

The Grace of God

Today we're starting a new series - I'm calling it "Grace", but it's about a lot more than that. It maybe should be called, "What is God really like?" because that will be the overarching question that I will be looking at throughout this series.

Gracie Allen was married to George Burns in the 1920's and the two had a successful comedy routine in both movies and on radio through the thirties and forties. One of Gracie's great lines was, "When I was born I was so surprised I couldn't talk for a year and a half!" We don't come into life knowing what the world is all about, what our role in it will be, how it all happened and where it's all going. We spend a lifetime trying to find answers that satisfy those questions. But each person on this earth does grow up with a story that attempts to explain what life is all about, a story their parents believed, a story their culture believed, a story that made some sense out of their existence and gave them values to live by. Three of the classic stories, the ones that have survived for over 2000 years, come from the period before Jesus was born.

In south Asia, the story centred around a world that had always been. There was no god, no creator, just a force that ordered things and bound them into a unity. This force was, of course, impersonal and unknowable. The Greek world had a remarkably similar view - that of an eternally existing cosmos that was governed by impersonal forces and which became the source of many gods and goddesses who were part of the world and able to influence it.

The Hebrew story was always very different from the Asian or Greek story. In the Hebrew story, Yahweh was the One who had always existed, not the world. In the Hebrew story, Yahweh created the heavens and the earth - in other words, the whole cosmos. In the Hebrew story, Yahweh is not an impersonal force, a set of laws that govern the universe, but is personal and knowable.

There are newer stories, as well, but they share aspects of the more ancient stories. There is the story of scientific naturalism, the belief that humans can answer all of the ultimate questions without reference to God. Like the ancient Asian religions and the thinkers of Greek philosophy, they believe that the universe is governed by laws that are eternal, without a knowable source. They tend to believe in a "law of necessity", that life and order and the constants of the universe somehow had to happen.

The Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all formed out of the belief in a Creator God, also have their unique stories, ideas that separate them from each other. The god of Islam is remote, unknowable, far removed from the daily lives of the people who pray to him five times each day. The God of Judaism has promised a Messiah, a Deliverer, who was to come to rescue His people - but, in their story, He hasn't come yet.

At the heart of the Christian story is the conviction that Jesus was and is the long-ago promised Messiah, that He did come and that He offered up His life as a ransom for many. And one of the most powerful and unique aspects of this Christian story is that

God is not only personal but that His actions towards us are characterized by grace. Not all of the Christian world accepts this, and that's one of the reasons for this series: how we look at God has a massive effect on how we live our lives.

Through the next few weeks, I want to ask some of the hard questions about the God of the Bible. If we are going to "walk humbly with our God", as Micah 6:8 tells us is God's requirement, we have to know Him - know Him enough to trust Him, to learn to depend on Him, to be willing to obey Him.

So, let's enter that process by starting where we were on Good Friday. Jesus, God come to earth in human form, the One who said, "If you've seen Me, you've seen the Father," is dying. In one of His final publicly spoken words, He prays, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." This was the most radical forgiveness because there was no repentance sought or required - Jesus simply asked that those who were executing Him, and those who had demanded His execution, would be forgiven. And the reason for His plea to pardon them is that they were acting in ignorance - they had no clue that they were killing off God's greatest gift to them, His presence with them. And so Jesus, in pity for the ignorance of humankind, asked His Father to forgive those who were so full of hatred and fear that they had determined to end His life.

This is revelation for us. In this we can finally see the heart of God towards us. In His agony on Golgotha, Jesus showed us the extent of His mercy and it raises for us this important question: Is there anyone whose sin is so great that they have removed them-selves from the possibility of receiving God's grace? Is there grace for Jeffrey Dahmer, who came to faith in Jesus Christ in prison while serving 15 consecutive life sentences? There are people who have done horrible things who now claim that they have been forgiven through Jesus' sacrifice on Calvary, Can that really be true? What are the limits on the grace of God?

I want to tell you a story today from a book by Lee Strobel who has written a number of previous books which all started with the words, "The Case for". One of those books, "The Case for Christ" was made into a movie that was released two years ago. The story I'm telling you today is from a book called "The Case for Grace", released in 2015 and it concerns a man who was highly involved in the communist revolution in Cambodia in the mid-to-late 1970's, a period of time when nearly 1/4 of the nation's people were killed. The story is told to Strobel by a man named Christopher LaPel, who grew up in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. He was the son of a high priest and spiritual advisor to Prince Norodom Sihanouk. This is a role that his father hoped that he would someday fill.

One day, while at the Prince's palace, he asked one of the craftsmen to make him a cross out of ivory. When he got his cross, he put it on a chain and wore it underneath his shirt. One day it fell out while he was reaching for food during a family meal and his father saw it. "You shouldn't wear that cross! Remember, we are a Buddhist family." From that time on Christopher wore the cross around the back. That's where it was

on April 17, 1975 when the Khmer Rouge took over and forcibly emptied the towns and cities of Cambodia. According to LaPel, who was 19 years old, they burst in with AK-47s and told everyone that they had to leave their homes immediately and would be allowed to return in three days. Three days turned into three weeks and they soon realized they would never get back home again.

The goal of the Khmer Rouge was to create a society of farmers and labourers, a peasant society. They quickly eliminated people who were educated, who had worked in government, or taught in schools or were journalists. In less than four years, close to 2 million people out of a total population of 8 million were killed. Out of 11,000 university students, only 450 survived the Killing Fields. Just 5% of high school students survived and 9 out of 10 physicians were eliminated. People like LaPel had to convince these new authorities that they were farmers in order to survive.

During this time LaPel was working 12-14 hours a day constructing irrigation ditches. His nutrition was a watery soup and whatever lizards he could catch - his weight dropped to 90 pounds. He was malnourished and became sick and unable to work. Each night the Khmer Rouge would call out names and ask those people to report - they would never be seen again. After missing three days of work, LaPel heard his name called out and the Khmer questioned him about his not working. He told them he had been sick and they checked him for fever. As they checked him out, one pulled his shirt aside to look at his chest and the ivory cross was exposed. Silence came over the room for what seemed like a long time until finally one voice said, "He really is sick - we'll let him go."

As the workload increased, the rations decreased and LaPel became desperate as he kept hearing people pleading for their lives but to no avail. He escaped one night and made it through the jungle to a refugee camp in Thailand, one with a name he didn't understand: Christian Outreach. It was in the refugee camp that he learned the meaning of the cross and gave his life to Jesus. It was in the refugee camp that he met and married another refugee named Vanna. It was from there that they immigrated to the U.S., where he went to school and eventually became pastor of Golden West Christian Church in Los Angeles. From there he continued to minister to his homeland. He conducted many ministry trips to Cambodia and today more than 200 churches can trace their origins back to his ministry of training and equipping Christian leaders.

The rest of his family was not so fortunate. While still captive in Cambodia, he learned that his father and mother had been worked to death. His sister, who had been a broadcaster in Phnom Penh, was slain by the Khmer Rouge and his brother was killed just before the Vietnamese intervened in 1979. His cousin was a scientist who taught in a school. She was arrested and taken to S-21, a former high school that had been converted into an interrogation, torture and killing centre in 1976. Those who lived nearby S-21 referred to it as "the place where people go in but never come out."

The place was run by Kaing Guek Eav, who was known as Duch, a former mathematics teacher who ran the place with brutal efficiency. He had every person who entered as

a prisoner photographed and kept records of every interrogation, every torture session, every forced confession and every murder. You can read some of the details of his inhumane treatment of the prisoners in Strobel's book, but I'm not going to share those with you today. When the Vietnamese and Cambodians captured S-21 in 1979, Duch fled without destroying his meticulous records. During the three years of operation, S-21 took in 14,000 prisoners - only 7 are known to have survived. It is now a genocide museum.

In 1994, fifteen years later, LaPel and his team bought farmland and built a church in northeastern Cambodia. The following year he returned to conduct leadership training among 100 local Christians. One of the participants was a teacher from a nearby village - a man named Hang Pin, who wasn't a Christian but who had lost his wife to the Khmer and who had been stabbed in the back by these same people, a sign that they considered him a traitor to their movement. He was depressed and was very withdrawn.

At the end of his sessions, LaPel would typically give an altar call, an invitation to people gathered there to give their lives to Jesus. At one of these, he was surprised to see Hang come forward. He asked him if he could pray for him but first if there was anything he would like to say. He responded that he had done a lot of bad things in his life and wasn't sure that the Christians there would be able to forgive him. LaPel responded: "God loves you. He can forgive you." He then prayed with Hang and the next day baptized him in the Sangke River. LaPel comments: "Rarely have I seen such an immediate transformation in anyone."

"His attitude, his demeanor — everything changed. Now he was sitting in the front row. He was dressed more neatly, he was excited, he would ask questions and interact with enthusiasm. He couldn't get enough teaching. He was the most attentive of all the students. He took meticulous notes and read the Bible eagerly. He couldn't wait to start a church in his village. Hang Pin returned to his village, led his children to Christ, planted a house church which soon had 14 families. Because of military violence, he ended up in a refugee camp with 12,000 refugees inside Thailand, training health workers and saving countless lives by helping stem a typhoid outbreak. An official with the American Refugee Committee described him as "our best worker, highly respected in the community, clearly very intelligent and dedicated to helping the refugees." A journalist described him as a humanitarian. When the violence subsided, Hang returned to Cambodia and worked with World Vision to provide healthcare to women and children.

Four years after LaPel had first met Hang and led him to faith in Christ, he was awakened by a phone call from a reporter for the Associated Press. This reporter informed LaPel that Hang Pin was none other than Duch, the infamous mass murderer who had been in charge of S-21. Confronted about his identity, Duch had at first been evasive, but then confessed that he had done very bad things. "It is God's will you are here," he told them. "Now my future is in God's hands." Looking at documents that bore his signature and which ordered the deaths of many prisoners, Duch seemed remorseful. "I am so sorry. The people who died were good people," he said through

tears. “The first half of my life I thought God was very bad, that only bad men pray to God. My fault is that I didn’t serve God. I served men; I served communism. I feel very sorry about the killings and the past — I wanted to be a good communist.” He agreed to testify against other Khmer Rouge officials so that they, too, could be brought to justice. About his own incarceration, he said simply, “It’s okay. They have my body; Jesus has my soul ... It is important that this history be understood. I want to tell you everything clearly.” And he did.

At his trial before a United Nations-backed tribunal for crimes against humanity, murder and torture he didn’t hide from his past as other Khmer Rouge killers were trying to do. His testimony made head-lines around the world because of his clear-cut confession of his guilt: “I am responsible for the crimes committed at S-21.” At one point, he was taken in handcuffs back to S-21 to face his accusers and he collapsed in tears, saying, “I ask for your forgiveness — I know that you cannot forgive me, but I ask you to leave me the hope that you might.”

One of the few S-21 survivors exclaimed, “Here are the words that I have longed to hear for thirty years!”

Today, Duch is serving a sentence in a Cambodian prison that will not end until his life on earth ends. There is no appeal. LaPel, who lost his cousin at S-21, visits Duch whenever he travels to Cambodia and relates that the prisoner is continually sharing the good news of God’s grace with his fellow prisoners - mostly Khmer Rouge - and with the guards. He tells LaPel:

I’m not a prisoner; I’m a free man. I rejoice every day of my life. I deserve death. I deserve this punishment. But I have Jesus and so I have love. If I had Jesus before, I never would have done what I did. I never knew about His love.

LaPel was asked to testify in front of the 5-member panel of judges. He was given 90 minutes to preach the good news of God’s love and offer of forgiveness. At one point, a judge leaned forward and asked the question on everyone’s mind: “Was this a genuine conversion?” LaPel had sworn on the Bible to tell the truth. He replied simply, “Yes.”

It’s important to note that, according to Theravada Buddhism, there is no such thing as grace - only the inevitable retribution of karma. Buddhist monks who were interviewed about Duch’s conversion predicted that he would come back in his next life as a bug.

The grace that is described for us in the New Testament is as unique as Jesus is unique. There is nothing like it, just as there is no one like Him. If we draw a line and say that the grace of God cannot go past that line, we are denying the grace that we have received, and we are guilty of undermining the assurance that any of us can be saved. For if we deny that God’s grace can extend to someone who committed such

atrocities as Duch did, then we can only wonder at where the line is and what we might have done that constitutes crossing that line.

But the grace of God, demonstrated in Jesus, is not like that; it's not an unknown line that we can cross one day and then we're beyond hope. The grace that was spoken from the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing," is the grace that extends to all of us. It is not fair, is not dependent on us being found worthy of it, but it is good and liberating and necessary, if we are to live the lives God has created for us to live. We have a long journey ahead of us in these coming weeks - to understand the why and how of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to walk in it with confidence and to extend it to others with a generous heart.