

The Life Changing Mercy of Jesus Christ

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[0 : 00] I think it's fitting and appropriate that Psalm 51 is our lectionary psalm for this week. Because I think the events of this past week should bring us to our knees.

! I think the assassination of Charlie Kirk should bring our nation to our knees. You know, whatever you think about his politics, that's immaterial.

The fact that you have a man who is a man of faith, who was engaging in the free exchange of ideas on a university campus, and that man is gunned down, presumably because of his beliefs. I think that should bring us to our knees. I think it asks very real questions about the state of our country, where that kind of political violence is becoming more and more normal.

And of course, that wasn't the only shooting that day. There was another shooting in Colorado at Evergreen High School. A young man who had been radicalized online.

[1 : 12] You know, a good friend of ours was a graduate of that high school. That hit hard for her. Not to mention there's anxiety in our city.

There's tremendous anxiety in our city right now. Frequently, there's an ICE checkpoint two blocks from our house. And we have people we know and love who are no longer leaving their homes because they're afraid if they do, they will get detained.

There's a lot more I could say. Secondly, my point is not to keep on the negativity here. It's to say this, is that I believe that this is a time when we desperately need hope.

It is a time when we need reassurance. It is a time when I believe we need to come together as a church. It is a time for us to seek unity.

And it is a time for us to step up and to step into this moment. And it's a time for us as a church to be reminded fundamentally of what is true.

[2 : 22] Because it is so easy to get disoriented and lose perspective. That's why as I was reflecting on the lectionary passages for this week, the words that the Apostle Paul writes to Timothy in this passage in 1 Timothy, to me these words were such a gift.

I hope they are similarly a gift to you. Because this is a place where Timothy is facing all kinds of challenges, the kinds of things that would make him probably prone to feel very discouraged, very hopeless, and like maybe it's not even worth the effort.

And Paul is writing this letter to encourage him as he does the hard work of ministry in Ephesus, where there is an enormous amount of confusion and hostility.

And Paul is essentially writing to tell him to keep going, to fight the good fight. And he begins in the letter by reminding him and reminding us that when everything else seems uncertain, there is one unshakable foundation, and that is the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

So that's what we're going to be talking about this morning, specifically the depth, the breadth, and the ultimate purpose of the grace of Christ.

[3 : 39] Let's pray. Our Lord, we strongly desire to have the kind of encouragement that Paul offers here.

We desire to receive it, and we desire to know what this means for us, Lord. How do we live in the face of these atrocities? Lord, there's so many more things we could list, so many more reasons that we might be coming here this morning feeling anxiety, or maybe even feeling hopelessness.

Lord, please, based on your promises to us, on the power of the Holy Spirit and the name of Jesus Christ, make your word known to us this morning.

Nourish us. Strengthen us. It's in the name of your Son that we pray. Amen. So first of all, the depth of God's grace.

If you know Paul's story at all, you know that he gained early notoriety as a star pupil among the Pharisees. He gained further notoriety and began to build his career as a zealous persecutor of

Christians.

[4 : 47] He describes his work doing this in Acts chapter 22. This is Paul speaking. He says, He refers to himself as someone who persecuted Christians to the death.

If we look at verse 13, he says, I was a blasphemer. I was a persecutor. I was an insolent opponent. What's interesting about that is blasphemer, that's sins of speech.

He denied Jesus and said horrible things about Jesus. Persecutor, those were the actions that Paul committed against other Christians. But insolent opponent, that Greek word is very interesting. And commentators say that really gets at the heart of it. That's actually where Paul is saying to translate it into a more approachable language.

Not only did I do these things, but deep down in me there was a part of myself that enjoyed doing these things. I got something out of it, a certain amount of satisfaction from doing this to these Christians.

[6 : 05] Now that's a very, very vulnerable thing for the Apostle Paul to admit. I was a violent person is another way that's sometimes translated. So we ask, what is Paul's point?

Well, in this passage, he famously refers to himself, not only as a sinner, but as the foremost sinner. Or as it's sometimes translated, the chief of sinners.

The worst of the worst. So what is Paul's point in sharing this story? Here it is in verse 16. He says, I received mercy for this reason. Here's why he's being so vulnerable.

That in me, as the foremost, foremost sinner, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

So what's he saying there? He says these things happened as an example. As an example for whom? As an example for the people who would one day come to believe the gospel.

[7 : 14] People including, by the way, us. As an example for all people for all time. And what's the example that he thinks is being said here? If there's hope for someone like me, then there's hope for someone like you.

That's his point. You know, this reminds me of the testimony of the late Chuck Colson. Many of you familiar with him. He was a political operative under Nixon who ended up doing time in federal prison after the Watergate scandal.

Just like Paul, he encountered the grace of Jesus during that season of his life, and it radically changed his life. And he ended up founding Prison Fellowship International.

Some of you, many of you are not only familiar, but maybe you've worked for that organization or ministries connected to it, dedicated to sharing the gospel with prisoners and supporting their families and promoting restorative justice.

But listen to what he says here. I love this from him. He says, this is Colson talking about his own life. The great paradox of my life is that every time I walk into a prison and see the faces of men and women who have been transformed by the power of the living God, I realize that the thing God has chosen to use in my life is none of the successes, achievements, degrees, awards, honors, or cases I won before the Supreme Court.

[8 : 42] That's not what God's using in my life. Listen to this. What God is using in my life to touch the lives of literally thousands of other people is the fact that I was a convict and went to prison.

That was my great defeat. The only thing in my life I didn't succeed in. I mean, just let that sit with you for just a minute.

Oh, room full of accomplished, amazing people. Just let that marinate for a little while. Right? Think about that. My goodness, we're an impressive bunch.

We have all of our accomplishments, all of our talents, all of our credentials, all of our accolades. And God is the kind of God who loves to look past all of those things.

He sort of, you know, moves the degree out of the way, moves the promotion, and moves the advancement, and this credential and that credential. And he gets all the way down, and there's that low point.

[9 : 56] There's that moment that we hope nobody ever finds out about. There's that thing that keeps us awake at four o'clock in the morning because we would give anything to go back and do it over a different way.

That thing that we're ashamed of, that thing that made us feel worse than worse. And God's the kind of God who shuffles all the stuff out of the way. He points down to that thing, and He goes, I can use that.

That's what I'm going to use. That's how I'm going to make my name known. That's how I'm going to glorify myself. That's how I'm going to change the lives of the people around you. It's through that thing, the thing that right now you're trying to hide.

Pretend it never happened. That's the kind of God we worship, friends. A God who delights in using the least likely people to do the most amazing things.

A God who is able to use our weaknesses and our failure to glorify Himself and make His strength known. The kind of God who can bring victory out of defeat.

[10:59] The kind of God who can bring life out of death. If we ever forget that, we have only to look to the cross. I'm nervous about the cross falling over. I'm going to do this. We're having stand issues.

If any carpenters are out there who can build a stand for the cross, we'd appreciate you. But this is the kind of God we worship. So, friends, for those of us who feel right now weak, hopeless, insecure, anxious, if we're tempted to look around in our world or our city and feel like everything's falling apart and wonder, is God even there?

Does God care? Is God doing anything? This is the kind of God we worship. This is His heart. This is His character. I actually think that this time of hardship is going to be used in the same way that God used Paul's weakness.

In the same way that God used Chuck Colson's weakness. So, to the extent that we are struggling or to the extent that we feel weak right now, what story might you one day tell about this time of your life?

How might God use this to work not only in you but through you? I believe, if nothing else, God is going to use this to soften our hearts, to teach us about His grace, and to glorify Himself.

[12:28] That is the depth of God's grace. Paul says, if there's hope for me, there's hope for anyone. The breadth of God's grace is equally striking.

In verse 15, the saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. Paul has roughly five times in his pastoral letters where he refers to a trustworthy saying.

We can reasonably assume that these were little summaries of gospel truth that were already in circulation in the church at this time. Part of the catechesis or the education reformation of believers involved these little nuggets of truth, distillations of gospel truth.

And so, he refers to one of those here. He says, this saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I'm the foremost.

So, not only can God save and restore anyone, His grace, Paul says, is available to everyone. It is available to everyone.

[13:40] And he says down in chapter 2, verse 4, God desires all people to be saved. And to come to the knowledge of the truth. The key here, if we are paying attention to what it says is, do we believe that we need grace?

That's the real key. God's grace is available to everyone. His desire is for everyone to come to saving knowledge of the truth. But Jesus came to save a certain kind of person.

Someone who knows they are a sinner. Someone who knows they need grace. It's available to people who know they're sinners. Now, admitting that you are a sinner is not just about admitting, yeah, here and there I mess up, I make mistakes, I do things I regret, I do the bad things, and I know I should do the good things.

But sometimes I do the bad things. That's not really what it's about. Objectively, you might actually do a lot of good in the world. By most people's standards, if we look at your life, you might actually live a good life, and you might actually do a lot of good and make a difference in the world.

That's a misunderstanding of the concept of sin. Sin, in the words of Alexander Schmemmann, is our lack of hunger for God and God alone.

[14:58] That's a much better way of thinking about it. It is our lack of hunger for God and God alone. It is, in other words, our ability to live in the world that God made as though God doesn't exist.

It is the fact that that is frighteningly easy to do. In fact, it is our default, is to live in the world that God made as though God doesn't exist.

That is sin. And for that reason, it is often the good people, it is often the people who are, the world would look at and say, that person has it all together, it's often those people who are the most closed off to grace, who are the most resistant to the power of grace.

The people who do a lot of good in the world, the people who are successful, the people who have the things that they need, the people who are well-liked and respected and have friends and a network of support.

A person like that can live their entire life completely oblivious to the fact that God made them after his own heart and that their entire purpose, the reason they are here and actually the purpose of creation itself is to glorify God.

[16:19] If you live a good, happy, self-sufficient life, you can go your whole life and never even ask the questions that might lead you down that path. To put it another way, the greatest obstacle to the work of God's grace in our lives is our self-sufficiency and our, at the end of the day, our pride.

It is our pride. The reason Paul has such a tremendous grasp of God's grace is because his pride has been stripped away.

It's because he has a tremendous grasp of his own sin. That's what goes together, right?

You may have heard that if you, it's interesting, if you look at Paul's letters as they were written chronologically, you can see how he refers to himself over time because the letters in the New Testament aren't necessarily in chronological order.

So in one of the earlier letters, 1 Corinthians, Paul refers to himself as, quote, least of the apostles. I'm an apostle, but I'm the least of the apostles. He was kind of added on at the end, you know.

[17:31] And he used to be, you know. Then in Ephesians, which is written after 1 Corinthians, he refers to himself as less than the least of the saints.

So he's not referring even to his apostleship anymore. He's referring to just among all Christians. Forget apostles. I'm less of the least. And then here in 1 Timothy, which is one of his final letters, we can assume that Paul was probably an old man at this point.

He refers to himself as the foremost sinner. His trajectory of growth, the evidence in the sign of maturity in Paul's life, is that as he grew more mature, his pride, his self-sufficiency, his sense of his own greatness, diminished.

And his awareness of his sin increased. And as his awareness of his own sin increased, his experience of God's grace increased.

This is what Christian maturity looks like. It is gradually over time peeling back the onion layers of our heart, recognizing just how deep sin goes, just how easy it is for us to functionally deny the Lord in the way we live, to forget that we were created to hunger for him and him alone, and to realize more and more how that, in a sense, infects every aspect of our lives.

[19:00] And the more we realize that, the bigger the cross gets, the bigger grace becomes, and the more we experience it. So Christian growth is in many ways growth downward.

It's growth in humility. If you want a litmus test for your own heart to know whether pride and self-sufficiency are issues for you, and I spent some time thinking, like, what are some good indicators in my life that pride has taken hold in a given situation?

Here's one test that might work for you. How quick are you to take offense? Are you someone who is easily offended? That's certainly a giveaway in my life.

I want to be clear, being offended is not the same thing as being hurt. You know, being hurt is not something we can always control. If someone says or does something that's hurtful, I can't, I didn't, that pain just happens.

It's a response to the hurt. But being offended is a choice. Being offended is something we choose to do. And I think that often when we choose to become offended, it's a self-protective mechanism.

[20:18] we're responding by putting up walls because being hurt makes us feel vulnerable, it makes us feel weak and powerless.

Those are bad feelings. But being offended, that makes me feel righteous. That makes me feel impervious. That makes me feel untouchable. I'm offended.

You know, so righteous anger feels good and powerful. It feels good to turn ourselves into victims and other people into villains. It feels good to see the world that clearly.

That's comforting. It feels safe. If we find ourselves being easily offended, that usually means that we have an inflated view of ourselves.

You know, we're sort of living our lives like overfilled balloons. You know, you fill a balloon up too much and it becomes extremely fragile.

[21 : 16] You know, someone comes along and just brushes up against you ever so slightly with a comment, something they did or didn't do, some little perceived slight, right?

And that's all it takes, just the slightest friction and you blow up because you're an overfilled balloon. It doesn't matter if it's intentional or unintentional, you burst over it.

I would say by contrast, I think that Christians by and large should be completely unoffendable. I think that we should live our lives and be completely unoffendable.

Number one, because we know first and foremost that every legitimate wrong that is committed against us, even the legitimate ways that people sin against us, are also and ultimately committed against Jesus.

You know, that's, that's the curious thing that Jesus says to Paul when he encounters him on the Damascus Road. Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

[22 : 28] Saul was persecuting Christians, not Jesus. Jesus says, when you did that to them, you did it to me. The worst offense that Paul ever committed was the fact that as he persecuted Christians, he was persecuting Jesus himself.

Jesus says, that's how closely connected I am to my followers. So anytime someone wrongs us as Christians, they sin against us, they're actually sinning against Jesus. and Jesus doesn't respond by getting offended and getting filled with righteous indignation.

Doesn't respond like a victim. Doesn't respond by hurling it back in people's faces. He responds with mercy and grace.

Right? He has more of a right to be offended than anyone. So that's the first reason I think we should be unoffendable. The second reason is if we think of ourselves the way Paul does, if I really think of myself as not only a sinner, but on par probably the foremost or among the foremost, if anybody really knew, if I really thought of myself the way Paul does, and if I'm seeking to be mature as a Christian, that's the direction I want to go.

If I really thought that, you know, then if somebody comes at you, if you think that and somebody comes at you and say they directly accuse you and hurl all kinds of accusations at you, and you did this and you did that, and say they're just coming at you with everything they've got.

[24 : 04] Even if all of those particular accusations are completely off base and wrong, even if they have no idea what they're talking about, and it's all smoke, and it's all hot air, there's no substance to it.

Because I'm a foremost of sinners, I know how easily it is for me to be self-deceived, I know how easy it is for there to be blind spots in my life, I know how many times I thought an area of my life was free from sin only to realize there's sin all over it, I've had enough experiences of being humbled and have to confess things that I didn't see until somebody pointed it out, that even if I think that person is completely off base, even if I think there's nothing here, we should always pause and ask ourselves, is there some little kernel of truth here, something in my heart that I do need to pay attention to?

And maybe this person is coming with the worst possible motives and intentions, it's not really about them. Is this an opportunity for me to do a little deeper self-reflection?

Is there some nugget or kernel that I need to be aware of and I need to repent of? So you say, thank you, I'll take that into consideration. I'm going to spend some time reflecting on that.

I'm going to pray about that. And I'm going to ask what Psalm 51 says, that I want God to renew me from the inside out, to make me aware of the things that I need to repent of, to create a clean heart inside me.

[25 : 34] So pride, that was a little excursus into the world of the offense culture that we live in, but it is directly connected to pride.

And pride is the great obstacle to grace. So growing in grace means doing away with pride and growing in humility. So when we are wronged and slighted, instead of choosing offense, I think we see those as opportunities for spiritual growth.

That's a great way to get back at somebody who comes at you. Thank you. This is a great opportunity for me to grow in grace. grace.

So if we looked at the depth of grace, we've looked at the breadth of grace, finally we need to remember what is all this for, the purpose of grace. As Paul reflects on the grace in his own life that he's experienced, it moves him to worship.

And it's almost as though he's writing this, he just sort of spontaneously breaks out into praise. There's a good chance maybe that actually Luke was his secretary and Luke's writing this as Paul is dictating, which is commonly the way letters like this would be written.

[26 : 48] And I love to imagine Paul sitting there dictating Luke's writing, and Paul just spontaneously, he's talking about the grace of God in his life, even though he's the foremost sinner, and then he spontaneously breaks into these words.

To the king of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever, amen. And I can imagine him doing that and Luke kind of turning around and being like, do you want me to write that down too, or are you just having a moment, you know?

And Paul says, no, write it down. Write it down. There's this moment where it all seems to well up in Paul, and then he breaks out into spontaneous praise.

And I think, you know, for all of us who feel like the world is falling apart, we desperately, friends, need a new perspective. We need a God-centered perspective, and that can only be gained through worship.

It can only be gained through worship. And look at what Paul praises about God and what it reminds us of when we think of God. If you look at verse 17 and what he says, he says, first of all, that God is the king of the ages.

[27 : 54] He is completely in control. He's in control of the past. He's in control of the present. He's in control of the future. It may not feel like it or look like it, but God is in control.

And nothing that is happening now is not outside of his grasp. And then Paul says, God is immortal. He's not subject to decay and entropy and death.

And one day, in fact, he's going to bring an end to decay and death. He says, God is invisible. He's not like the gods that we make. He's not like our idols that we make out of wood or stone or plastic or metal or silicon.

He's the God who makes himself known through the mountains, through the oceans, through the forests.

Look around. Everything you see, all of the beauty of creation, that is how God makes himself known. His fingerprints are everywhere. There's no possible way you could make something out of stone or wood or metal that could encapsulate that, unless by chance, unless you were to look at your fellow human being.

[29 : 03] If you want to see an image of the invisible God, it is reflected and refracted through human beings. If you want to see it in its ultimate expression, we see it in the face of Jesus Christ.

And then he goes on, God is the only God. He has no rivals. There are no competitors. There is no epic battle of good and evil, and I hope God wins.

God has no rivals. There is only one God. Anyone or anything we build our life on apart from him is inferior and will crumble.

So when we focus on ourselves, when we focus on our circumstances, when we read the latest headlines and the atrocities that they contain, anxiety and fear grow.

We should read the headlines. We should be engaged and know what's happening in the world. We should be involved in doing what we can to bring goodness and truth into the world. But when we focus only on those things, anxiety and fear grow.

[30 : 12] Worship is meant to reorient us back to what is true, back to the God who created all of this. So in worship, we are reminded what is true. Through worship, we're able to see the world the way it really is.

And the purpose of grace is to bring us back to worship. So often, friends, God will allow us to experience hard things, to bring us to our knees, to remind us that we need to come back to him and worship.

So we take the New York Times and we take the Atlantic and we take all the news articles that we're reading and we take all of the things that are happening.

We take all of that and we bring it to the cross. And we bring it before the Lord. And we say, we can't make sense of this. We don't know how to fix it. But you do.

And you will. We come back to God because only God can make sense of and offer hope to a world like ours. So as I said at the beginning, things are hard right now in our society.

[31 : 18] There's a lot of anxiety. I think there's a tremendous opportunity here for the church. A tremendous opportunity. Especially the church in the West. If you've been reading the articles and

headlines and looking at the statistics and the numbers, in places like the U.S., in places like the U.K., there looks to be a kind of quiet revival happening.

People by the hundreds, by the thousands are coming back to faith and they are coming back to the church. People are saying, has secularism, the march of secularism stopped?

Are things turning around? And it seems to be that that is the case. I believe it's because the empty promises of secularism are not delivering the peace and security and meaning and hope that people want and need.

Instead, we have more violence and division and nihilism. No way to make sense of it all. So I think there's a tremendous opportunity for the grace of Christ.

And I think that we're called to be people of grace who live out that grace and put that grace on display. To remember, as we said, the depth of grace means that God can use the most hopeless situations, the people we least expect, to do the most amazing things.

[32 : 44] So what does it look like for us to make our weakness available for God to use? The breadth of grace extends to the whole world, but we need to be humbled in order to receive it.

You know, may we be people who are marked by humility. The world does not need more pundits. The world needs more people pointing to Christ. And then the purpose of grace is to remind us why we're here, to worship and glorify the God who has made us.

Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we thank you that all of this is true regardless of how we feel in the moment.

That these are the bedrock truths upon which reality itself rests. And these are things that will be true long after all of these present realities are forgotten.

Lord, your word is eternal. Your grace is eternal. And Lord, because you have made us, we are eternal. So we will be there in that place, but all of the present struggles, to quote your apostle, will be like a light momentary affliction compared to the weight of that eternal glory.

[33 : 58] Lord, we pray that you would give us the strength and the courage to be people of grace here and now, pointing to that time yet to come until Christ comes again. In his name, amen.