

John 1 1-18

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[0 : 0 0] It's a very great pleasure for me to be with you this evening, tell you something very briefly of the work of EMF and then the privilege is mine to preach the word of God to you.

I have a particular affinity with Scotland in as much as I worked in Scotland some years ago in the fishing industry in a little place called Tarbert in Mull of Kintyre. I skippered two trawlers there over a period of years and I do love Scotland very much. It's my fourth visit to the island of Lewis and I have to say there has developed over these years a love affair with the island. I love it very, very much indeed. It just fits with me some way or another. You can work that out for yourself whether it's Celticness or whatever but I do love the island of Lewis. The continent of Europe has to its great dishonour an awful boast.

The boast is that relative to its size it's the most secular continent on earth. We number almost 800 million people and out of 800 million people there's only about 1.7% it's reckoned that are true believers in Jesus Christ. That sets us at the top of the league of the most ungodly continents on earth. That's an amazing figure I'm sure you'll agree. Especially whenever you stop to consider the great blessing that God has bestowed upon this continent over generations of time.

even from the first century places like Philippi, Corinth, Thessalonica all within Europe. The blessings that God has granted to us especially when we consider the 16th century the reformation through men like John Calvin, Martin Luther, Knox, Biza and so on. And then the period of the Puritans, the Covenanters and the various awakenings that have taken place right across Europe in the centuries following. And yet at this time this is the position that we occupy. And I suppose I can say as coming from Northern Ireland, you being a Lewis people, sometimes we're inclined to think of other places not in too dissimilar a way from our own. But that would be very, very wrong of us because you just need to cross the channel from Northern Ireland to mainland Scotland. And what can I tell Scottish people about Scotland? But I was taken just a little while back to visit the grave of John Knox in St. Giles. And to my great horror, I had to stand beside the Citroen C4 in order to have my photograph taken as the car was parked on top of the stone that marks the grave of Scotland's greatest sun. England is a wasteland. Wales is not a lot better. You cross the English Channel to France and France is now happily described as a secular country. EMF is seeking to work in 16 countries right across Europe. We work as far north as Norway, far south as Sicily, far to the east as Ukraine and Belarus. And as far to the west where we've got two Hungarian speaking congregations in London. And the way we actually function is that we support indigenous pastors. So we don't send missionaries per se. It has been done before. But generally speaking, our practice, our policy is to support men where they are. And I'm sure again, you'll agree that that's much more beneficial than taking someone like me to teach me Polish or Hungarian or something like that, which would take an inordinate amount of time and then to send me to a country such as Poland or Hungary. But even then I might be well so very ignorant of the of the particular culture of the country. And that's a big problem also. So EMF has carved out for themselves. We have led down this particular rule, generally speaking, that we support indigenous pastors right across the continent of

Europe. And as the churches grow by the grace of God through the ministry of these men, and they're able to support the pastor, our support diminishes. And we're quite happy to become redundant and move on then to some other needy situation. But I will ask you please to consider Europe. I was saying to your good minister this evening that I spent 23 years in the ministry. And I have to say to my own great shame, I had a very narrow view of mission. And I think generally speaking, it's the case right across the Christian board that we have quite a narrow view of mission. I wouldn't suggest that everyone would have been like me, but I did consider a mission, not uniquely, but I considered it to be the work of those who would go to darkest Africa or maybe to the

more remote places in Asia. But I seldom ever did give very much thought to the continent of Europe, of which we've been reminded so well this evening that we are part. And our responsibility then begins where we are. And I would press upon you the great need of seeing the need in our own continent, in our own country, your own country of Scotland, the island of Lewis, Harris, and to understand that sinners are sinners, whether they be red, yellow, black, white, wherever they are. Whatever they have been born into, they need this gospel, they need this Christ, they need the forgiveness of God. And the great ministry of the church is to the nations to take this glorious message of Christ crucified and raised from the dead, to tell sinners that there is a God who is willing to save them from his own pure wrath. And I would press upon you this evening to consider the continent of Europe, maybe in a way or to a degree that you've not done before, but to see it as a continent of great need, profound needs.

[6 : 21] It was described at one time to be Christian. It has been dominated, especially the central part of Europe by Catholicism, by a medieval church system. And yet it's questionable whether the continent was ever really justifiably called Christian. And I would ask you please to remember, to remember the work of EMF. We stand in need of your help, your prayers, your support. And I unashamedly ask you this evening to remember it. It's a great work. It's a work that I commend to you. I would ask you please to pray for us. We need the prayers and the support of God's people, maybe as never before. Some of our missionaries, particularly those in the eastern part of Europe, face many, many difficulties of the kind. Thank God we know nothing. But they labor, they labor hard, they labor long, and they seek to establish gospel churches. So I would commend it to you.

Your minister has kindly read the scripture that I propose to address you from this evening. Let me turn your attention to the gospel of John chapter one. I want to speak this evening on the matter of grace.

I want to speak this evening on the other day. We Christians have a language all of our own, haven't we? That's a good language. There are terms that we use, and there are wonderful terms. They are full of meaning. But sometimes, just sometimes, I personally wonder if we fully understand the meaning of the terms that we use. Certainly, I can speak for my own country in Northern Ireland. We do like to package things very neatly. We present some things, especially the things of God, in little sound bites at times, which sadly, tragically, are not at all sound. But it's the task of the preacher to preach the word that men and women should understand it. So it's not a bad thing that we seek to summarize things. But sometimes in our attempts to summarize great truths, we present them as deficient. For example, you take the great doctrine of justification, which has been described as the doctrine upon which the church stands or falls. And that's quite true. And an attempt to simplify it, we have often been taught it like this. You take the word justified, and you break it up into its various syllables, and you read it like this. Well, to be justified, it means that just as if I'd never sinned. I hope you understand my

Northern Ireland accent. Just as if I'd never sinned. That's good, isn't it? It is only good as far as it goes because it really doesn't go far enough. It's deficient because justification is the most wonderful doctrine, the wonderful truth of the gospel. We are forgiven. It is true. But what our little definition doesn't reveal is that what is imputed to us is the righteousness of Christ. So those of us who are true believers in Jesus Christ, we have been made the righteousness of God in him. That's the status that we actually have. We are the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ. Our lives are hidden with Christ in God. And there is no condemnation. And there is nothing shall separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. But equally, when we think of grace, we think about it, and it's often represented like this. It's the unmerited favor of God. That's good, isn't it? And yet, there's a measure of deficiency in that. Because what that does not address is the fact that grace comes to us when we're in a position of demerit. It's not as if we have nothing to offer to God. We offer our sin and our propensity to perpetuate that sin, to rebel against God, to live in a contrary position against his laws. So grace comes to us when we're in a state of demerit. You'll understand a man may be very poor. He may not have shoes on his feet. He may not have a coat on his back. He may not on any particular day have bread upon his table. But until he owes something, he cannot be described as a debtor. And we are born into sin. And we are debtors, and we are debtors to mercy alone.

And it's this grace that I want to outline just very briefly for you this evening, and I hope in a way that helps you. Because it's the great truth of the gospel. It's the gospel of the grace of God. What way do we best understand this grace? How do we cope with such an immense truth that the holy God

of heaven, the one who fills eternity, the great Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the one true and living God, that this God who is of pure eyes and to behold iniquity of any kind, that this God should look upon us is one thing. But that this God should come forth and retrieve us from the edge of the abyss of hell is in itself beyond all telling.

[11 : 58] We understand grace only as we focus upon the King of grace, Jesus Christ himself. The law came by Moses, says John, but grace and truth has come to us through Jesus Christ. He is the embodiment of grace.

And all that we can understand about grace, we understand it uniquely through him. Men have theories, they have notions, they are legion. But there is one truth, and the truth is this. Grace, true grace, God's grace, is only found through Jesus Christ. The first thing to which I want to draw your attention in this regard is quite simple. It is that this grace is represented to us in his amazing condescension to identify himself with us. We all understand something of Christmas. It has lost its meaning, hasn't it? But it is not for me this evening to say anything about that. But what it does speak of is the incarnation, this coming of God into this world. The creator, creating for himself, as it were, according to the words of one Puritan, the House of Clay.

That this God has identified himself with us. He became us. The writer to the Hebrews puts it most succinctly for us. He puts it like this.

For verily he took not on him the nature of angels, but he took on him the seed of Abraham.

Wherefore, in all things it behoved to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.

[13 : 51] But the apostle Paul, writing to the Colossians, refers to him who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature. For by him were all things created that are in heaven and that are in earth, visible and invisible. Whether they be thrones or dominions or principalities or powers, all things were created by him and for him. And he is before all things and by him all things consist.

God entered his own world, took to himself our very nature, became us. And this was necessary according to the great scheme of God in order to accomplish his goal, to have sinners with whom he could commune and they commune and they with him. It was necessary that he would come himself.

So it wasn't enough that he should send an angel or an archangel, a seraphim or a cherubim, but he would come himself. And whenever we think about this, it has been presented over the years in ways that are so contrary to scripture. And we understand that he became what he had never been before. And yet he never ceased to be the eternal God. We have this holy union of perfect humanity and absolute and utter deity in one holy person. That's the glory of the gospel of Christ. This God of ours who loved us so much sent his son into this world, the one that he loved from eternity, the one by whom the worlds were made, the one by whom the world consists. It all holds together by Jesus Christ.

He entered our flesh. He identified himself fully and truly with us. Again, with reference to the book of Hebrews, it tells us he was tempted in all points like as we are yet without sin. We have this great high priest who is touched with the feelings of our own infirmities. This is our God, our sovereign, our creator, our redeemer, our friend. God has identified himself with us fully and altogether.

But this identification with us had in itself an objective. And the objective was this, that he should offer himself as a substitute for us. His identification and his substitution for sinners is inextricably one.

[16 : 27] He came into this world to seek and to save that which was lost. He was a good place. There's an advertisement on television that appeals for a charity organization.

And it tells us at the beginning when we see a little emaciated face of a little African child, no child is born to die. Well, there was one who was born to die. Jesus Christ came into this world for the express purpose of offering himself as a substitute to stand in the place of men and women like you and me, taking our place, absorbing into himself the judgment and the wrath of a holy God, that men and women like you and me, in believing upon his name, trusting in him, giving up upon ourselves, that men and women like you and me, in the love of God.

And that men and women like you and me, in the love of God, are you and me? And that men and women like you and me, in the love of God, are you and me? But how do we understand this cross? And isn't it a tragedy that often we think about it in terms that we could describe as sentimental or even superstitious? We have various notions. And it's almost always that when we think of the

cross, and I say with utmost reverence, we almost entirely think about it only in terms of the physical sufferings of Jesus. And he did suffer. The prophet Isaiah would tell us he suffered more than that of any man.

He suffered excruciating physical pain. And the agony of the cross is unforpassed. And the purpose of the cross is unforpassed. And the purpose of the cross is unforpassed.

And the purpose of the cross is unforpassed. And the purpose of the cross is unforpassed. Only in the horizontal, if you like, we miss the whole point, the purpose, and the accomplishment of the cross.

[18 : 29] Have you ever wondered to yourself why it is that when you read the Gospels, when you read the Gospels and you read the Gospels and you read the Gospels and you read the Gospels, the purpose of the life of Christ on earth, this death upon the cross, have you ever wondered to yourself why it is that the Gospel writers are not more graphically descriptive?

Why in actual fact there is so little actual data given concerning the actual event of the crucifixion?

After all, when you think of the cross, you go back into the Old Testament, it begins in Genesis chapter 3, where God offers a sacrifice to cover the sins of our first parents.

The system then develops. God directs Moses. And the sacrificial system that was directed by God through Moses to the Jews was complex. It was detailed. And it had to be observed to the letter because of what it would represent. Types and shadows and prefigurements, all directing those prior to the cross, to the cross, in graphic images. We have so much of this in the Old Testament.

And yet when you come to the antitype, the death of Christ, you have very little that actually describes the event of the crucifixion. Or have you ever wondered when Jesus is hanging upon the cross, that he speaks seven times, they're referred to as the seven words or the seven sayings of Jesus. And it may be that you can recall some of them. Some of you, I'm sure, could. And those of you who can recall some, if I may ask questions, I would ask you this. How many of those words spoken by Jesus upon the cross refer to his physical suffering? And the answer is none. And I'm not inferring at all that he didn't suffer, for I've said he did suffer more than any man. But what we do know is this, that when he's upon the cross, he uttered these words, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? And isn't it the case that we have become so accustomed to think only in terms of the physical sufferings of Jesus that some way or the true event of the cross, the death of Christ has been obscured because of our readiness to think only in human terms and not to see the true meaning of it. I listen sometimes when I'm traveling home from preaching on Sundays to the radio, sometimes for no other reason than just to stay awake driving.

It's not good to sleep. And I remember listening in one particular evening to a radio station up in the north coast of Northern Ireland, country and western. It's not my particular genre of music, but it was just to keep me awake, as I say. And there was a song sung by one of these country and western gospel singers. And he spoke about some Roman soldier leaving the place of the proposed death of Jesus to go and buy three old rusty nails. By the, there had to be rusty nails, I have no idea. But we have this sentimentalizing attitude to the matter of the cross. And my answer as to the silence of Scripture with regarding to depicting the cross and all its horror to present to us some kind of image. It's to deliver us from idolatry, but also to cause us to ask the question, what meaneth this?

And upon the cross we have this execution, this death of the Son of God. But the chief player in the whole of the work of the cross is the Father, judging the Son worthy of death because he voluntarily took to himself the judgment due to my sins and to yours, if you be a child of God. He died just for the unjust, to make reconciliation. In other words, to create for God a basis of justification whereby this God remains just and the justifier of them that believe in Jesus. The cross was an act of divine judgment. Wrath, anger. My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? And the answer is, it is needful. The apostle puts it like this.

[23 : 18] He was made sin for us. Not a sinner, but made sin for us. He who knew no sin, the pure one, the holy one, the one who never thought an evil thought or spoke an evil word or performed an evil deed, holy, harnessed and undefiled and separate from sinners. This holy one died for unholy ones. And a holy God vented his anger upon the Son. And the blood of Jesus Christ has appeased this holiness. There's no wrath, no judgment, no judgment, no condemnation for such as believe upon the name of Christ.

Saved by grace. And by grace alone we are. This substitution, this one who stood for us, our representative now, our great high priest, our great King. The glory of the gospel is this.

The glory of the gospel is this. It's not by works of righteousness that we have done, but by his mercy has he saved us. We could do nothing. Our best works are rejected by God, no matter how sincerely they are done, no matter how much we sweat or labor, all is tragically in vain.

For God has offered himself in Jesus Christ, one sacrifice for sin in its totality for all eternity. And for those who believe upon his name, Christ has made peace by the blood of his cross. Peace that is passing all understanding for us. This is grace. This is God taking the initiative. No man asked him. He was not a request from heaven, from earth to heaven, but he came. He entered our world, born in relative obscurity, living in our world, walking day by day amongst the sewerage of sin.

[25 : 24] The Holy One, he went to a cross. He died for sinners like you and me. In some way, there are those in our world, sadly, who imagine that they can cut some contract with God, do a deal with him. They can short circuit the system. They can bypass this Christ. Never.

God will never accept on any terms, no matter how apparently right they may be. God will never accept on any terms, no matter how they can. God will never accept on any terms, no matter how they can.

And he declares that he that comes by the sun will receive mercy. This is the grace of God. There is nothing in us that can in any way incline the favor of God.

Our best works infuriate his anger, and justifiably so, because he's other than we are. He is God. He is God. And he is the offended one. And yet the offended one gave his son that the offenses of many may be absorbed by one. That whosoever should believe upon him should be saved from this judgment. It's grace, pure grace.

But lastly, we understand it in terms of his indwelling of us. This God who identified himself with us, the God who in Jesus Christ offered himself as a substitute for us, has given to those who believe his spirit that we might live our lives here as those who identify ourselves with him.

[27 : 06] The whole purpose of grace comes in full circle. It comes from heaven to reveal heaven upon earth and the lives and the living of those who profess the name of Christ.

How is your testimony? Does it reflect the claim that you make that you're a citizen of the kingdom of heaven? The claim that you make that you're a new creation? It's interesting when you go to the first chapter of the book of Genesis, each of the days, the six days of creation, they close with these words, and God saw that it was good. That old creation cost him nothing. The new creation had cost him everything. And this new creation has a demand made upon it that we show forth to this world that we are the product of God. We have come from God and we are going to God. Our citizenship is in heaven.

We are not those who will descend into the pit of eternal burning. Hell is not our destiny, but heaven.

We are heavenly citizens. And God has called upon us to walk worthily of the claim that we make. He identified himself with us that we might identify ourselves with him. We are Christians.

Christians. We name his name. And even our best efforts are so poor, aren't they? We reflect so little. And yet, God grants us grace that we might witness a good confession always. At last, we should stand before him and hear those most desirable words, well done, good and faithful servant. Remember this this evening, Christian. Your God so loved you that he gave his son to die for you. And isn't it so often the case that when we think of the love of God, we think about it in such a general way?

[29 : 23] But you will forgive me by beginning like this as I close. And that's an Irish system, isn't it? God loved me and loves me as if you don't exist. And he loves you as if I don't exist. All his concentration, all his focus, every day that you live, his eyes are upon you, his ears are ever open to you.

And the great purpose for which he has saved you. Staggering as it is to believe is simply this, that you should realize the potential for which you were created.

You Presbyterians, above all Christians, should know this. What is man's chief end, but to glorify God and enjoy him forever. That's it. That's the beginning and that's the end.

It cannot be summarized any better than that. Your confession, your subordinate standards put it well. I wonder this evening, I wonder in truth, how well we live this life. How pleasing are we to God?

Surely, considering what he has done for us, we must strive that little bit harder to please the God who has been gracious to us, not in any sense to achieve salvation or forgiveness, but to please the God who pleased himself to give his son to receive sinners like you and me, who for the joy that

was set before him endured the cross. What was the joy? You, me, that last he might present us before the Father.

[31 : 02] That's his joy. I wonder how you think about it. Let me close this evening. I'm not a poet and I don't know very much poetry, but I was reading a modern day poet not very long ago. I'd learned a little bit.

And he seemed to have captured the true meaning, at least the earthly meaning of being a Christian. And he penned these words. I'm looking forward to a land no man has ever seen, where sin and shame won't know my name and tears have never been. For though my life on earth is sweet, I won't be satisfied until I kneel at Jesus' feet and kiss the lamb who died. May God make that our testimony for his own name's sake. Amen.