

Grace: Wow!

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[0 : 0 0] Please turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Timothy chapter 1, a reading from a few minutes ago. 1 Timothy chapter 1, and I'll read again verses 15 and 16, very famous words.

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason that in me as the foremost Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who are to believe in him for eternal life. Now I'm not a long-distance traveler like many of you are, I know. I actually haven't been abroad this century. But we have friends who are just back from what they described as a fly cruise. They were in a fly drive to the States last year, so this year they thought they'd go one better and do a fly cruise. So they flew to New Zealand, cruise around New Zealand, then cruise to Sydney, and then travelled a bit around Australia and flew home. I was trying to tell them that because I've just been to the Outer Hebrides, Kathy and I did a cruise fly with McBrain and Loganair, but it didn't quite have the same cache. Now as a kid, I really did want to travel. I wanted to travel to space. I'm old enough to remember the excitement when

Yuri Gagarin, Cosmonaut, the first to orbit the earth in 1961, and then I followed the American Space Program rather obsessively until the moon landings. Well today I want to think about travel, not the kind of travel I've just been speaking about, but the most amazing journeys of all that I hope you will wonder at and say, wow, hopefully. Amazing journeys in distance and in depth. And I want you to think of them in terms of grace. You can see our context here in verse 14.

The grace of our Lord overflowed for me, says Paul. So I want us to think of the amazing journeys of amazing grace and say, wow. Four things as time allows. Number one, how far grace comes. How far grace comes. All the way to Bethlehem because the text says Christ Jesus came into the world.

Now I want to think of that as both a coming from and a coming into. First it was a coming from. We're used here to baby arrivals. I suspect there'll be another announcement about one next Sunday.

[3 : 3 8] If there was an award for the most fertile congregation in Scotland, we would get it every year. But the coming of Jesus, of course, was different from any other baby. Yes, his human life had a beginning, but he already was the eternal Son of God. And the author we're reading from today, Paul, always assumes this. Here one of his great sayings about Jesus in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, and notice the word grace. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor. And Paul is saying that before he came to earth, he was unimaginably rich in heaven before the poverty of earth. He came all the way from heaven, from the worship he enjoyed in heaven, and the blessedness he knew in heaven. Jesus comes from outside, Jesus comes from above.

So there's a coming from, and it's a long way. But there's also a coming into, into this world. The Son of God takes on human nature, body and soul, real humanity. He became what he was not while remaining what he was. And he comes into a world that is sinful, and it's so different from heaven, from the light of heaven to the darkness of this world. Imagine the sensitivity of the divine Son who was so holy. And he becomes this human being who is sinless and holy. And here he is in a world of such sin and horror and cruelty and abuse, how it would have felt to his holy soul.

But he came right into it. And he also comes into a suffering world to experience hunger and pain and loneliness and bereavement and all the rest of it. So God really did come all the way down to our world and right into our humanity. That's the journey that he traveled. That's the grace of the incarnation. That's the condescension of God from a throne to a manger. He came a vast and infinite distance when he came from and when he came into. He came on an amazing journey. How far grace comes.

Let me read from a short poem called Mary's Song, which I've loved for a very long time. It's by Lucy Shaw. I think she was born in England, but has been an American citizen for a long time. I can't quite say the first line terribly honestly, but you'll understand when I read it. Blue homespun and the bend of my breast keep warm this small hot naked star fall into my arms. Rest you who have had so far to come. Now nearness satisfies the body of God sweetly. Quiet he lies whose vigor hurled a universe.

And later on, breath mouth ears eyes he is curtailed who overflowed all skies all years. Older than eternity now he is new. Now native to earth as I am nailed to my poor planet caught that I might be free. Blind in my womb to know my darkness ended brought to this birth for me to be newborn and for him to see me mended I must see him torn. And these last lines take us to the second thing and for him to see me mended I must see him torn. The second thing is how far grace goes. How far grace goes all the way to Calvary. Surely another wow because the text says he came into the world to save sinners.

[8 : 41] We know from the Gospels that Jesus came into the world to do one thing above all others, to travel to the cross to save sinners. The four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John tell us that story with an amazing focus on the final week. Remember as we've just been thinking about the baby who came, according to Matthew 1 the baby is to be named Jesus which means the Lord saves because he will save his people from their sins. That's what the name Jesus signifies. He's going to save his people from their sins. He has no sin of his own but he's come to do something to save these people from their sins. Now everything Jesus does contributes to that but one event above all others is crucial and climactic, the cross. So later in that same Gospel of Matthew the Jesus who was named as the Savior of sinners says at the last supper in chapter 26 that the wine points to his blood, quote, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

He has to die to save us from our sins. So the one named Jesus, the baby, grows up and journeys to the cross and he saves us from sin by shedding his precious blood for sinners and we still, as we will do this evening in this church, we still take bread and wine to remember him by remembering this. We remember the cross in obedience to remember me. Now like Jesus, Paul who's writing here is a theologian of the cross and I wonder if Paul here actually has words of Jesus in mind, certainly he has the theology of Jesus in mind as he writes. If you know Mark 10 and 45 most of you will when I say what it is, Jesus on why he came into the world. He says that he came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for the many.

Jesus is saying I came into the world to die and he uses the language of ransom and you'll notice if you glance across that in the next column it was in our reading in chapter 2, Paul refers to Jesus as our ransom.

Verse 5, there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus who gave himself as a ransom for all. So what Paul is saying in this whole passage and that's why I read right into chapter 2 or ask Billy to read.

Jesus came into the world to save sinners and he achieved this by paying the price to rescue them, to redeem them through the cross. The cost of our forgiveness and freedom from the guilt and the power of sin was the blood of the Son of God shed on the cross. Jesus came into the world to save sinners and he does that by dying for us on the cross as our ransom. Still thinking about the cross, I want to take just two or three minutes to return to the theme of this amazing journey that Jesus takes to the cross and the idea of the descent of grace again in distance and in depth.

[13 : 06] The distance and depth that Jesus was willing to travel. If you think for example of the way Paul tells the story in Philippians 2 from verse 5, one of his famous passages in the New Testament, he tells us that Jesus in heaven was in the form of God but he took the form of a slave by coming to earth and becoming incarnate and then he humbled himself to the point of death, even death on a cross. There's the journey from heaven all the way to the cross. How far Jesus was willing to go for you and for me. Or think about another couple of verses with Paul's theology of the cross and ask yourself, did Jesus go far enough for me? 2 Corinthians 5 and 21. For our sake, God made Jesus to be sin, the one who knew no sin.

He made him sin on the cross. Is that enough? Or Galatians 3 and 13. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. He became a curse. He became the cursed thing. Is that enough? Or think just of the descent of the whole gospel story as you read the gospels. The shadow of the cross is over the whole of Jesus' life. And at last he goes down to Gethsemane and down to Golgotha and then down to the grave. Far enough? Or think of him just in one detail on the cross.

What I believe is his descent into hell on the cross. Without leaving the cross, he experiences hell on the cross.

That seems to be what's being portrayed in the darkness that you know about around Calvary. Remember Jesus said that hell means darkness, outer darkness. And there on the cross at noon, he is shrouded in darkness. And remember also that Jesus spoke about hell as abandonment, that he would one day say to some, depart from me, go away. And what does he have to say in the cross, but my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why have you abandoned me? In that experience of abandonment and that cry out of the darkness, Jesus is experiencing our hell for our sins so that we might not go to hell. What I'm saying is Jesus could not have gone further for you and for me. Jesus could not have come further than from heaven into human nature in this sinful suffering world. And Jesus couldn't have gone further than what he did for you and for me on the cross of Calvary. And when you hear that and understand that and appreciate that, then you realize that Jesus deserves your thanks and your trust. And he deserves that today, now, and every moment of every day from now.

He deserves your gratitude and your commitment and faith and love because he did all that for you. He could not have done more.

[17 : 29] He could not have come further. He could not have gone lower and it's all been done for us. So how far grace comes all the way to Bethlehem.

How far grace goes all the way to Calvary. Thirdly, how far grace reaches all the way to Paul, all the way to Saul, Paul.

Now this man, Paul, formerly known as Saul, a Pharisee as was, Saul the Pharisee would have known himself to be sinful.

Okay, he would not have thought of himself as a sinless human being. But it's interesting to know that he would have kept the term sinners for others. So for example, he would have talked of pagans and the Gentile world as sinners.

Or scandalous immoral Jews, they would have called sinners. Remember, you can look yourselves at Mark 2, 16 and 17 sometime, there's Jesus eating with sinners and the Pharisees criticized Jesus in verse 16 that he deans to eat with people they call sinners.

[18 : 59] Sometimes Pharisees would even apply the category sinners to Jews who didn't adhere to their own very strict phariseic standards. So basically, there's the Pharisees and then the rest. Now Saul would have seen himself, Saul, Paul would have seen himself in a different category, the category of the righteous. You can see in Mark 2, 17, the same passage I just referred to, that Jesus is playing with that language when the Pharisees criticize him for spending all this time with sinners and he just turns and he says to them, well, shouldn't I have come for sinners? I mean, I haven't come to call the righteous to repentance, meaning the Pharisees.

I haven't come for the righteous. You guys, you of course are okay, but I've come for sinners. So shouldn't I spend time with the sinners?

I hesitate to say this, but if there is such a thing, not saying that is, if there is such a thing as sinless sarcasm, then that was sinless sarcasm. I haven't come for the righteous, you good guys. I've come for the sinners, so let me spend my time with the people who need me.

So Saul would have kept this term, sinners, for everybody else except his own circle. But now you can see here that he includes himself in the category of sinners, but he also says, I am the foremost. I am the chief of sinners, he says in verse 15. Why? Because as he says in verse 13, I was a blasphemer, a persecutor, an insolent opponent of Jesus, but I received mercy. It's amazing, the chief of sinners.

And there's the humility also in verse 13 of, I acted ignorantly in unbelief. You can think about it for a second. Paul would have thought of himself in his pharaoh Pharisees as the epitome of believing people, people of faith.

[21 : 27] And he would also have thought of himself and his learned colleagues as the most able theologians on the planet.

So here's this very knowledgeable Paul who had seen himself as a professor and a believer. He's saying, well, when I opposed Jesus, I acted ignorantly in unbelief. I was an idiot.

And he was enemy number one of the young Christian church, as he knew as we know. We might even say that he saw the Jesus movement as the deadliest of viruses.

He believed in a coming Christ Messiah, but Jesus, he knew, wasn't the Christ. So for him, this was the Christo virus. And he sought to contain the virus.

He sought to quarantine the virus by putting Christians in prison and isolate them. He sought to eradicate the virus of faith in Jesus.

[22 : 45] And everyone around would have thought Saul to be an impossible case. When you look around and say, who's going to become a Christian? The last person you ever expected was Saul.

Let me apply that to your impossible cases, either close to you, family, or colleagues at work.

Who's the last person you'd offer as you think would ever become a Christian? Well, pray for them, because if Saul could be reached, anyone could be reached. Who's the last person when you watch the news you think will ever become a Christian?

Well, pray for them. Even perhaps especially if you can't stand them, that Jesus would touch them with his grace. Jesus can reach any impossible case, because Paul is saying, grace reached down all the way to me, even to me.

And it's a wonderful thing that when he talks about his conversion, he never got blasphemy about sin. Still the chief of sinners. And he never got blasphemy about grace.

[23 : 58] There's still doxology there in verse 17. He's always bursting into praise. There was always humility and always doxology.

And as we face our sin, I want you to think of it especially in terms of your attitude, my attitude to Jesus. If I'm not a Christian, what's my attitude to Jesus, all the way from complete apathy to hostility?

They're all wrong. Or if I'm a Christian, what is my attitude to Jesus today? And where do I need to repent of my lack of love or my lack of faith or my lack of depth or whatever it might be in your life?

We face our sin. Saul's great sin was his opposition to Jesus. And our greatest sin is always not taking Jesus as seriously as we should.

So Paul sees his story as an encouragement for anyone to come to Jesus. Verse 16, I received mercy for this reason that in me, as the foremost of sinners, Jesus might display as perfect patience as an example to others who were to believe in Him for eternal life.

[25 : 21] He considers himself the ultimate trophy of the incredible long-suffering patience of Jesus because he's saying, Jesus, first of all, withheld His judgment from me.

He could have zapped me anytime. And then Jesus poured out His grace on my life and into my life. Verse 14, the grace of our Lord overflowed for me.

He flooded Paul's heart with faith and love. So Paul is offering himself as a prototype, a pattern, so that anyone afterwards may know that they can come to.

They can be changed too. His logic is, if Jesus can change me, then He can change anyone.

There's a scholar, many of you will know the name of Tom Wright, N.T. Wright, I think still in St. Andrews University. The only thing I have in common with that genius, I suppose, is that, well, we're both Christians.

[26 : 36] But the other thing I have in common with him is that we both watched the Lone Ranger on TV when there weren't many channels to choose from a very long time ago.

So we're about the same age. If I'm remembering rightly Saturday afternoons, after spending all day outside playing football, came in for the football results on grandstand and then watched the Lone Ranger.

A story of a Texas Ranger who's the only one left after his family and his colleagues are killed. And what Tom Wright focuses on in relation to this text here is the Lone Ranger and Silver.

When we first meet Silver in the story, the horse is unbroken and untamed. And all the experts, the Native American experts, all the horse whispers and the rest of them say, this one will never be tamed.

There's a willfulness and a wildfulness that means everybody gives up. And they say it's a waste of time trying to train him. But the Lone Ranger is determined. This is the horse for him and by some secret means he brings the horse to respond and become his servant and his friend.

[28 : 02] Now Tom Wright says, the point I want to make is this. From the moment when the Lone Ranger shows he can tame the untameable horse and make it his servant and his friend, the viewer knows that he will be able to conquer all other obstacles in his path as well.

He's taken the hardest case and the easy ones will be well easy. And that's the point Paul is making when he talks about what God had done in his life.

God had taken the wildest, most violent of blaspheming persecutors and transformed him into a believer and an evangelist. If God can do that, Paul is saying, there is nobody out there anywhere.

There is no heart so hard. There is no anger so bitter that it remains outside the reach of God's patient mercy.

Above all, I think Paul's story is showing the heart of Christ to sinners. We remember the heart of Jesus on the cross, Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.

[29 : 15] And that is the heart of Jesus still in heaven. And Jesus invites everyone to come to him. That's why chapter 2 verse 6, where I refer to a ransom says, he's a ransom for all.

An expression highlighting the free offer of the gospel to anyone and everyone. And you see the logic is, if it's for all, then it's for you, whoever you are today.

If Jesus is a ransom for all, then he's offered to you as your Savior. And this Jesus is worthy of your trust.

Verse 15, this is a trustworthy saying. In a world of lies then and now, Paul is saying, this is worth believing, this is worth sharing, this is worth retweeting, this is worth whatever.

It's a reliable saying because it's about the reliable Jesus who has proved himself in life and death and resurrection to a Savior who deserves our trust and countless multitudes through the generations and across the cultures have proved Jesus to be reliable, have found this to be trustworthy.

[30 : 34] And then Paul says this saying deserves full acceptance, literally all acceptance. That could mean everyone's acceptance, Jesus is worthy of the trust of the whole world.

Or it could mean wholehearted acceptance, he's worthy of my whole acceptance, all of my being, which is true too. Paul is saying Jesus is worthy of everyone's complete trust.

He's worthy of my trust and your trust. And we're invited to rest our faith on him. It is literally towards the end of verse 16, to believe on him, to come exhausted to Jesus with all my baggage and say, I believe you're the truth, I will now rest my faith, rest my soul, my heart, my life, my eternity.

I will just collapse them onto you and trust you to take the weight forever. We are to believe on Jesus, he's trustworthy and we can rest our faith on him.

How far grace reaches all the way to Paul. And the fourth point, I won't go into my time, the time I was given as up. How far grace lasts, all the way to eternity.

[32 : 00] I was going to speak about grace taking us and guaranteeing eternity because verse 16 talks about believing for eternal life.

When we've been there 10,000 years, amazing grace's praise is only just beginning. And also I was going to think a little about grace in eternity, grace in glory, because grace means God's generosity.

And we will never exhaust God's generous grace. He will always be giving us new things to enjoy forever and forever. So if I can sum up what I was going to say, grace guarantees glory forever.

And grace saturates glory forever. And this grace is secure for us.

I also concluded basically a five minute riff on angels going back over all of this and saying, we don't believe it. He's not going to come that distance.

[33 : 10] He's not going to go for the womb and a manger and diapers and whatever. And then the cross, he's not going to go that distance and then Paul, he's not going to go into his heart.

And then eternity, we're not going to shade eternity with these people forever. 10,000 years is fine, but I let you yourselves speculate on two gossipy angels being amazed at the journeys that Jesus travels in grace for us.

But I want to finish with this because it struck me just a couple of days ago as I was thinking about this security of grace. And on Thursday, I went to one of the, what name the bookshop to buy Hilary Mantel's third volume of the trilogy about Thomas Cromwell, The Mirror and the Light.

And you've got a free tote bag with it. Well, it's 900 pages, so I should think 25 quid 900 pages that should give you a free tote bag.

But on the tote bag was written what I presume is a quote from the book. And it says, your whole life depends on the next beat of Henry's heart.

[34 : 27] Now, that's a capricious king. You never knew when Henry was going to say, even to family and friends, off with their head.

Capricious. Your whole life depends on the next beat of Henry's heart. But the Christian is so different because of God's grace. We know that we have always been in God's heart.

And we will never be plucked from the love of his heart. And we know that in our King Jesus, we are secure forever in the love of Jesus.

That's the most amazing thing in a sense about amazing grace, that it's committed, guaranteed, sealed in the blood of Jesus.

And God cannot go back in His word when you trust in Jesus, when you trust in grace, when you receive Him into your life. God is saying, your mind for evermore, I will never go back on my commitment to you.

[35 : 43] Nothing will separate you and me from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. We don't have a capricious king. We have a king who in grace guarantees Jesus to us with all that Jesus has done in all of these great journeys of grace.

And this Jesus is guaranteed to me and you forever in God's amazing grace. Amen.