

Surprised by Grace

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[0 : 0 0] I bring you greetings from your brothers and sisters in Milan, Italy, from Chiesa Rifromata, Philadelphia. It's always a pleasure to be with God's people all over the globe, to know that we are one in Christ, that we have the same Father in heaven, the same elder brother and Savior, the Lord Jesus.

We're endowed by the same spirit. Well, I want to turn your attention now to Genesis 45 and this chapter that we read. This scene really should give hope to any family that is dysfunctional.

It should give hope to any married couple who quarrels or to any individual who struggles with bitterness and finds forgiveness and reconciliation with other people difficult.

What do we see in this scene? We see a divided family reconciled. We see those who deserved justice receiving grace, receiving mercy.

We see mercy triumphing over judgment. We see God working in the hearts of His people, causing them to persevere in the faith and grow in their sanctification.

[1 : 1 8] The story of Joseph, as we know, is a marvelous story, a wonderful testimony of God's providence that Joseph, through a number of different events and calamities that befell him, ends up in Egypt.

Through all of that, God spares the 12 tribes of Israel so that really the Savior can come. He spares them from famine.

It's an incredible story of God's providence and sovereignty. But it's not just that, it's also a wonderful story of how God restored and renewed the deeply broken relationship of this family.

And that should fill our hearts with hope today, because the people in Jacob's family, in so many ways, look like us. They're ordinary sinners.

They struggle with bitterness when somebody hurts them. They may find it difficult to forgive. Here wells up in the heart, especially over years, and especially if it's something that was done, it was very harmful to us.

[2 : 2 6] They look a lot like us, all of the people in Scripture do, in some way or another, because they're sinners. They fail, and they feel the unpleasant consequences of sin.

And yet, like us, they too were justified by faith alone. They too were saved by the same Savior.

And as with us, their faith during their journey didn't always look bright and resplendent and perfect. In fact, often when we look at the patriarchal family, we think, really, this is the covenant family.

These are the people of faith, and they look awful in so many ways. And yet, it was an enduring faith that they had by God's grace, and that gives us hope today.

And so today, the same God who restored and renewed Jacob's family can bring peace to our broken families and reconciliation to our relationships with others.

[3 : 35] And that's hopeful for us today. The same gospel that restored them is able to restore us today. And so let's consider briefly three things.

What the brothers deserved, what the brothers received, and how the brothers responded as we think about this story. First of all, what the brothers deserved?

What did they deserve? Well, Joseph, as you know in this story, it's been many, many years since he's seen his brothers. His brothers had sold him into slavery. He ends up in Potiphar's house.

He's falsely accused. He ends up in prison and through all sorts of events. He ends up the second in command over all of Egypt, really the second most powerful man in the entire world.

Then you remember there, Pharaoh was having these dreams about seven cows that were getting eaten up by seven others. And it was a prophecy about seven years of plenty and then seven years of famine.

[4 : 34] And so Joseph said, save up all of the grain and the food for seven years and then you'll have food to go through the seven years of famine. And so it's during that time, the time of famine, while Jacob and Joseph's brothers, ten of his brothers, because Benjamin had not yet been born, but then he grows, and they come down to Egypt to get grain.

And Joseph's there as the second in command looks like an Egyptian. He's speaking in a foreign language. They have no idea that it's their brother. But when we come to this text, we come to this part of the story, he reveals his identity.

And so that's where we're at. And he's not excited to see them at first. He's not like my brothers. And they're not, as soon as he reveals his identity, saying, oh, it's Joseph.

They're terrified when he reveals his identity. And it took him some time to reveal his identity. He didn't trust them at first.

He's checking to see where they're really at. He's probably struggling with forgiveness. These are the guys that ripped him away from his family, from his mom and his dad, stole his life, sold him into slavery.

[5 : 57] It was probably difficult for him. But here he finally reveals his identity. You remember how one of the brothers, Judah, from whom his tribe came, the Lord Jesus, offered to be a substitute, you remember, for his younger brother.

And through hearing that confession and hearing that offer to be the substitute for his brother, Joseph has finally moved to reveal his identity.

It's me. But verse 3 says that they were terrified. Why? Because they know what they deserve. They deserve justice.

They deserve justice. Like our first parents, Adam and Eve, who hid from the Lord after sinning. Well, Joseph's brothers felt the weight of their guilt and the crushing burden of their own culpability and then the fear of punishment.

They realized that Joseph, their own brother whom they had harmed, is now in a place of power, in a position where he could bring justice upon them.

[7 : 06] He wields the hammer of justice. They deserved it and they knew it. And justice is a good thing, just as we heard in the prayer on a day like today, Remembrance Day.

Justice is important. We have to have justice in a world. Imagine a world where there was no justice. Imagine if all crimes went unpunished.

Imagine if you went to school and you never got a grade that you had earned. Or imagine if you had a job and you never were paid for it. Justice is fundamental for society.

We expect to receive justice. We want to get what we deserve for our efforts. It's the fundamental principle of the law that we all understand because it's been written on our hearts since creation.

But that also means that when someone does wrong to us, well, we want justice done to that person. We want to assert our rights.

[8 : 11] I've been wronged. That's why you don't have to teach a child to say things like, that's mine. Stop it. That's not fair.

You don't have to teach a child to say these things. They already know. It's written on the heart. We're hardwired. We're programmed for justice. We understand justice.

But this intuitive thing, justice, it's funny because we want it all the time for others, but we don't want it for ourselves. When we're the ones that are guilty, when we're the ones that have done something wrong, well, it's a little different.

You want others to pay for the things that they've done against us, but we always don't want to pay ourselves, of course, when we've done something wrong to others. Then you want mercy.

You don't want justice. And it's easy for excuses and self-justification to bubble up. Well, I only meant it this way.

[9 : 11] I didn't really intend it like that. We try to justify our sin because we fail to see our guilt or we just want to make it a little softer if we can.

So it's not so heavy on us. We have a hard time sometimes seeing ourselves as real sinners. And then often when we do, when we know we've blown it, when we know we have failed, then we want to run and hide.

Like our first parents, Adam and Eve, we become terrified like Joseph's brothers. Well, here they are. More than 20 years had passed and they had hidden their guilt.

They had stifled their shame and suddenly everything's out in the open. Everything's there. They're in front of Joseph, the second most powerful man in the world.

There's no escape. What do they do? Well, that's the first thing, what they deserve to notice, what they received. In verse 4, Joseph said to his brothers, please come near me.

[10 : 17] Come near. Surprisingly, he speaks words of tenderness. He had the right to strike the hammer of justice, but instead he decided to show mercy.

Now I don't know about you, but I could sympathize knowing Joseph's story. At that point, he wanted to, as we say, vent and unload a few things and maybe raise his voice a little and start listing all the things that his brothers had done.

Do you have any idea how you hurt me? You stole my young adulthood. You took my life away from me. I haven't seen my father, my mother.

I've never had the opportunity to meet or know my younger brother. Do you know what I suffered with those slave traders and in Potiphar's house and in prison and look at me?

You took it from me and now you're going to pay. If that were cast in a script in a movie, we would get it. We would understand. We'd all feel that way a little bit.

[11 : 22] And yet here, we don't see him getting angry, that kind of anger that wells up in our own hearts, that sense of justice, that desire for justice.

On the contrary, he decides to show mercy and grace. Mercy and grace. Two wonderful words. Mercy and grace. What's the difference between mercy and grace?

Because there is a difference. Mercy is not getting the judgment or the justice that you deserved. So mercy would be like if you violate a traffic law and you deserve, we say, a ticket in the United States and you don't get the ticket.

So I can remember one time in San Diego, California, in the church that I pastored, true story, driving to church and then get to church and realize I forgot my sermon and it was on the other computer, this was a long time ago, and drive back home.

Coming back to church to get there in the time of the call to worship and going much faster than I should and then getting pulled over by the California Highway Patrol at the one off ramp where the entire congregation also gets off to go to the church, all craning their necks and seeing their minister there pulled over by the police with the...

[12 : 47] When you think, I'm guilty, I've gone past the speed limit, what do I deserve here? I deserve a large fine in the state of California, remedial traffic school, which was a thing then, all the mocking and the shame of my teenage kids at the time and a lot of justice, right?

And the police officer comes to the door, asks for the documentation, I handed to him and I tell him straight away because to be honest, I was more concerned about missing the call to worship.

Officer, I'm the pastor of the church down there at Maston, Magnolia Boulevard and we're about to start and I'm so sorry, I wanted to say, can you make this quick? And he says, hold on a second and he goes and he checks to make sure I'm not a real criminal or anything and he comes back and hands me my documentation and then pulls it back and says, what's the last word in the Bible?

Excuse me? He says, come on, you're supposed to be a pastor, what's the last word in the Bible? I said, amen, true story, he hands me the documentation and says, slow it down, Pastor Brown.

What did I receive there? I received mercy. I did not receive the judgment I deserved. Now grace goes one step further.

[14 : 11] Grace is getting a gift, a good thing that you did not merit. So let's imagine now that the police officer said, well, not only am I going to let you off this time, which I don't have to, but here, it was \$500 for you and your wife to go out for a lovely evening or weekend and I'm going to pay the insurance premiums on your car and here, here's a free pass to drive as fast as you want on the freeway.

That would be ridiculous. That would be absurd, right? It would be strange. But here's the thing about grace. It is strange.

It is absurd. It doesn't make sense. It's counterintuitive. It's counterintuitive that Joseph would say, not only am I not going to punish you for all the stuff you did, but here's the best of the land.

You have want of nothing. Go get dad. Bring him down here. You have the fatted calf. Want of nothing.

It's absurd that God the son would come into this world, not to die for the righteous, but to die for sinners, for criminals, to have their crimes laid on him and for him to be punished for it.

[15 : 41] It doesn't make sense. It would be too good to be true. It would be shocking. It would be strange. And yet that's how grace works. Because Joseph said, look, God sent me here before you so that a remnant of you may be preserved on earth and to save the lives of many who have survived.

So it's not you who sent me here, but God. The brothers expected judgment, but instead received mercy and then received grace. It sounded too good to be true, but that's how grace works.

This is why Paul says that the preaching of the cross is madness for those who perish. It seems completely absurd that God would suffer for the wicked.

It seems illogical for God to forgive sins for people who did not merit that forgiveness. To reconcile us to himself when we're the ones who did wrong to him.

And then to give us eternal life, to give us adoption, to justify us, the promise of the resurrection, a living hope, all of this we receive for free.

[16 : 56] It would make sense if God gave us what we deserve, but grace doesn't work like that. Grace means receiving a good gift that I don't deserve. Now often in our relationships with other people, we have the opportunity to show mercy and grace instead of judgment.

As those who have received mercy and grace, we have opportunity to extend that to others. There's a choice often.

And the question is, what would we have done if we were in Joseph's place? Would you have punished them? Or would you have pursued peace?

Would you have given them what they deserve? Or would you have chosen to reconcile with them? There's a difference.

And the question is, what will you choose the next time you suffer from a broken relationship with someone? And what does God want us to do? Now, of course, I'm not saying there's no place for discipline in the church when a member is unrepentant, but that's a different matter.

[18 : 13] In that case, we're not the judges. God's word is. But oftentimes we appoint ourselves, prosecutor, judge, jury, in our broken relationships when there is a choice to pursue peace, to pursue reconciliation or not.

God wants us to seek peace and to pursue it. And seeking peace and pursuing peace is not simply avoiding the person, but pursuing peace and saying, come near to me, even as Joseph said to his brothers.

Now the grace of God, that's what Joseph did, even if it wasn't easy at first, because it's never easy. It took him a little time before he did. The last thing is notice the way the brothers responded.

The broken relationship of this family because of grace and mercy and because of what Joseph sought to pursue with his brothers this reconciliation.

Finally it opens up this possibility of there to be shalom in the family again. Peace, stability.

[19 : 31] We read in verse 15, he also kissed his brothers, weeping. After this, his brothers began to talk to him. How much they must have had to say to each other and that they couldn't say until grace and mercy had broke the ice and it opened up the way.

Not because of judgment, but because of grace, shalom in this family was possible again. And since forgiveness had been granted, there was no place for retaliation or bitterness.

Notice the imperative of Joseph to his brothers in verse 24. Let there be no quarrels with you now on your journey. He knows his brothers, he knows what they're going to do.

The brothers were not to blame each other for what had happened in the past. See, I told you not to sell him. No, it was Simon. No, you said if Joseph had forgiven them, how much more should they forgive each other?

And the same goes for us, loved ones. The same goes for us. God has canceled our debt in Christ by the blood of Jesus Christ.

[20 : 41] The one who like Joseph was betrayed by those close to him. The one who like Joseph suffered unjustly.

The one who like Joseph, his suffering brought life for others because he has granted our forgiveness because he has security turned alive for us.

Because it's his blood paid for our crimes. How much more must we forgive others? It's on the basis of the gospel that we can forgive.

On the basis of God satisfying his justice through Jesus Christ for us, that we don't have to go around holding debts over others.

Like Joseph's brothers, we too need forgiveness and we've received it. Now we were enemies. We were reconciled with God through the death of his son. And so now we can pursue that reconciliation with others.

[21 : 49] Our reconciliation with God that we've received through Christ, so it's not only vertical, but horizontal, so making the shape of the cross.

Because without Christ, there's no peace with God and there's no peace with others. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his beautiful book, *The Common Life or Life Together*, I think we say in English.

Without Christ, he said, we would not know God. We could not invoke him or even reach him. Without Christ, we could not even know our brother or approach him.

It is our very selves that bar the way. But Christ opened the way that leads to God and to his brother. Now says Bonhoeffer, Christians can live in peace among themselves.

They can love and serve each other. They can become one, but always and only through Christ. Only in Jesus Christ are we one. Only through him are we mutually bound.

[22 : 51] He remains the only mediator forever. It's because of Christ that we have the power to forgive. It's because of the forgiveness we've received through him that we now can be people of reconciliation and peace.

And so today, as Joseph said to his brothers, Jesus also says to us, come near. Come near to me.

Come all you who are weary and heavy laden, weary and heavy laden with broken relationships maybe. The need to forgive.

He says, I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you for it's easy. My burden is light. It's not heavy. It's not crushing like that sense of guilt we have or that sense of anger we have towards those who have hurt us.

Rather we're brothers because of Jesus Christ. And so he says, put on therefore as God's he lacked holy and loved with sentiments of mercy, benevolence, humility, meekness and patience, bear with one another and forgive each other.

[24 : 08] If one has something to complain about one about each other, forgive because as the Lord has forgiven you says Paul, so too you must forgive others.

These are someone whom you must forgive today, someone in your life, maybe a brother, a sister, a friend, a neighbor, a relative, a spouse, someone who maybe you've been avoiding.

You have the opportunity to apply the gospel that has rescued you and to be free. And Jesus wants to free us from the prison and the jailhouse of resentment and bitterness.

He's paved the way for peace and reconciliation through his blood and through his righteousness. And so look to him. Christ made peace with God for us and he is our peace with others.

Amen. Let us pray. Our God and our Father, we thank you for your word and we thank you for the gospel. We thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ through whose life, death and resurrection we have received complete forgiveness for all our sins, past, present and future, things we have done and things we have left undone.

[25 : 27] And oh Lord, in that and in the knowledge that we've been clothed and the perfection, the obedience, the righteousness of Jesus, that it is His performance that saves us and that we have the living hope of the resurrection and the life of the age to come and the new heavens and new earth.

Oh Lord, fill our hearts with gratitude. Fill our hearts with love for others. Strengthen our faith in Jesus. Strengthen our hope in heaven and make us, we pray, oh Lord, as forgiven people, forgiving people with others.

But we ask this through Christ our Lord.