

GOD'S AMAZING GRACE!

2022

Recently, someone shared with me the story of a woman who at a young age was raped, and later on in life was diagnosed with cancer. She obviously came out emotionally scarred from the first traumatic experience. Fortunately, she was cured of cancer, but not after going through chemo with the dreadful side effects. As I listened, I sincerely felt compassion for her, yet I was deeply saddened by what happened next. She grew up in a Christian home, but she couldn't understand why God had allowed such terrible trials in her life. And as she coped with these overwhelming challenges, she eventually lost all faith in God. What a heart-wrenching story...

We often hear similar stories of people going through very difficult ordeals in their lives, and the first question we are likely to ask ourselves is, "Why does a loving God allow these awful things to happen to good people?" We're sometimes quick to put the blame on God, aren't we? But are we as quick to recognize His love as He allows good things to happen to good people, and to us personally? When all goes well, it's so easy to take for granted all the blessings God bestows upon us, isn't it?

It would be idealistic to believe that we could eliminate all the trials and afflictions in our lives. Of course, if we'd live in a perfect and sinless world, it would be a very different story. But as we know it, it's not the case. From the time of Adam and Eve, humanity suffers the consequences of their sin: evil in all its forms, diseases, emotional/physical pain and suffering, the hatred and violence, wars, and ultimately death itself. Unlike a popular theory, God's role in dealing with evil is never as the author. God is sovereign, and He does overrule evil for His own wise and holy ends in the lives of His children. Ultimately, He makes all things work together for good to those who love Him, and remain faithful to Him. We can't always comprehend God's ways when we go through trials, and to question Him is sometimes hard to resist. However, God sees the end results, and He will always make a way for us to overcome when we trust Him and surrender all.

There is also the other side of the coin to consider.

Conversely, we can ask ourselves... "Why does God send rain on the righteous *and* the unrighteous, like Jesus said?" "Why does He allow some people who won't give Him the time of day to enjoy the simple pleasures of life, to be blessed financially or otherwise?" "Why does He allow them to live when the penalty of their sin is what they deserve?" Simply put, because God is loving and merciful. He gives them time to be reconciled to Him. Actually, withholding death to people who refuse to repent, even only for a limited time, is an act of immeasurable kindness from God, and proof of His gracious, loving nature.

Among the many parables Jesus gave, the one about the prodigal son is surely the most touching, compelling, and comforting of all. It shows such a clear, and humbling picture of God's loving and saving nature. This parable is about two sons, and in the middle is a loving father. Based on this story, it would be right to call one, "the bad son", and the other, "the good son". But the father is really the "star" in this story.

One day, even before his father's death, the younger son decides to ask for his share of his estate. The father is probably overwhelmed with grief by his request, but because of his deep love for him, he agrees to it, and gives him his freedom. The son then leaves home, and lives openly in wickedness and immorality. But his life doesn't turn out the way he thought it would, and he eventually comes to his senses... He evaluates his sin, where it leads him, and realizes that he can't change his life on his own. So, what does he do? He returns home, trusting that his father will take him back, even if he finds him unworthy to be called his son. Now, what happens next is truly amazing!

His father sees him a long way off, which means he has actually been waiting for his son, hoping for him,

loving him while he's gone... The father sees him, feels compassion for him, and runs to him. He throws his arms around him, and kisses him. Now, let me just add a bit of information to help us better understand what happens here. Apparently, back then, Middle Eastern noblemen didn't run for anyone. Even among the Jews, it was considered a shame for a man to show his legs. It would have been unthinkable to him to hike up his robe, and run through the streets. But this father does exactly that. He runs as fast as he can, unconcerned about what others might think of him, to meet his rebellious son. And what does he do next? He puts a ring on his finger, puts a robe on him, brings him back to his household, and then makes preparations for a big celebration in his honor. All is forgiven. The past is forgotten. The son is reconciled with his father. And the father not only takes him back as a son, but he gives him all his privileges. That's the beauty of it all, isn't it? After listening to this part of the story, how can anyone doubt God's love for all, His capacity to love sinners *even* before they repent?

Now, we usually don't hear much about the other son. The attention is mostly focused on the prodigal son. But he is as bad as his young brother since he doesn't even try to convince him that what he's doing is morally wrong. And when his brother returns home, and he hears about the big celebration his father is planning, he gets angry. His father is the happiest man on earth, but he doesn't share his happiness. And you know why? Because he thinks it's unfair... His father is being unfair to him. He stays home, does everything he is supposed to do, and does it the way his father wants him to. But his father never prepared a feast for him... Undoubtedly, this son always performs very well. But does he really love his father?

He does everything according to code, so to speak. He thinks this is enough to gain his father's approval, but he doesn't have a close relationship with his father either. He doesn't think that he's as bad as his brother. I could compare him to some of us who call ourselves religious. Oh, we may appear to be good, humanly speaking. We help people. We're kind and charitable. We're philanthropic. We go to church. But at the end of the day, we're all sinful people from birth. And if our motive to do these things is to earn our way to heaven or glorify ourselves rather than God, then it's wrong. We begin to convince ourselves that by doing good works, we're far better than we really are... Our works then produce self-satisfaction, self-gratification and pride, which is the most serious of all sins.

So, what does this parable tell us? Essentially, no matter how rebellious or self-righteous we have been; how low we have stooped morally or spiritually; how indifferent toward God or angry with Him we have been; how far we have strayed from God, there's always hope for reconciliation. And when God acknowledges a repentant heart, He always provides forgiveness. He forgets our previous failures or past sinful ways. He doesn't just turn a blind eye. His forgiveness is perfect, complete, and everlasting. And as the father in this parable, He embraces us, gives us back our privileges as His son or daughter, and our relationship is restored.

I sincerely pray for this woman I mentioned earlier, and for all those who somehow have lost their faith in God. I hope they return to their Heavenly Father who is patiently waiting for them. And when they do, they will start off with a clean slate. What a joyful day it will be for them, and in heaven too, as these words from Jesus prove it: "I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

What more can I add to this? Only one word... AMEN!