

Pitching Tabernacles

– Finding Connections Between Obedience and God's Grace

*Because of his very acuteness, he overlooked the point.
—Erubin, 90*

Jesus came “full of grace and truth”

Last time while discussing the Christian idea of grace, which means “unmerited favor,” we encountered yet another paradox, or antinomy. The parameters of the situation are well established with these words:

...when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Ro 5:6-8)

Note the language carefully: we are described as “powerless,” “ungodly,” and “sinners.” A contrast is drawn between us and “a righteous man.” And yet “Christ died for us.” The paradox is this: with our sins we have destroyed the perfect men and women we were created to be, therefore God deserves the pure justice of “a life for a life,” yet God gave up the justice he deserves, and accepted Jesus’ life in place of ours. It is the heart of the Gospel, the central paradox of Christianity, which is eloquently expressed in the following quote:

“We are confronted with the paradox that God criticizes us in order to affirm us. The cross of Christ simultaneously exposes and judges us as sinners, and affirms the astonishing extent of the love God has for us... This insight brings dignity and meaning to believers. In the midst of a dark, lonely and frightening world, God has affirmed them as individuals. The death of Christ is a striking and moving demonstration of the personal worth of believers. If God was prepared to go to such lengths to redeem them, they may assume that they are of value to him.” (New Dictionary of Christian Ethic & Pastoral Theology, p. 31)

As we have found so many times in our exploration of the Hebrew scriptures, this Christian doctrine is not new with Jesus. It is the ultimate expression of God’s way of reacting to disobedience from earliest times, first seen when God follows up his explanation of the curses that must come as a result of Adam and Eve’s disobedience with a gift:

The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. (Ge 3:21) NIV

In this way, although God makes it clear that Adam and Eve no longer merit the blessings formerly available to them in God’s presence in the garden, the Lord affirms that they still have worth to Him, and seals that affirmation with a gift, when one would expect only punishment. Thus begins the pattern of humanity’s relationship with God that still exists today. It continued with God’s response to Cain, the first murderer (see **Ge 4:11-16**).

**GOD LOVES
AN HONEST QUESTION!**

(continued)

We see this pattern emerge again in the Flood, God's response to a time of total depravity among humankind (see **Ge 8:20-21** & **Ge 9:13-16**).

If you offered everything in your home to a pair of houseguests with only one exception, yet they stole that one thing you had reserved for yourself, would you send them on their way with a new wardrobe? If one of your children killed another of your own children merely from spite, would you protect him for the rest of his life? If a group of totally depraved people destroyed or corrupted everything on earth that you hold dear (visualize the Taliban in control of your town) would you guarantee their survival? Most victims in such situations would say these perpetrators deserve nothing but "an eye for an eye," and yet the Bible says:

The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. (Psalm 103:8-10) NIV

- ▶ Consider that God sent his Son to suffer and die in our place "while we were still sinners." What does this say about us? What does it say about him? Now flip it around. If we deserved such a sacrifice on God's part, what differences would that mean in terms of the truth about God and ourselves?
- ▶ Think about the fact that God has chosen to pay the penalty for our sins against him by sending Jesus. What is the relationship between the idea that even the slightest sin separates us from God ("whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it" – James 2:10) and the idea that God loves us enough to send his son to die for us, no matter how terrible our sins might be?
- ▶ What is the full meaning of standing before God and knowing we are "naked"? (Hint: think about this in terms of what we studied in lesson 5: we long to be closer to God, yet we also fear drawing too close to him (or going too far from ourselves). What does our longing imply? What does our fear imply?)
- ▶ What circumstances would remove our fear and longing? (Hint: search **Ro 6:22** for the three stages of deliverance from fear and longing.)
- ▶ How do we know God loves us? (Hint: **1 John 4:10**) What does this teach us about how we should love? (Hint: **1 John 5:3**)

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