service. Please teach me to live out my leadership in love according to Your will!

Slave for God

Titus 2:9-15

In Titus 2, Paul explains to Titus how believers should behave towards each other under their different circumstances. In verses 9 and 10 he talks specifically about slaves who believe.

It is worth noting that he is not advocating here that slaves be freed. Wouldn't that be the right thing? No, he preached precisely to the believing slaves that they had to live out them being slaves in their society in such a way that outsiders had to realize that Christians in no way wanted to overthrow or undermine the social order, but that even they, the lowest of the low, could help with the spiritual edification of the bankrupt community.

The things that Paul has to say here about slaves, we can apply in almost the same way to our workplace today. Indeed believers are

often treated like slaves, and sometimes it feels bitterly unfair. If the other workers are on strike, then you walk together in anger to try to root out this injustice that is being done to you. Such a strike is often accompanied by violence, and a lot of damage is done, and it costs the country millions! The fact is that employees who only look all the time where they can benefit themselves, suffer from a spiritual poverty, and that they cannot realize their responsibility towards God. At the same time, the company they work for suffers so much damage as a result of the strike that at the end of the day it also harms all the employees!

Of course, the employer must also fulfill his responsibility, and compensate the workers properly for their services. According to 1 Tim. 5:18 and Col. 4:1 they also have a responsibility towards God in this respect. But now Paul is speaking specifically to employees and he says that believers fulfill their calling to God by doing obedient, honest and reliable work. Through this, they not only

make a great contribution to the spiritual building of society, but they also give credibility to the Christian faith.

In this chapter, Paul gave a lot of instructions for men, women and slaves. The question is, what should my life look like? Can't I just sit in my house and occupy myself there with spiritual things? Why can't I just leave the evil society to their own devices? I could rather occupy myself with God! The fact is that God's grace is not only intended for the small group of believers, but for all people. He does not want anyone to perish.

But there is a condition to God's grace, that it only happens through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. We must remember that God very rarely uses angels or miracles to lead people to faith in Jesus. This is the task of ordinary believers like you and me. We therefore dare not withdraw ourselves from an evil society, or simply watch as society destroys itself. No, we must carry the message of salvation into this society so that

God's grace can come to fullness there as well. John 3:16 does not say: "God so loved the believers...", but "God so loved the **world...**" That's mercy!

However, we must be very careful that our vision is not set too narrowly. A believer's vision must be much broader than just the present world. Paul does not preach a social Gospel that only has the building of society in mind. If you want to see the Gospel this way, you can do a lot of damage, because it is simply a materialistic interpretation of the Gospel message. With such a message you are saying that sin is social wrongdoing, and that repentance is the confession of your transgressions towards people. That salvation is the change of social and political structures. In this way, Jesus becomes a revolutionary liberation figure!

In South Africa, we Christians have long ago already failed to fully show with our lives that the relationship with God through Jesus Christ has credible meaning for all people.

The time has now come for you and me to climb out of this funnel of spiritual impoverishment. Indeed God's grace has social implications and we must live these implications to the fullest. At the same time, however, we must also thoroughly realize that God's grace involves much, much more than just social implications. As believers, we are part of God's own people who have been cleansed of sins by Jesus' sacrifice, and who look forward to a day when this evil, broken world will be replaced by an absolutely perfect new world. This vision of the future may never be there without the practical living out of our Christian faith. As we realize the full implications of God's great grace, we must live out this grace practically as well as spiritually every day.

Every believer must thoroughly realize that continued constructive involvement in this present world of ours can only gain meaning in the long run through the wonderful expectation of eternal life. Beyond that, we can do absolutely nothing in our own

strength, but only through the powerful action of the Holy Spirit in us.

Prayer:

Lord, please help me to come out of my shell and make a difference to the evil world!

My Society and I

Titus 3:1-7

Paul's letter is specifically addressed to Titus. However, it also affects the congregation in Crete, and it is still equally relevant today for us in South Africa or wherever you may be! In this letter he touches on several points about the Christian life. In this section he touches on a very important point, namely your behaviour in society.

Every believer must remember very thoroughly that we do not live in isolation but that we are part of a society where you and I can be an instrument in God's hand to lead those around us to faith. Apparently however, some believers in Crete have completely withdrawn from society!

Believers' biggest headache is the dear authority that has been appointed over us. Just thinking about it will get you hot under the collar! Yes, there are indeed a handful of

believers in our parliament, but the rest are outspoken non-believers. Sangomas are sometimes even used to "cleanse" parliament!

The question is, what should I do about that authority? Should I just accept it? "Indeed!" said Paul. He emphasizes this emphatically for Titus and the believers in verse 1: "Remind them to be submissive to the authorities and all power!" Moreover, they must obey this authority. Those are harsh words! Especially when we realize that Crete's government may have been even more corrupt than our own! The fact is that submission to God also includes submission to the authorities. Last week we saw that Paul writes in Romans 13:1-7 that there is no authority that does not come from God! It is for this reason that we must not only submit to the authority, but even give our positive co-operation in doing all that is good (Titus 3:1). Of course, this does not mean that we can participate in the unholiness, but that we will live and behave in such a way that even a

non-Christian government would wish that all it's subjects were Christians!

However, what applies to the government also applies to other people. In verse two, Paul says that we must show kindness and true gentleness to all people. Who is this "everyone?" In Titus' case, it is the infamous Cretans, the same "liars, bad beasts, and lazy gluttons" he writes about in chapter 1.

Isn't it getting a little too much? How can I be expected to still act with a sweet smile on my face towards a bunch of villains? One's natural reaction is to avoid such people at all costs and have nothing to do with them. Remember: Jesus came to set the example when he went to party with a bunch of villains! For the sake of proclaiming God's Gospel of grace, we must make an effort to act towards these hopelessly lost people as God asks of us.

It's definitely not easy! Christianity is definitely not for sissies! After all, it means that if they speak ill of you, you will not

retaliate but will swallow your pride. This also means that you will try to defuse a situation that could lead to a fight. You should rather forget about your own interest and honor, as Jesus did. We must be unconditionally willing to put other people's interests first. In this way you display the image of Christ in a rotten society. In this way you can help to make God's grace visible in a credible way to people who need it very urgently. Indeed, in this way you can help to heal the sick society.

You and I must fully realize that we dare not be haughty towards the rotten society, and we dare not withdraw from it, because we were once there too! Paul writes in verse 3: "For we too were previously unwise, disobedient, lost, enslaved to all kinds of desires and lusts. We lived in malice and envy, we were hateful and hated each other." It's only God's great grace that saved us from this! The fact is that it is not because of our own good works or our own doing that we got salvation, but only God's great grace that could save us from this!

Now we come to the core message of the letter of Titus, namely that the goodness and love of God must appear to people (verse 4). If we want to help with the spiritual building of South Africa, we as believers must not only constantly criticize and point out the mistakes, but our main task is to confront people with God's goodness, love and mercy. God has called us to convince unbelievers of God's goodness with his Word and with our lives.

Three things must constantly motivate us for such a life: a sincere pity in your heart for the fate of the community that is enslaved to their own desires, and at the same time the realization of the absolute undeserved grace of your own salvation, as well as the realization that this same grace is the only salvation for the lost of our society!

Prayer:

Lord, please teach me to live Your grace in such a way every day towards other people that they can see Jesus' wonderful

love in me!

Always a Christian?

Hebrews 10:26-31

There is a frightening tension in the camp of the freedom fighters. How did the government find out where they were hiding? Last night they were shot apart! The leaders hold an urgent summit to unravel the mystery. Slowly things start to become clear. "Fernando!" boomed the leader. Fernando cringes. He jumps up and tries to run away, but it's already too late... Now everyone knows: Fernando is a traitor! He is grabbed roughly. After all, he is responsible for the death of several of their comrades during the previous night's skirmish! The firing squad is now his front land!

Terrible story! Terrible end for a poor person! But this man knew exactly what he was doing when he betrayed his peers, his soul mates. The ideology he once believed in became worthless to him, and he threw it away to identify himself with the enemy.

For the early church it was often a struggle for survival. Christian believers were exterminated by the cruel Nero, and they had to lead an underground existence to try to prevent anyone from finding out that they were Christians. Secret signs, such as the fish, were used to recognize each other as fellow believers. When someone converted from paganism, he put his own life on the line. Why did people brave so many dangers and oppression to adopt the Christian faith? Oh, of course the benefits were endless! Being a child of God meant that you were freed from the power of sin. Along with that, of course, eternal life and that you could know Jesus. It meant grace!

However, when a believer decided that he could no longer continue with this faith, this would have terrible consequences. Suddenly he would be a danger to all the believers he came to know, because if he were to return to paganism, the great enemy, then he could not help but prove his loyalty to them! This would mean that he would become a traitor

which could mean torture or death for any believer.

It is against this background that we must read the passage in Hebrews 10. The congregation depended on each other for their survival, and any apostasy/faithlessness was literally a matter of life and death. If we then read that apostasy would be punished so terribly, then we should not be surprised because apostasy was a very serious matter!

But what does the writer here want to say to you and me today? Does this mean that a person who has apostatized will be severely punished by God? Your immediate reaction is: “But it doesn't make sense! For God is merciful! Love! What happened to that?”

What does it mean to loose your faith? Suzie was a lost soul, trapped in the world's sins. One day she repented. Her life was on fire for Jesus, and she participated in all the congregation's activities. One day she was disappointed when things did not happen the way she wanted them to. She was angry, and

stayed away from the church. Eventually she came to the congregation less and less, and finally fell back into a life of sin. If someone spoke to her about her faith, he got a rebuff. Her trust in Jesus was gone! She became a traitor who rejoined the enemy. Some people say that it is impossible, others claim that it is indeed possible and that you can "lose your faith!"

What then happens to such a person? I was taught that once you are a Christian, that you will always remain a Christian, and that NOTHING can take us out of the hand of God! However, the Bible teaches us in very clear language that God is indeed infinitely merciful and saves, but that the punishment for unbelief is terrible. Matt. 25:41 describes the punishment as an eternal fire. "There they will weep and grind their teeth," says Jesus about hell in Matt. 25:30.

Is it then possible to "lose" your faith? Someone who goes astray and turns totally against God has probably never truly

accepted Jesus as Saviour. For such a person, eternal destruction is his destiny

If it might be you who you are reading here today, I can give you very good news today: there is still grace time! "Though your sins were scarlet," says Isa. 1:18, God will still save and forgive. God's mercy is a thousand times greater than His punishment. Even David and Paul, both murderers, were totally forgiven. Even if you have completely gone astray and denied Jesus, He is still standing there pleading with you to come back and become God's child again. Don't you want to say "Yes" to Him today?

Prayer:

Lord, I can so easily fall into sin and lose You. Please give me perseverance to stand and hold tightly to Your hand!

Faith and Deeds

James 2:14-26

"All, all is grace, undeserved favour alone." So the words of a famous old church song goes. And then I think to myself: if absolutely everything is just grace, and I know that I am chosen and saved and on my way to heaven, can I just sit back and enjoy the ride? I don't have to do anything further, because my faith, which by the way, the Holy Spirit gave me, will carry me through to eternity!

If you planted a patch of vegetables in your backyard, you can just sit back and pick the juiciest vegetables a month or two later without lifting a finger, right? In your dreams! That will not happen! The weeds will smother it, it will dry up and the pests will devour it long before you can harvest anything! If you want to reap the fruits of your labour, you will need to pamper that little garden, pull out weeds fertilize and water and drive away the bugs. Only then will you see results!

Many people also see their faith as an individualistic, personal matter that affects no one else. I read my Bible and pray, and no one should meddle with me, because my faith is MY faith! On Sunday I go to church and I listen to the minister's sermon, and after that I take the shortest possible way back to the car without interfering with the other people. My faith does not concern other people! It has nothing to do with anyone else!

That's not faith, says James Your faith must be visible and tangible and certainly alive, otherwise it is dead! The things you do must confirm your faith. The question is whether it is your good deeds that get you to heaven? Very definitely not, it's only God's grace! However, your faith is like your vegetable garden, because if you don't constantly work on it then it flops! James takes the example of a very pious congregation member who prays for prosperity for a person in need: "Go in peace, keep warm and be satisfied." The poor man who hears this blessing has nothing to wear! And he has nothing to eat! It

is not a blessing that he needs, but food and clothes! Then rather say nothing and just give something for his needs. Faith must turn into actions!

James goes further and he says that there might be a counter-argument where someone will boast that he has faith, but does nothing practical with it, while someone else does all the beautiful things without having faith. But then he dismisses this argument as nonsense, because faith is not something invisible that is only in the heart or head! Faith is something concrete that you live out practically while at the same time there is trust and a living relationship with the Lord.

Does my creed then mean nothing? According to Wikipedia, 78% of South Africans are Christians. If this is indeed the case, we have a very religious country, probably the most religious in the whole world! However, James says that a confession of faith alone does not say that

you are a believer. There is a very beautiful example in Mark 5:7, where a possessed man came up with the most beautiful confession of faith, when he addressed Jesus as "Jesus, Son of the Most High." However, he was terribly afraid of Jesus because it was an evil spirit in him that spoke. Several other cases are also recorded where evil spirits recognized Jesus as the Son of God. James says that the evil spirits (and by implication also the devil) believe in God and acknowledge Him.

What makes their faith, as well as that of 78% of South Africans, different from the faith we have? Abraham is mentioned as an example of what true faith should entail. He trusted God so unconditionally that he was even willing to sacrifice his only son and heir at God's request. This is full, unconditional trust! After all, that's what faith is! Furthermore, we also see the practical doing. Abraham didn't just trust, but physically took his son and tied him on the altar. He was about to sacrifice his son when God stopped

him!

The story is told of the tightrope walker who put on a show at Niagra Falls. His rope was strung over the dangerous falls, and he danced over it to great applause. Then he asked the audience if they thought he would manage to carry someone over the waterfall on his shoulders. Everyone agreed that he was good enough to do it. However, when he asked for a volunteer to climb on his shoulders, no one was willing to risk it. True faith is putting the action to the word.

Indeed our deeds count with God. No, it is not your actions that save you, because as we saw at the beginning, absolutely everything is grace. It is only the merit of the redemption of Jesus that can save us. However, the question is what do you do with that faith that God gives you? Do you hide it under the proverbial bucket or let it bloom? The choice is yours!

Prayer:

Thank you for the faith you have given me,

Lord. Please also give me the zeal and strength to live that faith to the fullest!

The Seventh Seal

Revelation 8:1-13

We started with Genesis, and throughout the Bible we saw God's amazing grace. We conclude this series with something from Revelation. However, we have only touched the tips of the hippo's ears, because there is much more to God's grace than what we have described.

Revelation must always be read in its proper context, otherwise you can easily misunderstand it. First of all, Revelation is not simply a large number of predictions about the future, but that it was written especially as encouragement for the believers. We must also realize that it is riddled with symbolism as well as that it is an apocalyptic book. Then you must always keep the great message of Revelation in the back of your mind. As children of God, we must therefore look at it positively, and beyond the horror of judgment, see the

merciful God who came to save you and me from the terrible judgments. We must also see a merciful God who, even while the judgment is in progress, still gives the sinner another chance to repent!

Our text today is about Revelation 8 where the Lamb opens the seventh seal, something that suddenly causes a deathly silence in Heaven. Everyone hold their breath for the horror that is to follow. Even the angels who are busy praising God remain silent for half an hour, while the tension builds.

Then seven angels appear, each with a trumpet. Any moment now the terrible judgments are going to hit the earth. But before that can happen, another angel must come with a censer. He stands at the altar and pours coals and incense together, so that their delicious fragrance fills the room.

Have you ever sat in the veldt by a campfire late at night, while the night owls sing to you? Then you throw some dry Sicklebush twigs on the glowing coals. The delicious,

breathhtaking scent that the Sicklebush gives then fills the bush around you. It's heavenly! Then the night looks so much more beautiful, and the stars so much brighter, and then you can't help but praise and worship the Creator of it all in a jubilant song that makes your heart beat wildly.

Thus the fragrance of the incense filled the whole room together with the prayers of the faithful. Don't you and I also pray every day that the terrible injustice that dominates the world, all the violence and crime, murder and wars should come to an end? Our prayers do not fall on deaf ears! God hears our prayer, because it rises to Him like the fragrance of that incense.

The first angel came forward. He raised his trumpet and blew. This was the announcement of God's first judgment. The indescribable devastation and horror that followed clutches your heart. But for the believers, and especially those who suffered so terribly under the tribulation, the sound of

this trumpet is the most beautiful music ever! Hail mixed with fire and blood destroys a third of the earth. Terrible! But even in this we still see God's great and loving grace, because two thirds of the earth are still given a chance to come to their senses.

When the second trumpet sounds, a third of the sea is struck, and it becomes blood. It reminds one of the deadly red tide that sometimes hits the West Coast, where the sea literally turns red from a certain type of plankton that poisons everything. John's vision is something like a burning mountain that is thrown into the sea. Asia Minor was well known for volcanoes, where the glowing lava rolls down the mountain slopes. Just think of the devastation that such a volcano caused to the city of Pompeii, where all its inhabitants died a gruesome death. How much greater will this judgment of God be! But once again, God's grace is still there, because two-thirds of the earth is given another chance.

When the third trumpet sounds, a burning star falls from Heaven, and a third of all the fresh water sources are contaminated. Involuntarily you think of the great concern that pollution of our rivers causes. Much of our fresh water is becoming undrinkable!

So by the way, the name of the star mentioned here is Wildeals, or in English, Wormwood. Some doomsayers claimed that an invisible planet called Wormwood would destroy the earth in December 2012. It never happened!

Even the heavens are not spared, and when the fourth trumpet sounds, the sun, moon and stars are struck so that darkness hangs over the earth like a black blanket. But there is always a grace period, because once again it is only a third of the things that are hit.

Then the eagle flies high in the sky and warns all the inhabitants of the earth, i.e. the unbelievers of the terrifying things that are yet to come. God's judgment is directed

against the unbelievers, and the eagle that flies high is visible to all, so that no one can say that he was not warned. God's decisive judgment is striking, but His tolerance and mercy, to still try to persuade the unbeliever to come to his senses, is even so much greater!

Prayer:

Lord, this morning my prayer rises to You like a delicious incense, together with that of millions of other believers: come quickly, Lord Jesus, and put an end to the terrible injustice on earth!

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