

Full of Grace and Truth
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The eyewitnesses that actually saw Him, the people who were there when He was here and actually saw Him, spoke to Him, heard Him, say that He had a distinctive excellence about Him. There was something that was unique, and different, and better than anything they'd ever been around. When they tried to describe it further and tried to explain that excellence a little bit more, they called it glory; and they said it was a glory filled with grace and truth. It's kind of interesting because the things that we would normally pick up on when we see a person, the things we would notice, the things we would use to describe people, they don't use. They don't tell us, for example, about His stature—was He tall? Was He short? We don't know. We don't know about His physique...was He heavy-set? Was He slim and slight? We don't know about His mannerisms. Was He real active and always moving around, or was He kinda slow, and reflective, and contemplative? We don't know if, when He came up to shake your hand, it was a strong, vise-like grip...or was He the type of person who came by and gave you a high-five (they didn't do that back then, but their equivalent to that). When He walked into the room was His the voice that stood out? Did everybody stop and pick up on His lively banter with people as He was friendly, or was He one that kinda walked into the room unnoticed, and if you heard Him say anything it was just in quiet conversation or in teaching? We don't know if that voice was high-pitched, staccato style, or was it low and somber. All the things of first impression we're not told.

What we are given is the lasting impression. The way the Apostle John, one of those early eye-witnesses, described Him in kind of summary form, is probably the best description we have of this person named Jesus. John says in the opening of his gospel that the Word, speaking of Jesus, became flesh; and they use that name for Jesus sometimes. They called Him the Word. In our culture sometimes they'll say somebody's 'the Man', or 'the Judge', or 'the Hero', or 'the X-Factor', or whatever it is. But His disciples sometimes said He's the Word. Now, there was a lot to that name and that title; there was some philosophical background. But at its most basic it simply meant 'You know what? He's what God has said. That person is God's message to us. He's the Word.' And John says *'that Word became flesh and He dwelt among us. He lived right with us. We walked with Him, we talked with Him, we ate with Him, we camped out under the stars with Him. He was with us.'* And he says, *'We beheld His glory. We saw His glory, this distinctive excellence about Him.'* And he goes on and he says, *'And that glory was as the only begotten from the Father. It was otherworldly. It had to be from God.'* And then he makes this statement. *"It was a glory that was full of grace and truth."* Full of grace—the unearned favor of God just flowed out of the person of Jesus.

When you were in His presence, those apostles tell us...those early disciples tell us, when you were in His presence you knew, you just knew every circumstance, every condition, that God was for you, that you mattered, and that God's favor was upon you. You knew that. And not only did you know that, you knew it was favor beyond anything you deserved, that God's heart towards you and His good hand upon you went beyond anything your heart had ever felt for God and anything your hands had ever done for God. This grace was beyond anything you deserved. And when you were around Jesus you knew God's favor was upon you and towards you. And not in little trickle amounts, and not in 'it might be here today and maybe not tomorrow.' It was there full and rich all the time in Jesus' presence. He was full of grace.

He was full of truth. When you were in His presence you had a sense that this was reality. You may be confused about everything else; you may have questions about everything else; but you knew this person right here, with you—this is real. And when He spoke of God it rang true! And when He spoke of the world we live in, this crazy world where some things seem so great and some things seem so horrible, and where things are confusing and we're not always sure where it's going or where it's gonna end up and how come it's where it's at—when He spoke about the world we live in it makes sense. And then, most importantly, when He spoke about us, when He spoke to you about you... It may at times have been uncomfortable; it may at times have been convicting; but it was always spot-on accurate. He could speak to what was in you, and He could put words to it and names to what was in you; and as He did so you came to understand. You came to understand that there was pride in here, and there was envy, and there's jealousy, and there's lust, and there's anger. And He could see that, and He could know that, and He could name it. And as He did so, you knew the truth of it. And you also knew, in a way nobody else could speak it, in a way that nobody else could say it, He knew your worth. He knew the truth of your worth. Even as He knew what was wrong with you or what was right with you, He knew your worth.

That's Jesus...not in first impression...in lasting impression. This person, in a unique way, is a combination of grace and truth. And because of that our life as Christians today are shaped around those two aspects of His character and His person. Because He lives on, and we respond to Him in faith, and we deal with Him with faith, and we live in relationship to Him through faith. That's what we experience—grace and truth. And that's what gives shape to the Christian experience. It's one of the reasons the Christian life is so simple. And by that I don't mean it's easy. It's simple...it's not complicated. The Christian life is simply responding to the grace and the truth that we find in Jesus. Because He's a God, because He's a person so full of grace, we are a people who enjoy that grace. From the very first, when we first come to Him and we first call out to Him, and we say, "Jesus, save me! Take my life and do something with it! Sort it out! Make sense of it!" we experience His grace, and it goes on and on and on.

We've experienced His grace these past...this past stretch of time in our congregational life. Somebody comes by and puts out some accelerant, throws out a match...God answers with grace. And seven weeks later we're back in this building—faith strengthened, hope sustained, and hearts engaged. We've had people from across the nation...all fifty states have sent us cards, words of encouragement, sent us letters, and oh, have they prayed for us! We've enjoyed God's grace, and we haven't deserved it. You read some of the letters we've received, you go through some of the stuff people have done for us, and you know we don't deserve it. It goes way beyond what we deserve, way beyond. But that's grace.

We enjoy God's grace. We also have a calling to extend His grace. The Bible tells us that those who receive grace, who accept it and enjoy it, are called to a stewardship of grace. That means it's our responsibility to take that grace and extend it to others, make sure that others experience it and enjoy it also. And that isn't just something we're called to do at special moments of ministry, special moments of inspiration, special moments of motivation when we're really gonna do things right. That is a principal so woven into the way we should be as Christians that it should affect every word you speak. The Apostle Paul says, "*Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for the moment (as is fitting for the moment), that it may give grace to those who hear.*" This is such a reality and a part of the Christian life that it should be woven into everything about you, including the very words you speak. We enjoy grace, we extend grace. We hear, we listen, we pay attention to the truth—specifically the teachings of Jesus.

We have our core commitments up on the wall. The first one is the Centrality of Christ. And when we write that out and explain what we mean by that, part of that is we say, "You know what? His are the words we will listen to. In a world of conflicting opinions and ideas, and conflicting claims, His are the words we will listen to. We will hear and respond to His warnings. We will pursue His promises. We will grip His teachings. And we will cherish His sayings. We will listen to Jesus. But we'll go beyond that. We'll live the truth."

I have a little verse that always kinda sticks with me. And actually, it's just a simple phrase. The Apostle John, near the end of his life, was writing a letter to believers. And it's kinda like he's getting near the end and he's giving them advice and instruction for the Christian life and Christian experience. And as he's doing so, he makes a comment. He says, you know, he talks about if we're saying one thing about our relationship with God and we're living something different, he says "You are not..." and here's the phrase that catches me, "*You are not doing the truth.*" I love that phrase. You see, truth is something we don't just speak and hear. Truth is something we do, we live. In our culture, in our time, in our place, that's beyond challenging...it's problematic. We live in a time in history when there is more information flooding into your life than any other generation ever conceived possible. Between the media, between the internet, between our access to other peoples and the fluidity of communication and moving around, and contact with the world, we are flooded with information. We are flooded with new knowledge. We are flooded with requests, and opinions, and speculations and claims. We are flooded with things! We find more truth coming at us than we could ever absorb in a lifetime, and we find ourselves sorting through it, and picking up and talking about it, and spreading it around, and saying, "Did you see this? Do you know about this? What about that? Question this?" And in all of that we lose track of actually *doing* the truth. In fact I'm convinced that we can not personally or congregationally do the truth unless we do it deliberately and intentionally. And that's why, as we came back into the building today, we decided that the most important thing for us to do is not necessarily celebrate that we're in here; not try to rehash everything that's happened and all the special things that came together to get here. The really important thing to do is to make sure that we live the truth and extend grace. We've enjoyed it immensely. We know the truth of it.

Our challenge now is to do the truth and extend grace. That's what we introduced last week, and we put in front of you the one thing we really want to get on the calendar and the focus as we approach this day, and that is the Gaza Baptist Church. And we introduced what we call the Gaza Project. And the idea is to try to help this little church in the Gaza strip. And if you're not familiar with that area, it's an area in the southwest corner of Palestine. It's not a nation of its own; it's a little region that doesn't even have sovereign control of its own borders. Israel and Egypt control the borders. In that little area that's about a tenth of the size of Anchorage there are one point five million (1.5 million) people living. The population density is astounding. If you figure that in Anchorage the population density, where we go in and feel very crowded, the population density in Anchorage is under two hundred people per square mile. In Gaza City where the Gaza Baptist Church is, population density is over five thousand people per square mile. They are packed into that area! And that population that is literally stacked upon one another in that tiny little community, that tiny little area, is a young population. The average age is only about fifteen years old. That's 'cause people don't live very long in that area.

Not only are they a young population...they are a poverty-stricken population. There's somewhere between forty and seventy percent unemployment rate in that area, and it varies depending upon what's happening around the borders, and what kind of trade restrictions are being put off and taken on. Not only is it a young population, and a poor population—it is increasingly a radical population. The extremist Hamas movement was voted in by popular vote. It wasn't forced upon 'em. They're a traumatized population. They are caught between the Hamas militants and the Israeli military, and Gaza has become a death zone.

In the middle of that is Gaza Baptist Church, trying to give witness to the reality of Jesus Christ. They've been there for decades. Their primary ministries tend to be relief-oriented because there is so much poverty and so much strife and struggle there. They spend their time...they try to provide food; they try to provide medical assistance. They also try to provide training and teaching. They have the only public access library for Christian materials in all of Gaza. They're trying to set up a cancer screening clinic in their building. And they do all sorts of things along this line. But most importantly they speak about Jesus. I like the way their pastor, Pastor Massad, describes their ministry at the church. He says it this way; he says, "We try to spread a table of grace in a land of enmity."

It's been difficult, and the last year it's gotten extremely difficult. One of their congregational leaders was kidnapped and assassinated by militants. The pastor and some other leaders have been forced out of the country for security reasons. Pastor Massad is trying to get back in there. He hopes to be back in June, hopes even to bring his family back in there. But the past strife that has gone on has made it even worse beyond that. The bombs have damaged the building. The militants...strife between them and the military of Israel has scattered the church. They can't even meet together. And their ministries are all stopped.

We want to try to help. People stepped up; they didn't even know us. They stepped up and extended grace to us. We wanna do the same with this church. There's other churches we help—in Russia, Mexico, Rwanda, South Africa. A month ago we didn't even know about this church, but we wanna try to help 'em; just like other churches didn't know about us, found out about us, and tried to help us even though they had other things they were doing. So we're trying to do that with them.

Today we're gonna do, and the thing we've targeted...number one, this'll be following up as we go on this week, is we're gonna be sending them encouragement. We've already talked to their pastor by phone. We're gonna find other ways to send messages of encouragement to them. We're gonna be praying for them today in this service. We started that last week; we asked you to pray all week long in small groups and in your homes—pray for that church and the people of that church. And so that's been goin' on for a week. Today we'll pray as a congregation. Third and last, we'll be taking an offering today to extend financial assistance to them.

Those are things that people have done for us the past seven weeks. That first one, encouragement, lifts the spirit. You read some of the letters we've received and it's just...you've just gotta stop. We read one letter, we brought the staff all together, we read it, I looked all around, and sure enough...Jim Eller's starting to cry. ☺ You know. It's just been a lift. I've heard from people that I knew in high school that are writing letters. I haven't talked to 'em in five years...no, no...I haven't talked to 'em in forty years, and they're writing me! And it's just been special! Words of encouragement are powerful.

The other thing is offering. We're gonna take an offering today, and I'm gonna be up front with you. This is a high-risk offering. We're not exactly sure how we're gonna get it to those people on the ground in Gaza. We've got three different channels that we're working through, trying to find the best one to utilize. There's been times in this past weeks where the borders are even closed for any kind of aid and relief. And so we're trying to get it there. We don't even know totally what's left of that church, but we know they're damaged, we're gonna try to help 'em. We're gonna try to get there. And so, if financially you wanna give we encourage you to. We introduced it last week so you had time to think about it. We don't like people trying to make decisions last-minute—'Ok, do I give or not give?'—just because you heard about it just now. You know, if you think about it and you wanna help, then jump in. That's a help. It's a lift...it lifts a burden.

The really important thing is what we're gonna be doing in the next minute, and I can't say this strong enough...is the prayer. That's what releases the grace in people's lives. That's what gives Jesus the opportunity and the room to work, is when we ask Him to. And when we pray, when we call out and we ask God to work in somebody else's life, and He responds by releasing grace in their life, you feel it. You literally feel it. We felt it this past seven weeks. Your faith is strengthened. Your hope is refreshed, and your heart stays engaged instead of becoming frustrated and angry and bitter. The most important thing we can ever do for God is to first of all ask God. The most important thing we can do for others is to first of all ask God to work for them. That's what we'll be doin'.

And so I'm gonna be asking Don Ford to come up; and he'll be taking the place and the lead for the prayer. And the men will come up at the same time, and when the prayer is done we'll be taking the offering. So if, Don, you'll come up and be ready for our prayer, the men will come up and we'll take the offering immediately after that. And we're gonna ask you to stand for the prayer. And when Don, who's one of our elders, is done with the prayer, we're gonna ask you to affirm your agreement with that prayer with a simple 'amen'. So if you'll stand with me as Don's up here, we're done with the prayer, we'll say 'amen', the worship team will take their places. And right after the prayer we're gonna ask you to sit down. And we'll take the offering while we sing a song that is a song for that church, a prayer for that church, and then we'll close with our blessing. It goes a little longer than our normal service, but we think it's important to take the time to extend the grace to that church. So Don...

Don Ford: Please pray with me.

Heavenly Father,

We desire that You'll be praised, and that Your grace will be extended to the Gaza Baptist Church as they seek to honor, serve, and extend Your grace in Gaza. We are so thankful for the grace that You extended to us in such special and unique ways over these recent weeks, and over the years, and even from the very founding of Wasilla Bible Church. We praise and thank You.

LORD, thank You for the prayers that have been offered for those of Gaza Baptist Church during the week, prayers for God's provision and protection, for those who have lost loved ones, for the wounded and the suffering, for their present and planned outreach and relief work; that God will encourage their hearts and strengthen their faith; that their secure hope in Christ will be a witness to those around them; that they will be filled with the love of Christ as they minister to each other and to their neighbors.

We praise You for our children praying for their children, for our fathers praying for their fathers, for our mothers praying for their mothers, for our teens praying for their teens, for the prayers of each of our people praying as they were led to pray.

We lift up Pastor Massad and his family, and we ask Your blessing and grace on their lives, and for Your light to illuminate their path. Now we humbly ask that each in Your church in Gaza would profoundly experience what Jesus promised when He said,

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.
Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*

We ask that You bless this offering, that it will strengthen hope and love in such a way that their desires and vision would be encouraged; as the Church in Gaza, to reach out with hope and healing, and the love of Jesus Christ, to their neighbors and even those who persecute them.

And we pray all this in the name of Jesus. Amen.