

10th January 2021 10 am MOT 2: Undeserved Grace

Service led by Karen Mills, Talk by Andrew Attwood, who also interviews Heather about God at Work, Intercessions by Karen and Marcus

This transcript is only of the interview, the reading, the talk and the prayerful response.

Interview with Heather: God at Work

[Andrew:] So hi Heather. Good to see you.

[Heather:] Hi!

[Andrew:] I just wanted to ask you a handful of questions, just to see if we can get a picture of how life is for you at the minute, particularly in the context of your work. So, Heather, where will you be say tomorrow, maybe around 7:15am?

[Heather:] Yeah, I will be working in a local school, before and after school club assistant. So at 7:15, possibly tomorrow morning, I will be giving kids their breakfast, probably doing a little bit of craft, or reading a book, or playing some games. Generally, that lasts till about nine o'clock, and then I go back in the afternoon, from three till six, and do pretty much the same stuff again. So generally, being a big kid, having lots of fun. It really is really good fun. So that's what I'll be doing

[Andrew:] Excellent, that's really good. It sounds like you you're enjoying it. In what sense, in your work context, do you think God's presence is there and God's leading is happening in your work context?

[Heather:] If I just go back a little bit, what I tend to do is, I walk to work for one of my shifts and I pray on the way to work, and I see it a little bit as kind-of clothing myself, so that I'm ready for work. So, I pray about the day and ask God to fill me with His Holy Spirit, and I prepare myself. And it's a funny sort of way of doing it, but I ask God to open my ears, open my eyes, and kind of prepare my heart and watch what I see with my mouth. So I go into the day with that kind of attitude. And that's how I start my day really.

[Andrew:] Okay. And when you get there, what kinds of things have you found that seem to be something to do with faith and God - what's going on?

[Heather:] I do quite a lot of listening to people. And, you know, sometimes people, especially kids as well, will say things that may be a bit personal. And obviously, we've got restricted to what we can say, how far we can take that, but sometimes when people share things with me, I'll sometimes say to them, you know, "do you mind if I pray about that?" or I don't say anything but I go home, and I pray for that person that's maybe having that struggle or maybe got a difficulty in thinking about how they go about things so I tend to pray for people really without them sometimes knowing. Or often I'll sometimes say, "Do you want me to pray about that?" It was quite interesting, recently I shared with the head of the school about how I actually ended up working there, and how I got offered the job. About three weeks before I interviewed for this job, I think that I told the head that I got offered a job before the other interview, I felt God say to me, "Just wait." And that's what I did. And so that's one way I guess I've been able to kind-of share my story with the head of the school.

[Andrew:] Fantastic. That's really good. It's good that you've got that kind of dialogue and space to, to just be yourself and share things. So in light of how things are now, what would you say your hopes for yourself and God's activity over perhaps the next few months, you know, in a working context?

[Heather:] I think firstly, that at the moment it's quite tempting to be really, really anxious and worried about, certainly going into workplace, and certainly with everything that's going on nationally, it is very tempting to be anxious, but the Bible tells us not to be anxious about anything, but in everything you give your request to God. So that's kind of what I'm doing on a personal level, and I don't obviously know kind of what's happening or what may come in a couple of days' time or so, but whatever is expected of me, I have to keep my eyes on

God, I have to keep your feet firmly on His Word, and that's what I'm planning to do on a personal level. And I think, really, as far as God activities goes, I will just continue doing what I've always done, which is listening to people, you know, being open towards people and also just, you know, if God wants me to encourage somebody in a way that can help somebody's life, it's very much just really listening, and being kind, and just being open to being, you know, being someone that's that's willing to kind-of do what God wants me to do really. I'm not quite getting the point over. But it's a bit like a river flowing, you think well, okay, if it goes this way I'll follow, or if it goes that way I'll follow. I mean I had a situation recently where my work colleague was telling me that she really liked stars in the universe and she's really interested in the solar system and I actually happened to have a DVD of a guy that basically shares his passion for the universe and I've given that to her, and I did say to her, "It has got quite a message about the Gospel, you know, are you okay with that?" and she said, "Yeah, yeah that's fine." So I mean, you know, I feel quite convinced that I was able to do that, so, yeah it's just taking each day and looking out looking out for opportunities, really.

[Andrew:] Well, thank you for sharing. That's really, really helpful. Thank you very much.

[Heather:] It's all right, no worries. Thank you, Andrew.

[Karen:]

Thank you, Heather for sharing your little story about your work. So shall we just pray for Heather.

Father, thank You that Heather is in this job that she believes that You have given her, and I pray that You would continue to go ahead of her in all that she does, so that You keep her safe, that You keep her eyes open, that You keep her lips speaking well, and that You protect her heart, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Reading: Barabbas' perspective of Jesus before Pilate and on the Cross

So now we're going to have a reading, and this is really a retelling of a story¹ that we find in Matthew 27:15 So Jesus is before Pilate, and it's about that and the events that follow on.

I watch from the shadows. I watch that man die, nailed to a cross, my cross. I am guilty. I am all that I was accused of: rebel, murderer, thief. I am not sorry, but I was caught, put in chains, condemned to die. From my cell I heard the crowd shouting, "Barabbas, Barabbas, we want Barabbas."

I am hard, but fear coursed through every sinew of my body. I'm dragged out into the hard light of day in front of Pilate. *He* is there. Bound, silent. There is an amazing peace hanging over him. The crowd shout even louder, but they are shouting for *my* freedom. I know that that man is innocent. I've heard the stories of people being healed, even a man raised from the dead. How fickle humanity is!

Pilate washes his hands. He is fearful now, and orders me set free. A soldier unlocks my shackles. My chains fall off and I run.

I look at that man on the cross. He is dying in my place. What kind of man would not defend himself to let another go free? King of the Jews they called him. Son of God he said he was. Then it seems he looks straight at me. His eyes are full of love. It is too much to bear. That is *my* cross. That is *my* punishment. That man is crucified for me.

Amen.

1 By Karen herself

Talk

Father God, and as Andrew comes to speak to us this morning, would You fill him with your Spirit, and would You bless his words to us. In Jesus name, amen.

[Andrew:]

Amen. Thank you, Karen. Thank you for that reading: very, very moving. Morning all again. It's good to see you. We're going to be looking over these next few weeks at the subject of God's grace. Today we're going to be looking at undeserved grace. So that's where we're going to begin this very short series.

If I can have my first slide up please. I just wanted to read these words to set the scene. And the scene needs to be set with real clarity. Grace means not getting what you deserve. Grace means mercy, not justice. Grace means someone else paying your dues. Just have a think about that for a minute. These are kind of phrases that might be familiar to you, but I just wanted to say, in reality we can't appreciate grace until we know that we need it.

Grace means **not** getting what you deserve.

Grace means **mercy**, not justice.

Grace means **someone else paying** your dues.

zoom

So I just wanted to talk to you about one of the characteristics of our day. I can remember all the way back to theological college. One of my friends, he was a bit of a bit of a lad, he used to be kind of muck about and he was one of the first people who used to play around with graphics and computers and he made this brilliant, brilliant advert that used to flash up on screens every now and again and it was sent around to the other training ordinands and it would be a picture of himself. He had fairly long hair, and he would be swishing his hair, and he had a kind of a scruffy beard as well. But underneath it said, "because you're worth it," which always got a bit of a laugh. It's a take on the classic advert, "because you're worth it." And this particular chap was very self-deprecating: in the end, he knew his status before God as a normal human being. But he was mocking the way in which the advert and the spirit of our age is insistent on our own worth, ascribing worth to ourselves, self-made, competent people, and that creeps into some religious perspectives as well, where we repeatedly will say, "You know, God loves us and He loves us just as we are. God loves us just as we are." Can I just say that in the light of the New Testament, God does not love us just as we are. It doesn't say that. God mourns over the human race, because of what the human race can be like, deep down. Way before I saw it on the news, I was putting these notes down for today's talk, but all of us will have seen in recent days on the news what was happening over in America at the Capitol building, with the present President of the United States whipping up a crowd to behave irresponsibly and dangerously to the point of loss of life. We've been horrified. It's almost like unreal. It's almost like you're watching a movie. And, you know, you look at someone like Donald Trump and it's very easy with someone like him to go 'deluded'. Some doctors have even used the word 'psychopath'. But there's something seriously wrong. And not only that, there's something wrong with a number of people who have been persuaded and have acted terribly in the light of things he said, and so we can go, "there's something wrong with them, with him." But of course the story of Barabbas changes the perspective: it's very easy to point the finger, but the story of Barabbas which happens in all of the Gospel accounts, all four gospels talk about Barabbas, giving us a window into how we really are.

So, how do we really see grace? When we hear the word grace, do we think that's because God is nice? I really want to emphasise, you won't understand grace until you see your need of it. Until you're aware that something is broken, you won't seek a fix. In John 16 verse 8, Jesus was promising His disciples that the

Holy Spirit would come in His place to bring conviction of sin. And it seems to be in replacing Jesus that the Holy Spirit would do that. You find examples throughout the gospels that wherever Jesus is present with people, people are then acutely aware of something that is wrong with them. You'll know that first encounter with Simon Peter, where Peter falls at his knees and says, "Depart from me, Lord, I'm a sinful man."² Just being with Jesus makes you aware that something's wrong, but likewise the Holy Spirit plays that rôle. And my hope during this talk is that as we talk about grace, we don't just nod and smile at it, but that the Holy Spirit does a work in us, so that we can truly understand it.

Let me get personal. I can still remember, I have vivid memories of what I was like, before I became a Christian. I became a Christian at the age of 19, and I remember leading up to that tumultuous and big change for me, a big, big time of change. I was not a happy bunny. I was at the time a student, having a gap year, and I was remembering myself to be strangely empty - it's a very vivid memory. I remember trying to drown my emptiness in beer. I was trying very hard to be happy, but in reality I think I was hiding myself, hiding myself even from myself. I didn't talk to anybody about what was really going on inside, and it was almost like being a bit of a zombie, not quite alive. I was probably a bit depressed. And I can remember particularly feeling trapped by a sense of futility. I didn't quite know where my life should go. I'd lost hope in what I planned for. And I can remember getting caught up in things that I knew were just damaging to me but I just found no other mode, I just continued to get stuck in this pattern of self-damage, naturally selfish. And then I met Jesus Christ. As a 19-year-old, I unexpectedly met Jesus Christ. And it was dramatic for me, I suddenly could see. I was suddenly free, it was a complete change. When I read in Ephesians two verses 1, 2 and 3, it says these words:

1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. 3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

We don't usually describe ourselves in such acute ways, but that was one of my memories of feeling so, so lost.

Let's have my next slide, looking at this person called Barabbas. I wonder if you're aware of what his name means: Barabbas literally means, Son of the Father: Bar-Abbas, Son of the Father. The different accounts in the gospels describe him as someone who took part in an uprising. So, an insurrectionist, not dissimilar to those people storming into the Capitol. He was known as a murderer, it says in one of the

Barabbas
First name 'Jesus?',
last name means 'Son
of the Father'

Took part in an uprising,
was a murderer.
A revolutionary/bandit,
killer



accounts, so a revolutionary. It even uses a word to say a bandit, a revolutionary bandit and a killer. This is a description of this criminal. And as Karen so poignantly described to us, when Barabbas was led out into this scene where Pilate had a crowd in front of him, he is unexpectedly in the presence of Grace. Now, it is beautiful and poetic to think about what his response would be. It doesn't really give us complete clarity as to what his response is. But I can't imagine he was not aware of Jesus being there. I wonder if he or Pilate, or the crowd, knew that Grace was present. Living Grace was present.

So, Barabbas again. Barabbas was locked up. And he was likely to be under the

sentence of death, because he was a murderer, because he was an insurrectionist against Rome, it would have been perfectly normal for Romans to dispatch such people for their own criminal actions but also as a sign to the rest of society to beware. So he would have been bound because of his sin and he was likely to be executed because of his sin. Barabbas startlingly represents all of us. I don't know how you feel when I say that. "Barabbas represents you." There is a terrible, harrowing line in one of the accounts when the crowd is shouting, "Set Barabbas free." And Pilate says, "Well, what shall we do with this man?", meaning Jesus, and they say, "His blood to be on us and on our children."³ What a thing to say! "His blood be on us and on our children." Ironically, that is exactly what they needed.

At that moment, with Barabbas standing to one side in chains, and Jesus standing to one side on chains, Grace was quietly standing there, so that the condemned man could go free. This is an astonishing, literal description of how grace works. But let me just look at Jesus

Himself: let me have my next slide. I wanted to set before you how free Jesus was to do this or not. This is something that we know for definite from other aspects of the Gospel accounts about Jesus' ability to control His life and His destiny. He had already said just before His arrest, that He could if He wished, click His fingers and call on legions of angels to defend Him. That's Matthew 26:53. But He didn't! He could have had, going on the numbers we know for legions, 36,000 angels, if He wanted, to defend Himself, 36,000, but He didn't. It says in Matthew 22, He could have spoken words which would have silenced His enemies, it says in Matthew 22 verse 46. No one could say a word in reply and from that day no one dared ask Him any more questions. Jesus could speak things that would silence others. He could have walked away through the crowd without harm if He wanted, He had done that on other occasions. Luke 4 says that, Luke 4:30, where they were trying to grab hold of Him and throw Him off a cliff, but because it wasn't His time and because He didn't choose to, He simply walked through the crowd. So this amazing Man, this Son of Man, this Son of God, had extraordinary power, and yet here, arrested before Pilate, standing beside Barabbas, He remains silent, undefended. He doesn't move. He stays there. This is absolutely incredible.

When Jesus was arrested:

He could call on legions of angels, but didn't.

[Matthew 26:53](#)

He could have spoken words which silenced his enemies, but didn't. [Matthew 22:46](#)

He could have walked through the crowd without harm, but didn't. [Luke 4:30](#)

He remained. He was silent and undefended.

You see, Jesus stands silent, because grace doesn't shout. Grace simply stands beside us, and waits. The nature of Grace is that it doesn't push, it simply stands where we are. So think of this and think of the poetry of this: Barabbas, whose name is 'son of the father', but gone bad, is beside Jesus, Son of the Father. They both have the same description. In some Gospel accounts, it even does say that Barabbas actually might have had a first name that was Jesus, would you believe? Would you believe it? Jesus, son of the father, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus, Son of the Father, the one who brings Grace, the one who brings mercy. This is such an extraordinary portrait of how the Gospel works. It just stands beside us, and waits.

Some of you will remember famously the historical figure of John Newton. John Newton in 1730-something was a man who was oblivious of God, and oblivious of who he was, he was a slave trader. He was wicked in God's eyes, for sure. Even the people who travelled with him on boats regarded him as being a bad man. He was impious, even described by his own sailor friends. And then of course, those of you who know the story know that he cried out to God one particular occasion when the boat was likely to get submerged and sunk, and he cries out for mercy. He surprised himself crying out for mercy, and to his astonishment, the boat

3 [Matthew 27:25](#)

survived and he survived. And he started to think about the possibility of God being there. It took several years, but gradually his eyes were opened to his own wickedness as a slave trader, and his eyes were opened to his own wickedness, as just a human being. And he wrote the famous hymn, *Amazing Grace*. John Newton discovered gradually the presence of grace in his life.

We'll have our next slide. You see, this is what God is like. This is truly what God is like, this is the clearest portrait we have of God. God says to us, "In Christ, this is who I am. I'm the one who stands at your side, and ultimately, in your place. This is the One who you pray to." This is the picture God wants us to have in our heads when we think about what God is like. Grace means not getting what you deserve. Grace means mercy, not justice. Grace means someone else paying your dues.

**"This is who I am.
The one who stands at your side,
in your place.
This is who you pray to."**



Let's have our next slide. This is something that Karen read to us and I want you to read it with Barabbas' name in there. All right? Imagine Barabbas' name in there. I'll read it once and then I'm going to read it again. And maybe you would dare to put your own name in there instead. "You see at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly {like Barabbas}. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person, someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: while we were still sinners {like Barabbas}, Christ died for us." Just pause for a moment and read it to yourself again and say, "like me." "Like me." God demonstrates His own love for you in this: while you were still a sinner, Christ died for you.

"You see, at just the right time, when were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly [like Barabbas]. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners [like Barabbas], Christ died for us."

Rom. 5:6-8

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I just wanted to conclude this talk by saying this: grace is the deep characteristic of God. It's the deep characteristic of God because it holds two aspects of Himself together:

- it holds His holiness together, because sin needs to be dealt with,
- but it holds His love up to the holiness, because He wants to overcome the barrier of sin anyway.

God finds a way that was impossible before, and at great cost to Himself, He reaches out to utterly lost people. The even greater news, which we'll hear about over these next coming weeks, is that His Grace goes way beyond covering our offence. We don't just get forgiven, we get adopted, we get fully reinstated as His people, and we become sons and daughters of the Father. Remember Barabbas' name, 'son of the father'. When Jesus looked at Barabbas, I can only imagine it happened, but I'm presuming that there's something there. When Jesus looked at Barabbas, He saw him and thought, 'a potential son of the Father'. And for those of us who say 'yes' to Jesus, that becomes true in the fullest sense of the word, and we don't deserve it.

Prayerful Response

So I just want to finish with a moment of reflection, so can you close your eyes. Close your eyes and I want you to picture yourself in that situation where Barabbas was, in chains before a jeering crowd. And I want you in the quiet to picture yourself as Barabbas.

Just imagine shuffling out and hearing the crowd. Holy Spirit, help us to be real about this now. I want you, as you imagine this, to be aware of Jesus with you while you're standing there.

Let the Holy Spirit show you God's Grace in the face of Jesus Christ, right beside you now. Come, Holy Spirit, reveal to us Jesus again.

And I do pray Lord, that we would see the chains come off. Come, Holy Spirit, and show us that You have set us free.

So I'll have our final slide again. Remember these words, and can I encourage you to dwell on them. Grace means not getting what you deserve. Grace means mercy, not justice. Grace means someone else paying your dues.

Grace means **not** getting what you deserve.

Grace means **mercy**, not justice.

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zoom

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

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Barabbas' Perspective – by Karen Mills