

The Beauty of Jesus—2

In the opening greetings of many of the New Testament letters, we read:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

There are variations to this but the intent is similar. In the letters to Timothy Paul adds ‘mercy’ to the list.

Here is a matter of wonder: grace mercy and peace not only come from God our Father, but also from our Lord Jesus Christ. I suggest that one of the first things to note is that Jesus Christ our Lord is still actively engaging with us in the affairs of life. It was not that, for the time of ‘his earthly ministry’ grace, mercy and peace came from him while, now he has ascended, the Father has left us his spirit till the work on earth is done.¹ Jesus is not absent from us.

The account of his ascension (Acts 1:9–11) should not be understood as providing just a spatial picture of what took place. First, we might observe that when Paul spoke of his encounter with the risen Jesus, he described it as ‘the heavenly vision’ (Acts 26:19²). Secondly, literalism may prevent us from seeing that the words ‘he was lifted up’ can carry other than spatial meanings. For instance John 13:18, where the verb implies treachery, and in 2 Cor. 10:5 and 11:20 where it means pride. Positively, why should we not understand it to mean exaltation?

Thirdly, ‘a cloud took him out of their sight’ (Acts 1:9). The word ‘cloud’ has two connotations in scripture. The first is that of ordinary clouds, up in the sky and the second is the clouds associated with God’s glory. In the New Testament only one reference is to clouds with water (Jude 12—water-*less*, actually), while the others are to Christ’s coming in the clouds with great power and glory, evident allusions to Dan. 7:13). Furthermore, 1 Thessalonians 4:17 speak of believers at the return of Christ being caught up in the clouds.

Fourthly, heaven is used also in two contexts, the first being the sky (Gen. 1:1)³ and the second the abode of God (Ps. 115:3; Matt. 3:16–17; Mk 1:10; Luke 12:33; Acts 7:56 etc.). Putting these together, we can at least suggest that the ascension of Jesus meant that his physical body was now in the presence of God as it always had been, but that it was no longer visible to the disciples. They were gazing ‘into heaven’⁴ and that was not a possibility for them. He will return (Acts 1:11), and will do so in the same way as they saw him go, that is, with the clouds of glory. Thus Paul speaks of those who love his ‘appearing’, his *epiphany*, in 2 Timothy 4:8.

In the meantime, while we wait for that amazing moment, we understand that Jesus is still present and active in this world. This is immediately obvious from the book of the Revelation ‘of Jesus Christ’ (1:1, 17–18). What is also true is that all that Jesus is now doing is by the same means that he did all other things. He did it by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, there was no moment when Jesus was not totally dependent on the Holy Spirit, the personal presence of God; look at his conception, his baptism, his time in wilderness, his perceptions, his exorcisms, his crucifixion, his resurrection and his post-resurrection teaching.

¹ This is not intended as in any way a criticism of the song by Melody Green.

² See also Luke 1:22; 24:23; 2 Cor. 12:1.

³ Note the parallelism of Ps. 108:4.

⁴ Not, ‘up into heaven’ as NRSV puts it.

Then, just as he received the Spirit at his baptism with a view to him completing all that the Father had given him to do, so he ‘being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit . . . has poured out this that you both see and hear’ (Acts 2:33). This outpouring of the Spirit is not a concession in the face of his absence; it is his presence. Our being filled with the Spirit is our having the word of Christ dwelling in us richly (Eph. 5:18; Col. 3:16). Hence, Matthew 18:18–20:

Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.¹⁹ Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.

And Matthew 28:20, ‘I am with you always, to the end of the age’ (cf. Mark 16:20). Given that Jesus’ ministry commenced with his baptism and the associated affirmation of Matthew 3:17, which was a conflation of two passages Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1, both of which have their intention on the nations, it is not surprising that the gospel should end as it does with the disciples commissioned to make the nations his disciples and Jesus announcing his promise to be with them, since the nations are his for the asking. So, if the nations are to be struck down, it will be by the sword that comes from his mouth (Rev. 19:15).

Further, those who are with him in his present ministry will discover that it is the Lord, Jesus, who does the work (Acts 2:47). And if they are led by the Holy Spirit, as indeed they must be, it will be understood that it is the Spirit of Jesus who is instructing them.

THE GRACE, MERCY AND LOVE OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST

Grace [is] from God our Father *and* the Lord Jesus Christ. Also, the well-known conclusion to 2 Corinthians is emphatic: ‘*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with all of you*’ (2 Cor. 13:13). Elsewhere, Paul wrote simply, ‘The grace of the Lord Jesus [Christ] be with you’ (1 Cor. 16:23; Rom. 16:20).

We may have a developed doctrine of the grace of God, but there is something wonderful about seeing grace flowing from the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not, I suspect, merely that he is the channel, but that he *himself* is the man of grace. Luke describes Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth and informs us that ‘all spoke well of him and were amazed at *the words of grace* that came from his mouth’ (Luke 4:22). A similar expression is used in Ephesians 4:29:

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.

While we may understand ‘gracious’ to mean cultured or kind or whatever, if the use of the word earlier in both Luke and Ephesians is any indication, we might conclude that when Jesus spoke grace was in action. What is more, we are to expect the same to be true of our words! This is the potency of Christ in us.

We are saved by grace (Eph. 2:8–9), but Peter put it that ‘we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as [the Gentiles] will’ (Acts 15:11). The man Jesus, is the one through whom we know and receive grace. If grace has become a word for theological pedants, then it will mean little to the human heart,

either of speaker or hearer, but where we see it flowing from Jesus to us we will respond in deepest joy and gratitude. ‘With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all’ (Acts 4:33). Growing in grace is growing in the knowledge our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:18). On the other hand, to fall away from grace is to be severed from Christ (Gal. 5:4).

There are many who think that grace is a slick solution to the problem of evil. They are wrong. Grace is a deep work and is only seen and known in Jesus the man who bore our sins in his own body on the tree:

For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9),

‘Generous act’ translates the Greek *charis* (grace), but to the modern mind this may appear as a form of contemporary philanthropy⁵. It far exceeds that: it is the personal giving of our Lord Jesus Christ, who willingly gave himself up for us, taking our abject poverty and its hideous consequences in order that we might know the riches of his glory.

The incarnation had another immediate benefit:

For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham.¹⁷ Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people.¹⁸ Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested (Heb. 2:16–18).

This help flows from our high priest who fully knows our weakness. He is also weak, and so is utterly dependent on the supply from the Father, though his weakness is not complicated by sin or in any way reprehensible. So Hebrews 4:16:

Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Mercy is the response to misery and we can only approach the throne as we do so through the intercession of our ‘great high priest’ (Heb. 4:14). Intercession has often been represented as ‘forensic’, with legal questions dealt with in a legal setting. But there is more to it than that. What is presented to us is a situation where deep suffering causes the human heart to ache for total deliverance, or even partial relief. So the afflicted can come to the throne, not just for justice, but for mercy and so for the presence of God in the man Jesus Christ to act in and for us in life.

Romans, with its great theme of justification by grace through faith, still shows us this mercy in action. The great goal will be the Gentiles glorifying God for his mercy (Rom. 15:9), while chapters 9–11 seven times describe the salvation of God in terms of his mercy (9:15, 16, 18, 23; 11:30, 31, 32). So prior to that, we see Paul crying out for deliverance from this body of death (7:24), and recognising that adoption means that ‘we suffer with [Christ] so that we may be glorified with him’ (8:17). The sufferings of this present time are awful: we groan inwardly as we wait for the redemption of our bodies of death. And even our prayers are expressions of ignorance and helplessness. Good theology is no answer to our fearful predicament. Our misery is sometimes expressed in us thinking that we actually have what we know (1 Cor.

⁵ It is of course ‘philanthropy’, ‘the love of man’, and we should be grateful for all generous giving to meet human need.

8:2–3). In that painful situation, the Spirit intercedes in words too deep for our feeble words, and we see the mercy which keeps us from being destroyed:

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?

³² He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?

³³ Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.

³⁴ Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

³⁶ As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,

³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:31–39).

Here we must return to the point made above: ‘Christ Jesus our Lord’ is the Jewish Messiah, Jesus, the Word who has become totally and beautifully human, who is also LORD, Yahweh in the flesh. His tender compassion, seen in his intercession, is ‘his tender hand soft on his bride’⁶ or, in the words of Hebrews 2:11, him being ‘not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters’.

Pastorally, there is no place for anger or criticism when there is such mercy and grace upon the church. Romans 12:8 speaks of ‘the merciful’ being cheerful, and Galatians 6:1 reminds us of the tenderness with which we should deal with each other’s weaknesses.

Personally, we must encourage each other to see the eternal and continuous mercy of God *in Jesus* and to exhort each other to see ourselves in our dear Savior.

THE LOVE OF CHRIST

What of the drive to proclaim? For too long, ‘The Great Commission’ has been presented as a prod to the church to engage in what we may call ‘missionary activity’.⁷ But the New Testament is far more personal and ‘human’. Law always works wrath, so mere legal obligation will always carry within it strong restraints. The mercy of God in Jesus is that he does not limit us to our understanding. The work is his and he wonderfully overrules so that his purposes are accomplished. We should recognise the work of God, even when our theological rationalisations are occasionally different. And we should also recognise that people will often be driven by more than one element.

Nonetheless, there is a clear picture in the scriptures: ‘the love of Christ constrains us’ (2 Cor. 5:14). We do need to note that the phrase ‘the love of Christ’ might have two possible meanings. The first is ‘our love for Christ’ and the second is ‘Christ’s love for us’, but as what follows makes it plain that the topic is what Christ has done

⁶ Geoffrey Bingham, *Tell them about the banquet*, NCTM Hymn Book, N° 286, v. 4.

⁷ I have dealt with this in some minor detail in the NCTM Ministry School notes for 2011, *The Word of God and the Armies of Heaven*, in study 9, ‘The Church and the Gospel’ and study 12, ‘The Great Co-mission’.

for us, it is likely that the second is what was in Paul's mind.⁸ But of course were it to be Paul's love for Christ, it remains evident that it would only because the love of God has been shed abroad in his heart through the Spirit (Rom. 5:5). 'We love because he first loved us' (1 John 4:19). The primary experience is that of God's love for him, for us. It is that which comes to us when we believe, and we believe *because* it has come to us. And here we observe again what we said earlier, that if anyone does not love the Lord, let him be accursed. The love of God evokes our love for him, and for others:

Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another;¹⁰ and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia (1 Thess. 4:9–10).

What is significant for us here, however, is that the love of Christ is the love of the Jewish Messiah for us. Doubtless it is always the love of God in Christ (Rom. 8:39) but Paul first wrote that nothing and no one 'will separate us from the love of Christ' (Rom. 8:35). We have just examined this context but we should do so again.

Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ?

. . .³⁷ in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us (Rom. 8:34–35, 37).

The Messiah, Jesus, died, was raised from death and is exalted, and it is this one who intercedes, and our security rests in the continuous action of his love for us. He loved us and gave himself for us (Gal. 2:20) and 'he' is the man who is 'our man' in the heavens. We conquer only because he loved us and gained the victory for those in him (cf. 1 Cor. 15:56, '*goes on giving* us the victory' and 1 John 1:7, 'the blood of *Jesus* his Son *goes on cleansing* us from all sin').

The Lord Jesus was first the man who loved the Father in the love with which the Father loved him. 'I love the Father' (John 14:31), in contrast to those who 'do not have the love of God in [them]' (John 5:42). In consequence, we see that even when faced with the self justifying arrogance of the man described in Mark 10:17ff., 'Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said . . .' (Mark. 10:21). We cannot rationalise such love which provokes such deep, even hostile, rejection on the part of some, and which evokes deep adoration from others:

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end [to the *telos*, the goal] (John 13:1).

His love would see the goal reached; he then washed Judas' feet as well as those of the others (cf. John 13:10–11)!

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⁸ 'The love of Christ' is also most likely to be a subjective genitive, i.e. Christ is the one doing the loving, rather than an objective genitive, where he is the object of our love, because the majority of NT uses of 'love' plus the genitive are subjective genitives.