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# “Going Home”

Isaiah 49:8-15

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Thus says the Lord:  
In a time of favor I have answered you,  
on a day of salvation I have helped you.  
I have kept you and given you  
as a covenant to the people,  
to establish the land,  
to apportion the desolate heritages;  
saying to the prisoners, "Come out,"  
to those who are in darkness, "Show yourselves."

They shall feed along the ways,  
on all the bare heights shall be their pasture.

They shall not hunger or thirst,  
neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down,  
for God who has pity on them will lead them,  
and by springs of water will guide them.

And I will turn all my mountains into a road,  
and my highways shall be raised up.

Lo, these shall come from far away, and lo,  
these from the north and from the west,  
and these from the land of Syene.

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;  
break forth, O mountains, into singing!

For the Lord has comforted the people,  
and will have compassion on the suffering ones.

But Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me,  
my Lord has forgotten me."

Can a woman forget her nursing child,  
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?

Even these may forget,  
yet I will not forget you.

We sang Amazing Grace at my father's funeral on Thursday. We were at Lakeland Southern Baptist Church in Mantachie, Mississippi, surrounded by people who were good to my parents and good to one another. We had a pattern. They would tell me how much they loved my father. We would smile, hug, and say, "Thank you so much" over and over.

The members of my parents' church are happy with their church and certain about their brand of faith. One delightful Baptist woman told us that when she was dating her husband, she told him that if he wanted to keep dating her, he needed to leave the Church of Christ, get saved, and join her Baptist church. During the funeral, one creative person described my father living in a mansion in heaven, waiting for my mom to come and make breakfast, because he still can't cook. This view of heaven raises several questions.

After I preached the sermon, at lunch in the fellowship hall, I was asked, "What religion are you now?"

I said, "I'm a Christian."

She said, "You know what I mean. What kind of church?"

"I'm a Congregationalist."

She seemed confused by this, but she had a look that said, "I hope that's okay."

When they sang, "When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise, than when we'd first begun," they sang it knowing exactly who we is. We agree that God will hold my father forever. We disagree on who else God might be holding.

C.S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia close with the final battle between the forces of good and evil. After the war ends Aslan, the great lion, welcomes his people into the kingdom. A young man is brought before him who has been a member of the opposing army. The frightened soldier believes that he is about to be punished for serving the wrong king, but Aslan invites him into his new home: "You're welcome here. You were never the servant of my enemy. All that you have done, I count as service to me."

The young man is surprised: "Then is it true that you and your enemy are one?"

The lion growls so that the earth shakes: "It is false. Not because he and I are one, but because we are opposites, I take to me those who are given to my way. For he and I are so different that no life given to him is given to me, and no life given to me can be given to him. Therefore if any keep an oath for truth's sake, it is by me, although they don't know it, and it is I who reward them. And if any do a cruelty in my name, then though they say my name, they serve the evil one. Do you understand, child?"

"Lord, you know how much I understand."

The Glorious One answers, "My Beloved, all find what they truly seek."

The king welcomes him home. Those who are listening gasp. They are shocked to hear the king's grace extends farther than they have imagined (C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, New York: Macmillan, 1956, 161-165).

The Hebrew people listening to Isaiah gasp. They are shocked to hear that God's grace extends farther than they have imagined.

The prophet says, "One day there will be a parade of

people coming home. God's grace will reach more than just those who've heard God's name."

After the people of Israel are taken into exile, they pray for deliverance. Isaiah tells them that God will answer their prayers in a big way. The glorious future is so certain that the prophet reports it in the past tense.

He assures them that there will be a day of salvation. The light will overcome the darkness. The prisoners will be released. The hungry will be filled. The thirsty will find rivers.

The parade will wind through what was once wilderness, but has now been transformed into green pastures. The road home will be smooth. The mountains in the desert will become a highway.

People will come from north, south, east and west, from every corner of the world. When people see the size of the procession going home to God, they will begin singing. Heaven and earth will join in a hymn of thanksgiving for the love that brings God's people home.

God's grace is so wonderful that many will have trouble believing it. They will say: "I thought God had forgotten me."

But God could no more forget any of God's children than a mother could forget her nursing child. Isaiah preaches that God is even more loving than a mother. A few mothers may on rare occasions forget their children, but God will never forget.

The central theme of the Bible is God's grace. If we had to choose one word to describe Christianity, we could choose grace. For 2000 years, Christians have contemplated, discussed, and argued over everything they

could come up with to contemplate, discuss, and argue. Scholars debate every interpretation, inspiration, and manner of explanation. The church struggles with ethical questions—what to do and what not to do.

But our ideas are, at best, only commentary on the truth at the center of faith. When you take away the husks, the kernel is grace. We do not deserve it, but God loves us.

I was invited to a mosque to observe worship, and be part of an interfaith dialogue. During the service the men—and there were only men—bowed, chanted, and prayed. Afterwards, I am sitting with a friendly young man named Majed. I tell him how much I admire his commitment to pray five times a day. We talk about the Koran. He tells me about the things Muslims don't do and the things Muslims are required to do.

I ask, "What would I have to do to be part of your congregation?"

"You have to profess, 'There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet' before two Muslim witnesses, and then follow the rules of the Muslim life."

I ask, "Do you believe that you and I pray to the same God?"

"Yes, there is only one God. You just have the name wrong."

"If I'm praying to the one true God, but have the name wrong, at the end of my life will I be welcomed into God's presence?"

He stops smiling: "No. I'm sorry, but you will be damned, because you haven't followed the rules of the Koran."

That's a conversation stopper. I could get a different response if I talked to a different Muslim. He could get a different response by talking to a different Christian. Both of us would do well to put our trust not in our ideas, but in the love of God. Surely God's grace is big enough to cover both of us—even if we get God's name wrong.

Every once in a while, you will see a cartoon with Simon Peter sitting at the pearly gates looking up names in the book of life. Some believe that one day Peter, Gabriel or someone wearing a halo will say something like: "You were born in the right country to good parents, so you went to a church that believes the right things. You just made it on the niceness scale. You got a six. Five is the cut off. You committed several unapproved sins. You lost a point there. You just pass. Congratulations! Go on in before I recheck the math."

However it works, it does not work like that. If there is a book of life, the only thing written in it is your name. Our hope is not that we will someday be moral enough, wise enough, or kind enough to be worthy of God's love. Our hope is God's love.

If you ask people who are not part of the church, "What do you think Christians want you to know?" many will respond with a list of bad things they think Christians think they should not do or good things they should do. Christians have either missed the point or been misunderstood. The gospel is that none of us will ever stop making mistakes or start doing all the good we should do, but God's love has nothing to do with our goodness, and everything to do with God's goodness.

When William Sloane Coffin was asked to summarize the

gospel he said, “It’s I’m not okay, you’re not okay, but that’s okay.”

The Hebrew word for grace, the word Isaiah uses, *hesed*, is difficult to translate. Most interpreters use a phrase like “constant love,” or “loving kindness,” but it is stronger than that. *Hesed* is passionate, persistent, relentless love that will not quit until it has brought us home.

Saying “Grace is going home” sounds like pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by, but grace is not an escape from reality. The grace of going home is the ultimate reality. Home is where real life happens. Home is where the disposal is broken. Home is where people go when they are not sick enough for the hospital, but are sick enough to be miserable. Home is where we hide until we fix our hair. Home is where most promises are broken. But in the best homes, in spite of our mistakes, home is where we are loved.

The promise of grace is what makes the difference every day. Busyness that makes us dull, frustration that steals our joy, and sorrow that threatens to overwhelm us, are less than a drop in the ocean of God’s grace. God has punched our tickets forgiven and invited us to get on with the celebration.

By God’s grace we become people who help with directions, return wallets, and make children laugh. By God’s grace we enjoy listening to music, writing creatively, laboring physically, making love with the one with whom we share life.

By grace we appreciate the extravagant gifts of God—the face that smiles when you walk in the door, the joy of being reconciled, the goodness of a church, the smell of fresh



bread, the taste of chocolate, breathing, speaking, eating, sleeping, and seeing. It is all the grace of God that will bring us home.

God offers grace to business people who worry too much about money, grace to fundamentalist preachers who give religion a bad name, grace to skeptics who think it is too good to be true, and grace to church people who have forgotten why they showed up in the first place. Come that great homecoming parade, the gates will be open wide. The processional will be filled with people who have nothing in common, but the grace that calls them home.

In her short story *Revelation*, Flannery O'Connor tells of Mrs. Turpin, a large woman in the rural south in the 1960s. Mrs. Turpin categorizes everyone she meets by how much they are like her. The story closes with this judgmental woman catching a vision from God, not unlike the one Isaiah saw: "Mrs. Turpin saw a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. She raised her hands. A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black (folks) in shining robes, and battalions of what she called freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs."

“And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. Her eyes were fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead. In a moment the vision faded, but she remained where she was, immobile. In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah” (Flannery O’Connor, “Revelation,” *Listening to God*, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1994, 18-36).

At the end of it all, the grace of God will welcome us home.

*sermon © Brett Younger*