

17th January 2021 10 am Saving Grace

Service led by Denise Coomber, Talk by Roger Homes, who also includes testimonies from Heather and Marcus, two members of the congregation from different families.

Intercessions by Denise.

This transcript is only of the readings, the talk and the testimonies.

Reading: John 5:24-29 [NIV 2011]

24 'Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life. 25 Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. 26 For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. 27 And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.

28 'Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice 29 and come out – those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned.

Talk

[Denise Coomber:]

Let's just pray for Roger before he speaks to us.

Father, thank You for Your Word. Thank You that there is a way back to You. And thank You for Roger. We pray that You will speak Your words through him and that we will be blessed and encouraged by them. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

[Roger Homes:]

Well, good morning everybody. We've started looking this year at God's grace to us. And last week Andrew spoke about God's undeserved grace. Today, I want to look at God's saving grace.

But before I do that, I thought it'd be good to reflect just a moment upon our current circumstances. I think it's easy in the current situation to reflect upon what we don't have, rather than what we do. And I came across an article on Facebook, that I'd like to share with you about the year 2020. And it says this:

Maybe this year was never meant to be about reaching the big goals, ticking the dream destinations off our bucket lists or making the big life moves we've been planning. Maybe, just maybe, this year was meant to be about us learning how to sit with what we already do have, and about discovering the joy that is still possible here. Maybe this year was about removing the distractions, so that we could see the joy more clearly. And maybe even the most difficult, the most painful and the most frustrating of days, we were simply being asked to dig a little deeper, to find even the tiniest reason to still be grateful, when the normal we knew was nowhere to be seen. Maybe this year was always about us remembering the little things, and holding them a little bit closer to our hearts: the food on our table, the air in our lungs, the safety of a home, the nature right beside us, a good friend to lean on, the warmth of a hug from someone you love, laughter, movement and time to rest. Maybe this year was about being grateful for everyday miracles, and for the joy of simply being alive.

I thought that was very appropriate for not just obviously 2020 but also for the beginning of this year as well. So I'm going to bring a couple of readings to you, and hopefully they will appear on your screen. And then I've asked Marcus

to share a testimony with us about how his faith has helped him during the lockdowns that we've had. The first reading is from Romans 8, and it's starting at verse 14. It says this:

14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 15 For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" 16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.

And the second reading is taken from 1 Peter, chapter 1 and starting at verse 3.

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, 7 so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

I'll hand over now to Marcus for his testimony.

[Marcus:]

There are some familiar verses in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, that say [GNT 16-18a, NIVUK 2011 verse 18b]

16 Be joyful always, 17 pray at all times, 18 be thankful in all circumstances. This is what God wants from you in your life in union with Christ Jesus.

I think recently I found it really important to give thanks to God, really, every day, and to give thanks to God for something that I can do, something that I have, and try and focus on that rather than things that we can't do right now. And I think that's something I've tried to include in my thinking every day, which I think has been very helpful. During lockdown I think we've all felt much more isolated and quite lonely at times. I think it's really encouraging that we can still pray for one another. And I've found that, particularly for example with my parents right now, where I've not seen my parents for some time, I've not been able to support them very much, but I can pray for them and support them in that way. My parents happen to be Christians, and I know that they tell us that they pray for our family every day, which I do find very encouraging. I think something else that's happened more recently, is I think we've all been encouraged to draw closer to God and to rely on God more on a daily basis. And I think that's been very important during such an uncertain time. I remember the verse that says, "God has said, 'Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you,'"¹ which I find very encouraging.

[Roger:]

Thank you, Marcus, for that. I think it's always helpful to be reminded about being thankful in all circumstances and relying on God every day.

So I want to delve into these passages now from Romans and from 1 Peter. And the

1 Deuteronomy 31:6

passage in Romans talks about us being adopted into God's family. After Adam and Eve were cast out in the Garden of Eden, we ended up as human beings having an orphan spirit, effectively being self-reliant, and having an insecurity, trying to earn our salvation through our good deeds. Think of the story for instance of the Prodigal Son, and the older brother, who tries to earn his father's acceptance. But we do not need to live like this, we do not need to live in constant fear of not being good enough, or trying to do things to please our Heavenly Father. As adopted children we automatically have the same privileges and benefits as other children. And God sees us as heirs or co-heirs with Christ. And this gives us a security to us. We don't have to earn our own salvation. Once we've been adopted there is no chance of the process being reversed. The child takes on the new name and becomes the heir of all that the family owns. John 1 verse 12 says,

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

Now justification is to do with our standing before God's law, but adoption is about our relationship with God. I don't know what your earthly father is always like. I've been very privileged and fortunate to have a very kind, loving and generous father, who has been a great role model to my brother and to me, and I've always felt that if I could be half as good as him to my kids, then I would be happy. Hopefully at least a couple of his good traits have rubbed off on me. But as Christians we are no longer children of the slave woman, but of the free woman, so that we can cry out, Abba Father. And this is so different from other religions: our relationship with God is not so much about our devotion to Him as about His love for us. I do not need to do anything to earn my father's love. It is there automatically and it cannot be lost. And that's a great comfort to me. Being adopted, we leave our past behind and become members of a new family, God's family.

Secondly, out of that, I want to talk about how Christ gives us a new identity. Now the word 'identity' means our sense of self, what decides the roles that we play, and our sense of values. The fact that now we've left the European Union means that we all end up with a new passport. Rather than the magenta old passports from the European Union, we will all eventually get a blue passport, a UK passport. And I'm old enough to be able to remember when we used to have a blue passport before. When I lived abroad, I used to have to carry around with me an identity card, which basically said who I was. Quite often you got stopped by the police, or I was living by the army and asked to show that identity card. In other cultures people are more willing to accept an identity given to them by their family or their community. But in our culture we like to be independent. We like to look inside ourselves to find our own identity. So it's harder for us to accept an identity given to us from somebody else. By accepting that we are God's adopted children, made in His image, it is almost as though we have a bit of His DNA in us. This of course brings a responsibility to act in a way that brings glory to Him. As parents we like it, don't we, when our children make us proud. But we don't like it when they don't. Sometimes we might think that perhaps we've failed as parents. My kids have a habit of speaking back to me phrases that I've used on them, or copying some of my bad habits. Certainly we can often see characteristics of ourselves, or of other family members in our kids. When they do something good, we like to think they've taken after us. When they do something bad, we like to think they've taken after maybe their father or mother or the other side of the family.

1 Peter 1 verse 15 tells us that we should live lives that reflect our adoption as God's children in terms of our conduct and our behaviour. Who better to give us an identity than the One who laid down His life for us, Jesus the Good Shepherd. God gives us the opportunity to be His representatives on Earth, to walk in Christ footsteps. I've now asked Heather if she would give a brief testimony about how God saved her.

[Heather:]

Yeah, I thought this morning, I'd just share in a couple of minutes my journey to faith and growing up. So, as a youngster, my parents would quite often voice out their beliefs, and my dad would often tell people that he was an atheist, whereas my mum would actually say that she did tend to believe in God, but neither of them really had any sort of conviction in any way. So growing up, I was always quite interested in what faith actually meant, but I never really got encouraged to pursue it. And then, in my early 20s, I made quite a lot of big decisions and one of them being moving from Scotland to England, and with that, giving up a job in a family business, and taking on a new job completely, and also moving in with my boyfriend and running a house, so in a space of about a matter of weeks, I made really big decisions and actually it caused me quite a lot of anxiety because I wasn't really prepared in any way to deal with the enormity of what I had done. So quite quickly, I became quite an anxious person, and actually that anxiety became quite difficult for me. And I looked for ways to get out of the anxiety. I tried hypnosis, I tried all sorts of stuff, but nothing really dealt with the anxiety in my life.

And then, one day, one of my friends invited me to a Billy Graham meeting by satellite, and I hadn't a clue who Billy Graham was, and I said, yeah, fair enough, I'll come along and I wasn't really taken by the whole evening until the very last thing that the speaker said, and he basically said, if anybody here wants God to change their life tonight, why don't you say yes to God? And that really caught my attention, and I decided, okay, I've made a real mess of my life, so actually, if I do let God take over my life and guide me and lead me, and if He really is God, He's going to make a better job of it than me. So I actually said 'yes' to God that evening. And I didn't really understand what I was committing myself to, or what the Gospel message meant. But I just know that I said, 'yes' to God from that night onwards. And as the weeks and months went on, I learned the Gospel message, I learned what it was all about. But the most important thing that I found out was that Jesus was real. And that when I prayed to Him and asked Him for help, He helped me. When I asked Him for guidance, He guided me. And it's never really changed, from that day on, I've always sought God for decisions, and even now, decisions of where I work, who I mingle with, and what I do with my time, everything, I seek God for decisions in my life now, and God is real, you know, God is real, and a lot of people look at you, like, it's really weird when you say God is real, but He is, because He lives in me. And He is a personal God, a God that cares for you, and looks into the details of your life, and helps you. So, I hope you've enjoyed my couple of minutes rambling. And thank you.

[Roger:]

Thank you very much for that, Heather. It's always good to hear testimony about how God has met people.

Finally, then, I want to say a little bit about Christ, our living hope. Now we're all living in hope for a vaccine to be rolled out soon, so that we can get to back to some kind of degree of normality. John 5, verse 24, says,

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

And I guess these days, we don't like talking about God's judgement, because we're frightened of offending people and causing offence. And yet people like Wesley used to preach Hellfire and brimstone. And I certainly know of people who have become Christians, mainly because of fear of Hell. Jesus who is the Saviour, is also Jesus who is the judge. And you can see that in John 5, verse 27. By accepting Jesus' death and resurrection, we have security. And we have a hope for the future, that we no longer need to fear death. And the passage from 1 Peter, when Peter was writing that particular passage was around about AD 64.

And that's at a time when Christians were being persecuted and scattered, after Emperor Nero burned Rome, and then blamed the Christians for it. And Peter wanted to give people hope in the face of adversity. And I think it's fair to say that people have suffered and are suffering during this pandemic, whether that be through loneliness, or loss of job, or fear of losing job, or tragically, in some cases, we may actually know people who have lost their lives. But our message is one of the Living Hope. John 16, verse 33, says,

“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

I thought it'd be good for us to reflect at the end of this talk about what particularly as Christians now is our role. I think increasingly, the Church is starting to reflect about what is our role in society, both as individuals, and as a community? Now, I can't give the full answer to that question, because I think that's a sermon in itself. But I would have thought that part of what we're about is about giving people hope, people that are in despair, giving them a hope. And I wonder, what is God saying to you? What is God saying to me? And what is God saying to the Church at this particular time, about our role in society, about bringing hope to a fallen world? So I'm going to pause for a moment and just give you a chance to have a think and pray about what is God saying to us about our role this year?

Lord, I want to thank You that we are adopted as Your children, and that this brings with it a security, that we do not have to earn our salvation. Help us to live out the faith and hope that we have in Christ. Help us to be ambassadors of the living hope that we have to a broken world. Help us, Lord, this year to make a difference in the lives of those around us. I pray this now in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I hope that's been helpful today. Thank you to Marcus and Heather. And God bless you all. Bye Bye now.

[Denise:]

Thank you, Roger. I heard it said this week that telling other people about that living hope that we can have is just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. So perhaps we can be those people that just share the Good News with other people.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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