

What Is God Like? (Volume 2)

Introduction

This second volume of ‘What Is God Like?’ continues the voyage of discovery into the character of God that we began in volume 1. In that booklet we have seen that no one else is as great and glorious as God is, and we shall find that underlined further in our Bible studies in this second volume. And that itself is a helpful reminder that what this booklet contains is only a very small indication of the amazing nature of God. It is, if you like, a first step in discovering what God is like, and we pray it will encourage you to look into the Bible further on each of the areas we shall think about. But even more important than that very essential exercise, our greatest desire of all is that what you learn about God in these pages will make you want to know him personally in your own life, and to know him more and more each day. The Bible teaches us that we come to know God through following the Lord Jesus Christ who is the only way to him (John 14:6), and the more we know the Lord Jesus the more we shall understand about God’s wonderful being.

This booklet is based on the series of ‘*Sound Words*’ which has the same title. I am very grateful indeed for the help given in the production of this series by Colin Vincent. Colin is the pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Bexleyheath, which is not very far from London in England.

As with all the ‘*Sound Words*’ study booklets, you will benefit mostly from reading this one if you do so prayerfully, asking God himself to be your teacher. This book is about him, and therefore you need him to help you understand something of his glorious nature. It is also important to have your Bible with you as you read, so that you can look up each of the Bible passages referred to. Some verses will be written out in full, but there will also be a number of other references for you to find in the Bible yourself. May God bless you as you study the things he has revealed to us about himself in the Bible, and may this cause you to love and trust him with all your heart.

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Chapter 1 God is good

The theme of God’s goodness runs throughout the Bible like a golden thread. We discover from its pages that God does good, and more than that, he is good in his very nature. A part of the Bible where this aspect of God’s character is declared so plainly is in the Psalms. Consider these two examples: (Psalm 100:5) “*For **the Lord is good** and his love endures for ever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.*” (Psalm 34:8) “*Taste and see that **the Lord is good**; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.*”

1) God’s goodness explained.

We need to think about God’s goodness in two ways.

a. The Bible teaches us that God is pure goodness in himself.

God is the highest good, he is infinitely good, and he is constantly good. We read in Psalm 119:68, *“You are good, and what you do is good...”* This means that God is the final standard of goodness. It also means that all he does is worthy of approval, not only by man, but by God himself. As we think of God’s goodness in this way it is closely linked with his holiness (which we will consider in volume 3). This also helps us to answer the question ‘What is good?’ We can do that by answering another question, namely, ‘Does God approve of this?’ because God only ever approves of what is good because he is good.

b. The Bible teaches us that God delights to do good.

This is seen in the way God deals kindly and generously with all his creatures, and it is this we are going to concentrate on in the rest of this study. Again the Psalms provide us with ample evidence of this: (Psalm 36:6) *“Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your justice like the great deep. O Lord, you preserve both man and beast.”* (cf. Psalm 104:21); (Psalm 145:8-9) *“The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.”* (Psalm 145:16) *“You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.”*

The kindness of God is amazing because he showers it upon everyone, even his enemies! This comes out in the words of the Lord Jesus Christ in the ‘Sermon on the

Mount’, where Christian believers are instructed to respond to their enemies with kindness (Matthew 5:44-45):

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

Another example is found in Paul’s words to the people of Lystra. These were an idolatrous people and certainly not godly, yet Paul reminds them of how good God had been to them (Acts 14:17):

“... he (i.e. God) has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.”

2) God’s goodness displayed.

The Bible teaches us that God’s goodness is seen in a number of important areas.

a. In creation

When we considered that God is wise (see volume 1 page 42), we saw that one of the ways where his wisdom is displayed is in creation, and this is the same also with his goodness. Indeed, repeatedly through Genesis chapter 1 where God’s great creative work is described, we find the phrase, *“And God saw that it was good”* (v10, v12, v18, v21, v25). Then when all of creation was completed, including the creation of man, we read in Genesis 1:31, *“And God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.”*

As we consider God's handiwork closely we see his kindness displayed in every part of his creation, and this is seen supremely in his kindness to man. As David considered his own body he glorified God and wrote in Psalm 139:14, *"I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well."* We can see this ourselves quite easily. Consider, for example, how suited our hands are to perform the work they were intended and needed to do. How hard it would be to do the simplest of things such as holding something if our fingers had no joints! But God is good and he made us, and his goodness is seen in this very ordinary and practical way. Another example is how his goodness is seen in giving us eyelids to protect our eyes. Think how painful it would be if every speck of dust or sand that was blown onto our faces by the air got into our eyes! But God in his goodness has given us eyelids to prevent that. Then think of God's goodness in giving us tongues that can taste. How unenjoyable and dull our food would be if we could not recognise the different flavours in our food! But in his goodness God has given us this wonderful sense. And we can add our other senses, too, of sight and hearing and smell and touch, which all bring us tremendous enjoyment in life. God in his goodness has created these things. These are just a very few examples of God's goodness displayed in creation. There are literally millions more! (See Psalm 104 which is a hymn of praise to our good Creator God, and will give you further examples of his goodness in creation.)

b. In his dealings with sinful man.

Although God revealed his solemn anger and displeasure and judgement when sin first entered the world (Genesis 3), how kind God was not to pour out the full weight of his holy anger and wrath on the human race at that time! If he had done so none of us would have come into existence, for Adam and Eve would have been destroyed instantly. In addition, how good God has been not to deprive his fallen sinful creatures of every blessing and comfort and enjoyment in this world. This is something he could well have done, and which we certainly deserve. But God is good, and his goodness is displayed in this kindness. Now a day is coming when his judgement will fall on rebellious men in all its solemnity and we must never forget that, but God in his goodness waits, and Peter tells us why (2 Peter 3:9): *"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise (i.e. his promise of judgement), as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."* This leads on to the way God's goodness towards sinful men is seen supremely. By this we mean his provision of a Saviour, his own dear Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. We read of his coming into the world in these words in Galatians 4:4, *"But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons."* How good God must be to do such a thing for undeserving and rebellious sinners. It is no wonder that when the birth of Jesus was announced to the shepherds outside Bethlehem on the night he was born, that Luke tells us the very angels of God could not hold back but burst forth in adoration and praise of God (Luke 2:14): *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to*

men on whom his favour rests.” And therefore what a great sin it is when men reject Christ and refuse to receive him as their Lord and Saviour! It is trampling God’s goodness under foot.

c. In his dealings with his people.

It is here that God’s goodness and tenderness is very wonderfully displayed, as any Christian believer will be able to testify. Believers enjoy God’s goodness to them in a wide variety of ways. For example, Christian believers are eternally secure in the safe keeping of God, our loving heavenly Father (Psalm 31:19-20):

“How great is your goodness which you have stored up for those who fear you, which you bestow in the sight of men on those who take refuge in you. In the shelter of your presence you hide them from the intrigues of men; in your dwelling you keep them safe from accusing tongues.”

No one and no thing can separate the disciple of Jesus from his love (see Romans 8:37-39). Further, throughout our lives, God not only watches over us, but provides for our every need (Psalm 84:11): *“For the Lord God is a sun and a shield; the Lord bestows favour and honour; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless.”* These words encourage us to cultivate a blameless and godly life, which itself will do us great good. They also teach God’s children that because he knows what is best for us, if he ever says ‘No’ to our requests, it is because he knows it would not be good for us. This then enables believers to rest and trust in him knowing he is

promoting our eternal well-being. And that is a wonderful antidote to discontentment and the temptation to grumble and complain when we are deprived of certain things we would like to have, but which God sees best to keep from us. Remember, God only ever gives good gifts to us. We read in James 1:17, *“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”* We can also say that having met our greatest need, the need for our sins to be forgiven, through giving us the greatest gift of all, the Lord Jesus Christ, God will also meet every other and lesser need (Romans 8:32): *“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all - how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”* Indeed, God’s goodness is showered upon his children even when he sees the need to discipline us. His whole intention at such times is to bring us the greatest benefit, that we might share in his holiness (Hebrews 12:10-11): *“Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”* Because God is good, he never misuses nor abuses us, but in his great love intervenes in our lives for good, and he does this all the time. This has led one godly Christian believer, A. W. Pink, to write: *“God is not only the Greatest of beings, but the Best.”*

3) Applying the truth that God is good.

As with all that we discover about God from the Bible, we need to ask ourselves, how should our understanding of God's goodness influence us? What bearing should it have on our lives and how we live today? Here are a number of ways this should be seen in our lives.

i. It should make us grateful.

The goodness of God should always lead us to thank and praise him. This was the great desire of the psalmist in Psalm 107:8, "*Oh that men would give thanks to the Lord for his goodness, and his wonderful works to the children of men!*" It was also part of Paul's instructions to the Thessalonian Christians in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, "*Be joyful always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*" Cultivating a thankful attitude is very important. Sadly, we live in a very ungrateful world that is self centred and selfish, and which constantly wants to take without ever returning thanks. That attitude should never be found in the hearts of Christian believers. The way to safeguard against such a thing happening is to remind ourselves often of all that God has done for us. We should especially think about what he has done in and through the Lord Jesus Christ and the shedding of his precious blood at Calvary. If we do these things this will keep us ever thankful to our God for his goodness to us.

ii. It should encourage us to pray.

Consider this: if God was not good, but unkind, cruel, insensitive and hard, then we could never bring our needs to him with any sense of hope, and we would constantly be

afraid. But the Bible teaches us that God is good, and that is a tremendous encouragement to come to him at every point of our lives and with every need we have, and seek his help in prayer. Indeed, Jesus taught his disciples this very thing in Matthew 7:7-11:

"Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"

iii. It should help us in trials.

God's goodness is a tremendous help to believers because it enables us to trust him when life becomes difficult and painful and we find ourselves in distress. The prophet Nahum expressed it like this in Nahum 1:7: "*The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him...*" Nahum's words are very similar to those found in Proverbs 18:10, "*The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe.*" The Christian believer knows the Lord can always be depended on at such times, and his unfailing goodness is there for us to draw on and rest in. As believers, we know that God has some good purpose for us in all that happens in our lives, and we therefore can trust him implicitly (cf. Romans 8:28).

iv. It should encourage us to imitate his goodness.

We have already touched on this earlier in this study when we reminded ourselves of the teaching of the Lord Jesus (see Matthew 5:43-48), where he taught us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, because God is good to his enemies also. But there are many other Bible passages which urge us to be like our Father in heaven: (Galatians 6:10) *“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”* (Luke 6:27) *“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you.”* (See also Luke 6:32-36.) Indeed, one of the reasons why God has given us the Bible and commanded us to study it is (2 Timothy 3:17) *“... so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”* As others look at us - members of our families, those who live near us, colleagues at work, or friends at college or school - what is their assessment of us? As we look at God, we can only conclude that he is good. Do others see a reflection of his goodness in us? God’s goodness to us should be seen in our being good to others.

v. It should stimulate us to seek God with all our hearts.

Because God is good, to know him more and more should be the greatest desire we have. It was certainly the deep longing of the psalmist Asaph in Psalm 73. He had been battling with the great problem of the prosperity of the wicked who seemed to get away with their evil deeds, and this fact troubled him greatly. However, when he brought God into the picture he realised that the apparent prosperity

of the wicked was only short lived, where by contrast he had the Lord. This led him to write in Psalm 73:25-26, *“Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.”* Because Asaph knew that God is good, he therefore longed to know him better and walk closer to him.

Another of the psalmists described this yearning after God in this very graphic way (Psalm 42:1-2): *“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God.”* It is evident that these psalmists had done as David instructed in Psalm 34:8, and had already tasted that the Lord is good, and therefore no one else could satisfy them. The great question is, do you desire to know the God who is good like that? It is a mark of one who is truly his child.

Chapter 2 God is love

A very precious truth that the Bible constantly reveals and stresses is that God is love. It is a theme that we find running like a refreshing stream throughout its pages. Perhaps the most well known statement about this aspect of God’s character was written by John (1 John 4:8): *“... God is love.”* It is not simply that God is a loving God, although that is perfectly and wonderfully true of him as we shall consider shortly, but John is teaching us that God’s very nature is love. He is pure love. Indeed in 1 John 4:7 we read that *“... love comes from God...”* In other words, he is its source; it originates in him, because he is

love. The word that John uses in 1 John 4:8 is the Greek term ‘agape’ (pronounced agapay) which means a self giving love. And this term teaches us that God’s love means he eternally gives of himself to others. To understand the depth of God’s love we need to consider it under two main headings, and then, thirdly, to think about our response.

1) Love within the Godhead.

While the Bible teaches us that there is only one God, it also teaches us that this one God is in three persons, the Father, the Son (i.e. the Lord Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit (cf. 2 Corinthians 13:14). And within the Godhead there is a perfect love between each of the three persons, and that has always been true for the whole of eternity, from before the beginning of time. In a sense it is very difficult for our minds to go back to before the beginning of time, but none-the-less the Bible teaches us that love was expressed and enjoyed by each of the persons of the Trinity in eternity. Each of the Divine Persons gave himself to each other person in the Godhead in love, and delighted in each other and sought to honour each other.

The Bible only gives us small glimpses of this, but what it reveals is sufficient to help us understand the perfect love that has always existed within God himself. For example, just before he was crucified the Lord Jesus spent time in prayer with his Father, and this prayer is known as his high-priestly prayer, and is found in John 17. As this prayer drew to its conclusion Jesus expressed his desire that every believer would be with him and be able to see his glory. As he described his glory he said this in John

17:24, “... *the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.*” God the Father loved his own dear Son before time had even begun. And that love did not stop even while he was here on earth, for Jesus also said in John 3:35, “*The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands.*” Note the present tense of that word ‘love’. God the Father keeps on loving his Son, and indeed he will never cease to love him, because God is love. He delights in his Son and honours his Son. On several occasions during his earthly ministry, the Lord Jesus Christ heard his Father express his love for him. At his baptism in Matthew 3:17, “*A voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’*” Then at his transfiguration, we read in Matthew 17:5, “*While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him.’*” This honour given to the Son by the Father is expressed by Paul when he wrote about the Lord Jesus Christ in his letter to the Philippian believers (Philippians 2:9-11):

“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Similarly, the Lord Jesus Christ has always perfectly delighted in and sought to honour his Father in heaven (John 14:31): “... *the world must learn that I love the*

Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me.” His was a life of constant love and delight in his Father, and that was shown while he was on earth by his life of continual and perfect obedience to him. We need to remember that Jesus never sinned (see 2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15, 7:26; 1 Peter 2:22; 1 John 3:5), and this demonstrates most remarkably that God the Son’s love for God the Father is immense; it is perfect love.

Although the Bible does not specifically say that this love of the Father and the Son was shared with the Holy Spirit, we can confidently presume that this was so, for the very thought of any disunity within the Godhead is itself absurd. In addition, we can say that it is through the Holy Spirit that the love of God has been poured into every Christian believer’s heart (Romans 5:5), and therefore he is full of the love of God.

While it is impossible for us fully to understand the love that exists between the persons of the Trinity, we can at least appreciate this: heaven must be absolutely full of love and joy and blessedness because each person of the Trinity seeks to bring joy and happiness and glory to each other. And this, therefore, makes the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ into this sinful and sorrowful world, all the more remarkable and a tremendous step of condescension. Paul described it like this in 2 Corinthians 8:9,

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”

And this again tells us of Jesus’ great love for the Father because he was obeying his Father’s will by coming to the earth. It also indicates his selflessness to give up heaven’s joys and glory, and his love for sinful men because it was to save such that he came. This leads us to consider the second main point about the love of God that we discover in the Bible.

2) Love that saves sinful men.

a. A love that reaches out to sinners.

From our perspective this is where we see and can appreciate the truth, perhaps most easily, that God is love. God’s love for sinful men and women is demonstrated so clearly in both the sending and the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ into the world. Because God loved sinners he sent Jesus, and because Jesus loved sinners he came. An important lesson to grasp is that God did not send the Lord Jesus so that as a result of his work he could then love us, but instead it was because he loved sinners that he sent his Son to be our Saviour. This is spelled out for us in one of the best known verses in all the Bible (John 3:16):

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

This is also emphasised by John when he tells us that it is not even the Christian believer’s loving response that motivated God to send Jesus (1 John 4:10): *“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”*

The love that God has shown to sinful men was a truth that Paul was continually amazed at, and this is what he wrote to the Christians living in Rome (Romans 5:8), "... *God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*" Then note particularly these words from Paul (Galatians 2:20): "*The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, **who loved me and gave himself for me.***" They teach us two great truths.

i. This is a love for individual sinners.

God's love is a particular and personal love - '*the Son of God, who loved me.*' Paul realised that the Lord's love brings his personal involvement with the individual sinner. And how amazing this is! The Lord of the universe has a deep concern and interest in us - we who are so small and insignificant and just dust and ashes in his sight - yet we are precious to him.

ii. This love is costly.

It cost the Lord Jesus Christ his life to save us! This is a love that gives, and gives to the uttermost. And that in turn helps us to understand how serious sin must be in God's eyes, and how much each Christian believer owes to the Lord. Therefore, how we should love and serve him!

b. A love that is lavished on each Christian believer.

We need to note two important things about this love which God showers on those who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

i. God has shown this love to us freely and sovereignly.

He was not forced or compelled by any reason whatsoever into loving us. There was nothing within us that made us attractive or which prompted him to treat us in such a special way. In fact, there was much in us to produce the opposite. We were sinners and had broken his law, and therefore there was every reason for God to repel us, but instead he has freely and sovereignly chosen to love us. And it has always been this way with those who have been the recipients of God's saving love. Moses pointed this out to the people of Israel many centuries ago (Deuteronomy 7:7-8): "*The Lord did not set his affection on you or choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was **because the Lord loved you...***" Note carefully that God did not set his affection on them because he thought they were such a great people and were so wonderful. In fact, they were only a very small number, and therefore very frail and weak. Instead, it was simply because he freely chose to do so. John tells us the reason why the Christian believer today loves God is this (1 John 4:19): "*We love **because he first loved us.***" Indeed, we must confess that if God had to wait for us to love him before he loved us then he would still be waiting!

ii. This love is eternal.

The prophet Jeremiah brings this out in a delightful way (Jeremiah 31:3): "*The Lord appeared to us in the past, saying: **'I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving kindness.'***" This is really beyond our full grasp and comprehension, but how

marvellous to know that God loved his people before heaven and earth were called into existence! And Paul brings this out for us in the New Testament. We read in Ephesians 1:4-5, “*For he (i.e. God the Father) chose us in him (i.e. the Lord Jesus Christ) before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Christ Jesus, in accordance with his pleasure and will...*” And the great significance of this for Christian believers today is this: as God’s love for us had no beginning, neither will it ever end. His love for us is from everlasting to everlasting, and therefore is the most solid ground for our assurance of salvation. If our salvation depended on us, and our efforts and our good works, we could never have any assurance that we had done enough to satisfy God’s demands. This is not to say that good works are unimportant for the Christian believer, but it is not these things that secure our salvation, they are only an indication that we are indeed saved. But wonderfully our salvation depends upon the love of God, which he has shown to us in Christ. And therefore we need not doubt nor fear the future. God who began to love us before time began, will go on loving us for all the ages of eternity to come, and nothing shall separate us from that love (Romans 8:37-39). This is intended by God to bring us great joy and comfort now, because the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have devoted themselves to bring us true joy and everlasting happiness. And this is true for every single follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. How gracious God is to love us so!

3) Our response.

In answering the question, ‘How should this marvellous truth that God is love affect us?’, there are a number of things for us to consider.

a. We should love God in return.

If you are a Christian believer then anything less is both unworthy of the great love that God has shown to us, and also to be very, very ungrateful. Indeed, the Lord Jesus Christ has told us we are to thank God with all of our being (Matt hew 22:37): “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*” And one of the supreme ways in which true love for God is seen, is in lives that are obedient to him (1 John 5:3): “*This is love for God; to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone who is born of God overcomes the world.*” This was something the Lord Jesus Christ taught throughout his ministry. In John 14:15 Jesus said, “*If you love me, you will obey what I command.*” Later in the same chapter we read in John 14:23-24, “*Jesus replied, ‘If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching.’*” From this we can see that a disobedient life is not one that indicates a real deep love for God. Indeed, a disobedient life may well indicate that person is not a Christian believer at all, even if they claim to be one!

We also display a true love for God by not loving the sinful ways of the world and by refusing to conform to its pattern of living (1 John 2:15-17):

“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world - the cravings of sinful man, the lust of the eyes and the boasting of what he has and does - comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives for ever.”

It may well mean that living such a lifestyle will bring upon Christian believers the scorn and ridicule and hostile persecution of unbelieving men and women, but be encouraged by these words from A. W. Pink: *“How good to know that when the world hates us, God loves us!”*

While it is the love of God for us that is our prime motive for responding to him in this way (see 1 John 4:19), the Bible also gives us another amazing reason for doing so. God rejoices when we love him! Consider these two Bible passages: (Isaiah 62:5) *“... as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.”* (Zephaniah 3:17) *“The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.”* These are two really remarkable statements, and a tremendous encouragement genuinely to love and serve the Lord our God.

b. We should love other people.

When Jesus said that to love God was the first and greatest of all the commandments, he added in Matthew 22:39 that the second was, *“Love your neighbour as yourself.”* And that is a very far-reaching command. Our love for others is

to be like his love for us, and it is described so penetratingly by Paul (1 Corinthians 13:4-8): *“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”* The most perfect example of all of these aspects of true love is the Lord Jesus Christ himself, who displayed each of them during his earthly life.

The outworking of this in our own lives is to be seen in several directions.

i. We are to love fellow believers.

In John 15:12 Jesus said, *“My command is this: love each other as I have loved you.”* Indeed, it is the way that will show to our harsh, wicked, self-centred and cruel world that we truly belong to Christ. (John 13:35) *“By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”* (See also 1 John 4:11.) And this love is immensely practical, as Paul shows us in his letters to the Romans and the Galatians. (Romans 13:10) *“Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.”* (Galatians 6:2) *“Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.”* (Galatians 6:10) *“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”* And the writer to the Hebrews referred to a lovely example of the believer’s love for other Christians when he wrote in

Hebrews 10:34, *“You sympathised with those in prison...”*

ii. We are to love others.

When Jesus was asked the question, ‘Who is my neighbour?’, the one we are to love, he told the story or parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. In that story a traveller going from Jerusalem to Jericho was attacked, robbed and left half dead on the roadside. Two other travellers passed by without offering the man any help whatsoever, even though they were both religious men, a priest and a Levite. But then a man from another country and from another religion came along the road and gave the man his help, bound up his wounds, and took him to an inn to be cared for, paying the cost out of his own pocket. He was a Samaritan. It was this man who showed true love for his neighbour, and the Lord Jesus Christ said that we are to do likewise (Luke 10:37). We are to have a love and concern for others that actually includes our involvement in seeking to help them with their needs. Indeed, Jesus went further, and told us we are also to love our enemies! (Matthew 5:43-45) *“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.”* This is by no means an easy thing to do, but one thing that will help us is regularly to remind ourselves that God loved us when we were his enemies (Rom 5:8; 1 John 3:16). Though we were sinners, rebels against him, disregarding him and disobeying his commands, he still

loved us, and gave his Son to die as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. When we realise how utterly unworthy we are of such amazing and extravagant love which God has lavished on us, it will help us to love him, to love one another, and to love even our enemies.

Chapter 3 God is gracious

Peter describes God in this way in 1 Peter 5:10: he is *“... the God of all grace...”* God’s grace is very closely linked to his love, but is more narrowly or precisely defined. By ‘the grace of God’ we mean that expression of his love which he shows in pardoning sin. A Christian teacher of a former time named Abraham Booth, defined God’s grace like this:

“It is the eternal and absolute free favour of God, manifested in the granting of spiritual and eternal blessings to the guilty and unworthy.”

It is truly a marvellous aspect of God’s character, and without it there would be no hope for any person in the world, for we are all sinful, and we all do that which is wrong and fail to do that which is good and right (see Romans 3:10 & 23; James 4:17). But because God is ‘the God of all grace’ there is hope for sinners and therefore this is a most precious truth for us to understand. The nature of God’s grace is described for us in the Bible, and a number of important points about it need to be emphasised.

1) God’s grace is never deserved.

God’s grace is never earned and its recipients are never ever worthy of it, because it is shown to the guilty. As

sinner we are guilty of rebellion against God and his holy standards of behaviour. The apostle John tells us in 1 John 3:4, *“Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness.”* As sinners we have absolutely nothing within ourselves that in any way whatsoever makes us worthy or deserving of God’s forgiveness. Our disobedience, wrongdoing and rebellion against God makes us worthy of damnation! As sinners we are totally unattractive and wretched; we are ill deserving of God’s grace, and in fact hell-deserving. Therefore God’s grace has been described as his unmerited favour. This is because he showers it on guilty sinners, who in reality deserve only his condemnation, judgement and punishment. And it is this which makes God’s grace something truly amazing.

Paul had a particularly clear grasp of the grace of God, which no doubt came out of his experience of it in his own life. He brings this out in his letter to the Ephesian believers as he describes the goodness of God in saving sinners, and then adopting them into the family of believers through the Lord Jesus Christ. He wrote that this great salvation, which was to God’s praise, was given to us when we were totally undeserving (Ephesians 1:6-7):

“... to the praise of his (i.e. God’s) glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves (i.e. the Lord Jesus Christ). In him (i.e. Christ) we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of his grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.”

This most remarkable action on God’s part towards the guilty caused Paul to write in Ephesians 2:7 of *“...the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.”* The grace of God that results in the forgiveness of sins is something that no human being ever deserves, and makes God’s saving kindness something that far exceeds every and any other form of love we can find amongst men.

2) God’s grace is sovereign.

This really comes out of what we have been saying already. If God is not under obligation to anyone to be gracious to them - which he is not because we are sinners - then when he displays this grace to individuals he does so because he chooses to do so. He is entirely free in whom he decides to forgive. We see this made clear right back in Old Testament days when Moses asked the Lord to show him his glory. The Lord replied in these words in Exodus 33:19:

*“And the Lord said, ‘I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. **I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.**’”*

Paul took up these very words in the letter to the Romans chapter 9 where he was answering a problem that some had faced over God’s forgiveness, namely, why are some people forgiven by God and brought into his kingdom, while others are not? Paul’s answer is very profound, and he presents us with very deep truth beyond our full

understanding, but which we can summarise by saying that God is sovereign over whom he chooses to show his grace (Romans 9:14-16):

“What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ It does not, therefore depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy.”

In these verses the Lord is teaching us that he is not forced or compelled or obligated to forgive anyone. Not that he is reluctant to forgive, because he delights to do that, but each forgiven sinner has become the object of God’s special favour which has been entirely God’s doing, and not ours. He has shown his grace because he wanted to show his grace - the choice was his, not man’s. Now this is a very humbling truth for us to receive, and which the human heart, because it is proud, resists. We all would like to think that we contributed something towards our salvation, but the truth is that we contributed nothing, except the sin from which God’s grace delivered us. Our salvation is entirely God’s doing, as Jonah declared in Jonah 2:9, *“Salvation comes from the Lord.”* God is absolutely sovereign in whom he shows his grace to, and indeed it has to be that way. For if it had been left up to us to obtain God’s grace by our efforts and achievements no one would ever have come to experience God’s forgiveness because:

- i. all our actions are stained by our sinfulness (Romans 3:23, 7:18) and therefore displeasing to God, and

- ii. we were spiritually dead in our transgressions and sins (Ephesians 2:1ff) and therefore incapable of raising ourselves to spiritual life.

God had to forgive us by his sovereign grace or we would never have been forgiven. And just in case any Christian believer should ever be tempted to think that they obtained God’s grace, the forgiveness of their sins, by any worthiness or effort of their own, Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:8-10, *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no-one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”* We can see clearly in those words that the whole emphasis is on God. He sovereignly saves, sovereignly bestows his grace. This is something every true Christian believer knows to be true in his or her heart of hearts.

Let me try and illustrate this by thinking about a question but placing it in two different settings and noting the contrast that arises out of doing that. The question is, ‘Why me, Lord?’ First of all, think about times when unbelievers go through trying experiences. Often unbelievers going through trial or difficulty cry out in anger against God with the question, ‘Why me, Lord?’ In so doing they are blaming God, and are very hostile towards him, and that is always a very tragic and sad response. Now, by contrast, think of this quite different setting for the same question. A sinner has become a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, and through Jesus he has received the forgiveness of his sins. This person also cries

out ‘Why me, Lord?’ It is the same question, but this time not one asked in anger, but in sheer amazement that God has chosen to show him his mercy which he knows he did not deserve. He is so overwhelmed with amazement and gratitude that God has been so gracious to him that he is almost lost for words, and is astonished that God should ever have dealt so mercifully with him. As I said earlier, this is something every true Christian believer can identify with, and this in turn helps us to praise God that he is **“the God of all grace.”** It was this that constrained David to pray with confidence in Psalm 119:132, *“Turn to me and have mercy on me, as you always do to those who love your name.”*

3) God’s grace is a gift.

We have already referred to this by inference as we have looked at our unworthiness to receive God’s grace and God’s sovereignty in bestowing it, but it is worth just isolating this aspect of God’s saving love and dwelling on it for a while. Because God is sovereign in the distribution of his grace to sinners, it means that God’s grace comes to us freely. It is a gift. This is expressed by Paul in Romans 3:22-24, *“There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are **justified freely by his grace** through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ.”*

As we have already noted, God’s grace experienced in his forgiveness of sinners, is not a reward for our works. When writing about the remnant of Jewish Christian believers in New Testament times, Paul wrote in Romans 11:5-6, *“So too, at the present time there is a remnant*

chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.” So we can see that God’s grace cannot be bought or earned or won by our efforts or ‘works’; it can only be given by him. We have no claim on God’s grace and can never demand it. But remarkable as it may seem, God’s grace is a gift which he freely gives. All that we have to do is simply to receive it. And grace can only be received through faith in God’s mercy shown to us in the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 4:4-5): *“Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.”* (See also Ephesians 2:8-9 quoted on the previous page.) The reason why God’s grace is received through faith, and has to be received through faith, is that faith does not depend on self at all, but entirely on God (see Romans 4:16). Faith depends on Christ’s merits and not on ours - we believe in Jesus (see John 3:16).

4) God’s grace is costly.

When we say that God’s grace is costly, we are referring to what it cost God to bring sinners his forgiveness. The cost was immense, and beyond our quantifying in monetary or material terms. Grace has been described using the letters of the word ‘grace’ to stand for the following words:

- G for ‘great’
- R for ‘riches’
- A for ‘at’
- C for ‘Christ’s’ and
- E for ‘expense’

Great riches at Christ's expense. And how true that statement is! The cost to the Lord was the shedding of his own precious blood - his very life. For sinners to enjoy God's grace, his undeserved favour, his forgiveness, Christ had to die on the cross. This was truly a terrible death - terrible physically, and even more terrible spiritually. The Lord Jesus Christ became the sin bearer for all who will believe in him. He took their guilt upon himself, and bore its punishment in their place in full. He was forsaken and cursed for us, as these two Bible passages explain. When Jesus was dying on the cross, we read in Matthew 27:46, *"About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice.... 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'"* Then when Paul was describing what took place when Jesus died he wrote in Galatians 3:13-14, *"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.' He redeemed us in order that the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit."* The great personal cost to the Lord has been wonderfully summarised for us in 2 Corinthians 8:9, *"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich."*

An important matter to note from the Bible passages we have considered so far is that the grace of God comes to us through the Lord Jesus Christ alone, and through no-one else. Some have mistakenly thought grace can be obtained through godly believers of former generations, but the

Bible nowhere teaches this - God's grace comes to us through Christ alone, because it was by Christ alone that the cost of grace was paid (see Romans 5:15, 17 & 21). And this amazing fact shows just how much every Christian believer owes to the Lord Jesus Christ. We owe him everything. Isaac Watts summed it up like this in his lovely hymn 'When I survey the wondrous cross':

*"Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all."*

5) God's grace has glorious consequences.

i. To the believer it brings complete and lasting pardon, and unites us to Christ.

(Ephesians 1:7) *"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding."* What peace this brings to us, peace with God. This is the foundation for all Christian assurance of salvation - God's unfailing grace.

ii. It transforms each recipient, producing holiness of life and likeness to Christ.

There was no one who was more conscious of this great blessing and mercy than Paul himself. He who once hated Christ and persecuted his followers with great ferocity (see 1 Corinthians 15:9) was wonderfully transformed into one who proclaimed the Saviour. He was indeed a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17), and he put this down entirely to the grace of God. He wrote in 1

Corinthians 15:10, *“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them - yet not I, but the grace of God that was in me.”*

iii. It brings the sinner into the family of believers.

This brings the believer tremendous security and privileges. In particular, believers in the Lord Jesus enjoy the privilege of God’s gracious care and of fellowship with other believers (Ephesians 1:4ff): *“For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be **adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ**, in accordance with the pleasure of his will...”* (Galatians 4:4-7) *“But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, to be born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, **that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father.’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.**”* Being adopted as sons of God means each believer belongs both to the Lord himself and also to one another. This brings with it both privileges and responsibilities. Paul indicates this in Galatians 6:10, *“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, **especially to those who belong to the family of believers.**”*

iv. It opens up for us the privilege of prayer.

The believer is now able to approach God’s throne, the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16):

“Let us, then, approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

This Bible passage reminds us that God’s grace to sinners is not only experienced when we first trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and begin to enjoy God’s forgiveness, it also is there to sustain and help us throughout our lives. We can say that the believer, in answer to his prayer, receives grace upon grace from the Lord, and his grace is sufficient for our every need (2 Corinthians 12:9).

v. It is a great incentive for evangelism.

Although man’s sinfulness is an insurmountable obstacle for us to overcome, God’s grace can and does overcome it. We read of the tremendous power of God’s grace in a short phrase in Romans 5:20, *“...where sin increased, grace increased all the more...”* For example, it was God’s grace that enabled Paul and Barnabas to complete their first missionary journey together, equipping them, and using them to bring other sinners to enjoy God’s forgiveness. When they ended that first evangelistic journey we are told in Acts 14:26 *“... they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed.”* Again and again the servants of God have been sustained in preaching the gospel of Christ to lost men and women. They knew the work did not depend on man’s achievements but on God’s grace, and therefore would succeed because the Lord would build his church (see Matthew 16:18). That same grace is an encouragement to us today to take the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to our lost world.

vi. It sustains believers throughout their lives.

As we read through the New Testament we discover that Paul prayed for his brethren who were the recipients of his letters that God would continue to show them his grace. This is sometimes called God's sustaining grace. (Romans 1:7) "*Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.*" (2 Corinthians 9:8) "*And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.*"

vii. It brings us to heaven.

Those whom God forgives by his grace receive a glorious inheritance. Paul expressed this as he gave thanks to God in prayer for the Colossian believers (Colossians 1:12-14): "*... giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*" And Peter describes this inheritance in 1 Peter 1:3-5, "*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade - kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.*" Surely such blessings compel us to declare, 'What a marvellous God the Lord is! **He is indeed the God of all grace!**'

Chapter 4 God is merciful

The Bible repeatedly tells us that God is merciful. (Exodus 34:6) "*The Lord, the Lord God, **merciful** and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness.*" (Psalm 136:1) "*Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for he is good! **For his mercy endures for ever.***" (Psalm 103:8) "*The Lord is merciful and gracious...*" The mercy of God is, of course, very closely linked with both his love and his grace. Indeed, the word mercy is sometimes translated 'love' in a number of Bible versions, so we need to define what the Bible means by the use of this term as it is related to God himself. It has been described in this full, yet very helpful, way.

"The mercy of God is that love whereby he relieves the misery of those who are bearing the consequences of sin. This is seen supremely by us in his dealings with believers, his own dear people, to whom he delights to show his kindness and whom he determines to bless."

This was exactly how God's relationship with Israel was described in the Old Testament (Isaiah 63:9):

*"In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and **mercy** he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old."*

God's relationship with his people is described in a similar way in the New Testament (1 Peter 1:3):

*“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his **great mercy** he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...”*

God’s mercy is often referred to, both in the Bible and by Christian believers, as his tender compassion or lovingkindness.

The Bible teaches us three distinct ways in which God’s mercy is displayed.

1) God is merciful to all creation.

(Psalm 145:9) *“The Lord is good to all; he has compassion (or ‘mercy’) on all he has made.”* This aspect of God’s mercy is enjoyed by all his creation, even animals! God is concerned for all his creatures. He is kind to all, for he has pity on them and feeds them.

2) God is merciful to all mankind.

a. This is experienced by everyone.

God is good and kind to the whole population of the world, helping and providing for them, even though many never acknowledge him at all! Even their very existence is due to God’s kindness. When Paul preached to the philosophers in Athens he declared this about God in Acts 17:25, *“... he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.”* Further, the Lord Jesus Christ commanded his disciples to show mercy to their enemies because that is exactly what God does (Matthew 5:44-45):

“...Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father

in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

b. This mercy is only temporary.

We need to note that these mercies are temporary in nature and do not endure for ever,

- i. because the world will not endure but come to an end one day;
- ii. because unbelievers die.

For unbelievers, this mercy which they enjoy from God through life does not continue beyond the grave. Even so, Paul reminded the people of Lystra about these mercies of God and used them as a basis for urging them to turn to him (Acts 14:15-17):

“...We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.”

And we must add a very important warning at this point. Those who fail to respond to God’s kindness during their lives, and who show no gratitude nor trust him, will discover these very mercies will be evidence against them at the judgement! This is very solemn as Paul points out in Romans 2:4-6,

“... do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realising that God’s kindness leads you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgement will be revealed. God will give to each person according to what he has done.”

And as we think of this solemn subject we must remember the words of Exodus 34:7, “... *he* (i.e. God) *does not leave the guilty unpunished...*” To all who remain in stubborn rebellion to God Jesus said in Luke 13:3, “... *unless you repent, you too will perish.*” Therefore, if you have never done so, acknowledge God’s common mercy and seek him for his saving mercy. An excellent example of someone who did this is seen in the prayer of the sinful guilty tax-collector in Luke 18:13, “*God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*” Jesus said that this man went home justified before God (Luke 18:14).

c. A solemn and important reality.

This most solemn matter, the final judgement of unbelievers, will actually be a mercy towards God’s people. Those who receive God’s kindness, yet resist him and oppose and persecute his people, will not be allowed to do so ever again. Indeed, how dreadful it would be if they could! Praise God that even Satan will be unable to trouble us then, because in the New Jerusalem all wickedness will be banished (Revelation 21:27):

“Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those written in the Lamb’s book of life.”

This is why the psalmist, David, could write in Psalm 143:12, “*In your unfailing love (i.e. mercy), silence my enemies; destroy all my foes, for I am your servant.*”

3) God is merciful supremely to those he saves.

a. In saving us.

As sinners we are under God’s curse because of sin (Genesis 3), and the Lord responds to that plight of his dear people with mercy. They become the heirs of salvation (Romans 8:15-17; Hebrews 1:14; 6:17). This is quite breathtaking, really, because we deserve to be under God’s curse as we are the ones who are guilty, but God’s love is so amazing that he looks on us with great pity. Mary testified to this when the Lord told her he was sending his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to be the Saviour of sinners (Luke 1:54-55): “*He* (i.e. God) *has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants for ever, even as he said to our fathers.*” (See also the similar declaration by Zechariah in Luke 1:72, and by Paul in Romans 15:9.)

This very precious expression of God’s mercy is brought before us helpfully by Paul in the letter to the Ephesians. In Ephesians 2 we are told that God is ‘*rich in mercy*’, and that this richness is seen in his response to the spiritual condition caused by our sin. We were spiritually dead. And this meant we were spiritually lifeless, cut off from God, unable to change or improve our spiritual condition

by the slightest amount. Because of sin, we were helpless and hopeless, hell bound and dominated by it. This is how Paul describes our condition before we became Christian believers, and notice that he includes himself in this description, for this was true of him as well (Ephesians 2:1-3):

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest we were children of wrath.”

The condition represented in those words is tragic, to say the least. We were deserving of nothing less than the terrible judgement of God. Our lives were in misery and distress and great danger, even though we may not have realised it. But God realised it, and as he saw us in that condition he had mercy on us and responded to our incredible need by making us alive in Christ! (Ephesians 2:4-5) *“But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions - it is by grace you have been saved.”* How right and just God would have been to have left us in that terrible lost state, but he did not because he is rich in mercy. His heart was moved with compassion towards us and he saved us from our sin. He did us the greatest possible good, making us alive with Christ. Paul himself never lost the wonder of the fact that God had been

merciful to him (1 Timothy 1:16): *“... I was shown **mercy** so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.”* And the prophet Micah in the Old Testament also wrote about the wonder of God’s mercy (Micah 7:18): *“Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry for ever but **delight to show mercy.**”* And this mercy is something God’s people have enjoyed from the beginning. It was this which caused blind Bartimaeus to cry out to Jesus in Mark 10:47, *“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”* And the Lord responded to his distress and restored his sight.

b. In daily experience.

God is merciful to his people every day (Lamentations 3:22-23): *“Because of the Lord’s great love (i.e. mercies) we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”* Thomas Watson, a Christian teacher of a former time, wrote this lovely statement about God’s mercy, *“As his mercy is overflowing, so it is everflowing.”* In other words, God’s mercy flows out to the Christian believer constantly, and we see this in a number of ways.

i. God’s mercy is seen in providing daily pardon.

The mercy of the Lord towards his people could well be called his forgiving mercy as this is something that believers need throughout their lives. The reason is that in our weakness and folly we still sin, even though we love and follow the Lord Jesus Christ. For example, consider

David's prayer when he sinned against God with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, the details of which are recorded in 2 Samuel 11. He cried out to God with these words found in Psalm 51:1, "**Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgression.**" Mercifully, God did just that (2 Samuel 12:13) and forgave him. Indeed God never ceases to be merciful to his people, as Psalm 136:1 tells us, his mercy endures forever. This is why Christian believers are aptly called in Romans 9:15, "... the objects of his mercy..."

ii. God's mercy is seen in the way he helps us in difficulties.

For example, the mercy of God is displayed when he upholds us in times of sorrow and affliction (2 Corinthians 1:3):

*"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of **compassion (i.e. mercy)** and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God."*

Indeed, David recognised his need of God's mercy every day, and pleaded with God for it. (Psalm 25:6) "**Remember, O Lord, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old.**" (Psalm 40:11) "**Do not withhold your mercy from me, O Lord; may your love and your truth always protect me.**"

It is precisely because God does look in pity on his needy children that we are commanded and encouraged to seek

his mercy in prayer, especially when we are aware of our weaknesses and temptations (Hebrews 4:14-16):

*"Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, **so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.**"*

And Job is held out as an example of one who received this mercy as an encouragement for us to seek God's help when we are being tried and tested (James 5:11): "*As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.*"

c. God's saving mercy is given freely.

Those who receive God's mercy receive it because God alone has chosen to show it to them (Romans 9:15): "*I will have mercy on whom I have mercy...*" As with his grace, God is sovereign with his mercy. Why he shows this saving mercy to some and not to all is because he has chosen to act in that way. It is his good pleasure, and in that we must rest. It is certainly not because some are more worthy of his mercy than others. We read in Titus 3:5, "*... he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, **but because of his mercy...***"

d. God's mercy brings believers to heaven.

Saved sinners, believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, have a wonderful hope that one day God will bring them to heaven, to final salvation and glory. We are taught in the Bible that it is the mercy of God which achieves this in us (Jude 21): *“Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.”* How good to know that God's saving mercy shown to us through the Lord Jesus is everlasting.

Chapter 5 God is patient

We read in Romans 15:5 this precious description of God as *“...the God of patience...”* This patience of God is sometimes described by the older but graphic term ‘longsuffering’ or even ‘forebearance’. This leads us to consider first of all what this term means precisely when the Bible applies it to God.

1) The meaning of God's patience.

By ‘patience’ the Bible means that aspect of God's love whereby he bears with, or puts up with, the sinner who does not take any notice of either God's instructions or his warnings. It is helpful to note that the word ‘patience’ in the Bible is always found in the context of difficulty or provocation, and that is exactly how God's patience is displayed. Sinners provoke God very much by their rebellion against him, yet he is merciful and does not destroy us instantly, but bears with us to an amazing degree. God's patience is his kindness in withholding his punishment from those who sin over a period.

Consider this description of God's patience from the pen of A. W. Pink: *“...the Divine patience is that power of control which God exercises over himself, causing Him to bear with the wicked and forebear so long in punishing them... The patience of God is that excellency which causes him to sustain great injuries without immediately avenging himself. He has a power of patience as well as a power of justice.”*

2) The benefits of God's patience.

a. God's patience means salvation for sinners.

When Paul wrote about those who had refused to seek God's mercy he declared in Romans 2:4, *“... Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realising that God's kindness leads you towards repentance.”* Those he was describing had failed to benefit from the Lord's patience towards them, and thought it meant God would never punish them, so Paul warned them to repent before it was too late. In a similar way Peter spoke about God's patience which brings great benefits with it. He had been speaking about the day of judgement which God has promised will come to this world at the end of time, and he answers the question, ‘Why doesn't God punish the world and destroy it now?’ (2 Peter 3:8-9): *“...do not forget this one thing, dear friends: with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise (i.e. his promise of judgement), as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”* Then a little later he stresses this again (2

Peter 3:15): *“Bear in mind that our **Lord’s patience means salvation**, just as our brother Paul also wrote to you with the wisdom that God gave him.”* In other words, the Lord very graciously gives sinners time to seek his forgiveness.

b. It means God is slow to be angry.

Again and again the Bible teaches us that God is patient by reminding us he is slow to anger. (Exodus 34:6) *“The Lord...passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, ‘The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, **slow to anger**, abounding in love and faithfulness.’”* (Numbers 14:18) *“The Lord is **slow to anger**, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion.”* (Psalm 86:15) *“But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, **slow to anger**, abounding in love and faithfulness.”* (Psalm 103:8) *“The Lord is compassionate and gracious, **slow to anger**, abounding in love.”* (Psalm 145:8) *“The Lord is gracious and compassionate, **slow to anger** and rich in love.”* (Jonah 4:2) *“I knew that you were a gracious and compassionate God, **slow to anger** and abounding in love.”* (Nahum 1:3) *“The Lord is **slow to anger** and great in power.”* How different from us! We are so often very quick to be angry, and even lose our temper at the least little thing, but God is so different. We are also not so ready to forgive an injury or bear with an offender. And what makes God’s patience all the more remarkable is that our sin against him is enormous. It is rebellion and lawlessness. The number of our sins is simply immense. And we sin in the face of God’s great kindness to us, and we sin repeatedly! Even genuine Christian believers sin, as John tells us in 1 John 1:10, *“If we claim we have not*

sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.” Yet God not only does not destroy us immediately, but he continues to be kind to us, sustaining our lives, giving us air to breath, providing for our needs, etc. His patience is most remarkable.

An excellent illustration of this is God’s dealings with Saul of Tarsus, or Paul, as he is now more familiarly known. Before becoming a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, he hated Christ and hated Christians. When Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death, Paul minded the clothes of those stoning him (see Acts 7:58 & 8:1), and he determined to destroy the Christian Church by persecuting and imprisoning believers (Acts 8:3ff). And yet the Lord Jesus Christ did not destroy Paul, but dealt most patiently with him and actually forgave him and transformed his life, as we read in Acts 9. Later on in his life Paul wrote about it in this way in his first letter to Timothy (1 Timothy 1:15-16):

*“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ might display his unlimited **patience** as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.”*

3) The application of God’s patience to our lives.

a. All Christian believers have cause to thank God, for he has been patient with us.

If he had not been, none of us would be forgiven and saved. Even now that we are believers in the Lord Jesus, he continues to exercise patience towards us, because like the early disciples we are so slow to learn from him at times. You may recall how on the first day of the week when Jesus rose from the dead, he joined two disciples walking along the road to Emmaus village. These disciples had failed to grasp that Jesus had told them on more than one occasion that he would rise from the dead, and that many of the Old Testament prophets had foretold his resurrection. Jesus spoke to them in this way (Luke 24:25):

“How foolish you are, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets had spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?”

It was a very pointed and necessary rebuke, but what is so significant is that Jesus did not give up on his ‘slow to learn’ disciples, but he patiently took time to remind them what the Old Testament had said about him (Luke 24:27): *“And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.”* And how often we are slow to learn from him, yet he does not cast us off, but is so gracious with us, and this surely must be a cause for us to praise God for his gentle dealings with us.

b. Christian believers are to imitate God’s patience and be patient themselves.

This is to be worked out in a number of ways in our lives.

i. We are to be slow to anger.

This is to be seen in all our dealings with other people, whether they are believers or not! (James 1:19-20)

*“My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and **slow to become angry**, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.”*

It is so easy for us to get annoyed with others and even to lose our temper. We therefore need to seek the Lord’s help in prayer, and to produce the fruit of the Spirit, part of which is self-control (Galatians 5:23).

ii. We are to be patient in suffering.

I think it is fair to say that this is one of the most difficult things we are called to do. This is particularly the case with suffering inflicted on us because we are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not easy to bear. To help us, the Bible encourages us to consider our Saviour, whose sufferings were the very worst of all, yet he still endured them with great patience, and we are called to do the same (Hebrews 12:2-3):

“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

Peter gives us similar instruction, urging us to serve God patiently in our daily work, even when our earthly employers are unkind (1 Peter 2:18-23):

“Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.”

James also tells us to exercise this patience in the face of trials of every kind (James 1:2-4):

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know the testing of your faith develops perseverance (i.e. patience). Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

And to help us to do this Paul gives us this encouragement (Romans 8:18):

“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”

It is a great comfort to know that our earthly sufferings are only temporary and will soon be over. We have a blessed hope. The glory and joy of heaven will far outweigh any

trials in this life. Then, for the whole of eternity, we shall dwell with the Lord in unending glory and blessedness.

iii. We are to be particularly patient with our fellow believers.

Paul teaches us we are to consider each other with great kindness and tolerance, especially when we might be a cause of irritation to each other (Ephesians 4:1-3):

“... I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

This is a very useful passage because when another believer hurts or wrongs us, it is harder to receive than if it was an unbeliever. A believer in the Lord Jesus Christ should know better! So Paul's instructions turn what is potentially a destructive situation into one that is very constructive. And again, if we simply remind ourselves of how God is patient with us every day of our Christian lives, and of how often our behaviour must be a cause of irritation to him, it will make it much easier to be patient with fellow Christian believers. James adds a further incentive for believers to be patient with each other (James 5:7-8):

“Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble

against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!”

Indeed, to live patiently like this is an evidence God has called us into his kingdom. (See also Romans 8:25, 1 Corinthians 13:4, Colossians 1:11, 3:12, 2 Timothy 3:10 & 4:2, Revelation 2:2-3.)

iv. God’s patience must not be misused.

God’s patience must not be presumed upon. This is a special warning for those who have not yet become followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Some have been tempted to think that because God is patient then they can carry on living a sinful life because God is so tolerant. That is a very dangerous mistake to make, because the Bible teaches us there are times when God withdraws his patience. We have the solemn example of the people of Noah’s day in Genesis 6. Noah took up to 120 years to build the ark (Genesis 6:3), and was a preacher of righteousness (2 Peter 2:5). Through Noah, God warned the people of the judgement he was going to bring by flooding the world, and he waited patiently, but they did not repent of their sins (1 Peter 3:20). Then he sent the flood and it was too late for them, and they perished. It will be exactly like that at the end of the world. God is at present being patient with the world, giving its population the opportunity to repent of their sins and place their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for forgiveness. But this will not continue forever (2 Peter 3:10):

“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will

be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.”

We must be ready for that day, and the only way to be sure you will be ready then, is to be sure you are ready now! Some have thought they could put off seeking God until later in their life. They use the phrase ‘the eleventh hour’ of their lives, meaning when their lives are nearly at their end, then they will seek the Lord. The trouble is that so many who think like that die in their tenth hour and don’t live until their eleventh hour! Therefore, if you are not yet a Christian believer, make the best use of the fact that God has been patient with you so far and spared your life. Seek the Lord Jesus Christ to be your Saviour today, and don’t leave it until it is too late.

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