

There Even With the Grace of God Go I

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. Now, perhaps you've heard the phrase, or maybe you've used it yourself, there but for the grace of God go I.

There but for the grace of God go I. It's probably fallen out of use. I've not heard it or used it much at all in my lifetime. Apparently, the first record of it actually comes from one of the early church reformers, the 1500s, a man called John Bradford one day said he saw a group of prisoners being led away to be executed, and he turned to his friend and said, there but for the grace of God goes John Bradford.

It's a really shocking thing to say, isn't it, that the difference between him and them was not that he was better, but rather simply, purely the grace of God, the undeserved kindness of God to him.

But for God's grace, he said, that could well have been him going to lose his life for doing wrong. And there's great truth in that. We saw that really vividly last week in Genesis 15.

Remember, God told Abram to cut up some animals. It was part of his covenant or his promise. And the idea, remember, is that whoever would break their promise should become like those butchered animals.

[1 : 3 0] Today, we'll see Abram certainly deserved that. As we all do, he had broken faith with God in our hearts, in our lives. But remember then, it was only God who took that oath.

He swore on his own life to keep his promises. He walked between those pieces. Remember, he took the curse upon himself while Abram was what?

He was sleeping. Sleeping. So that in the end, it was not Abram. And it is not us. If we are in Christ, you get what we deserve for our sin.

But it is God who gets what we deserve for our sin. On the cross, the Son of God, Jesus Christ, became like the slaughtered animals.

Like those prisoners going to die. Not for his unfaithfulness, for he was not unfaithful. He went to die in our place for our broken faith, our unfaithfulness, so that we would not receive what we deserve, that punishment.

[2 : 4 3] So Abram could well have said, couldn't he, as he looked at those slaughtered animals, there but for the grace of God go I. We certainly have not understood the death of Jesus until we have looked at Jesus on the cross and said, there but for the grace of God go I.

But today, Genesis shows us that in another sense, even with the grace of God, we still choose to go that way of death. Because God's grace comes to us, not because of any goodness in us, but in spite of our sin.

So that we today will look at Abram and Sarai and their ongoing sin, and we can say equally there, even with the grace of God, go I.

Because even though we have in Christ been spared that punishment, well, this family shows us that we are no less deserving of that punishment than we ever were.

There are some really low points in the book of Genesis. Chapter 16 is clearly one of the lowest. It's as if in the brightness of God's grace in chapter 15, while the shadow of the human heart is even darker than in chapter 16.

[4 : 08] And so that, what I hope we'll see, is that as the grace of God comes to the rescue of his people once again, we will be all the more stunned and blown away and awed by his amazing grace towards us who do not deserve it.

So two points to help us see that this morning, beginning with a fallen family, a broken family. We have an amazing ability, don't we?

I know that I do anyway. To get it wrong again and again, not only to get it wrong again and again, but get it wrong in the same way again and again and again. And we won't understand this passage this morning until we see that the problem here is a repeat of the same problem we saw last time and the same problem all the way back to the beginning.

On the surface, this looks new, doesn't it? Different people, different words, but underneath it is the same issue at stake, that same question, is God not as good as his word?

See that in verses one and two, just look down now. Sarah, Abram's wife, had borne him no children, but she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar. So she said to Abram, the Lord has kept me from having children.

[5 : 30] Go sleep with my slave. Perhaps I can build a family through her. Now it's hard to know where to start, isn't it? But put the scandal to one side and just see where this is coming from.

What's the premise of this plan? The Lord has kept me from having children. So straight away, if you were here last week, or even if you just glance back to the start of chapter 15, we're right back there, aren't we?

Where we started last week, Abram said to God, you have given me no children. Same problem. And that's a unique problem for this couple because God's whole promise, his whole covenant to bless the world through this family rests on that mini promise, doesn't it?

To grow the family, to give them children that will carry the promise forward. But didn't God answer that concern last week? Wasn't that what that whole conversation was all about?

He proved, did he not? His power, his willingness to see his promise through. So how are we back here again at the start of the very next chapter?

[6 : 44] Well, on one level, brothers and sisters, friends, this is how the human heart works, isn't it? This is who we are. Sometimes people say, don't they, time is a healer.

Time is a healer. But time can also be a bruiser. Time can help us to get over things, but sometimes time only papers over the cracks that underneath the surface are getting deeper and deeper every day.

And it could be that that is what is happening in this family. Notice verse three. This is after Abram had been living in Canaan for 10 years. 10 years ago, Abram had listened to God, put his trust in his promise, 10 years after he'd built his life in the land God showed him, and still seemingly no promise.

You think, where were you 10 years ago? What were you doing? And think, if somebody had made you a promise 10 years ago, and they still seemingly had not kept that promise, what would you think?

Would you not think, perhaps they're not going to you? Perhaps this person cannot be trusted. You know, I said last time, this is why we need to come back, don't we?

[8 : 04] Back again and again to God and to his word, over and over, through the different seasons of life, through the ups and the downs, so that we remain convinced that he cannot lie, that his promises cannot fail.

We don't naturally grow closer to God over time, do we? You might like to think that we do. We don't, because that is not how our hearts work. It is God and his word that help us every day to trust in him and to wait well for the coming of his promise.

And so here's a question for you to ask yourself today, this week, am I waiting well? Am I waiting well?

The last month, year, decade, have I grown in trust and independence on God and his word, or have I drifted? What has that time done to me?

What change have I seen in me? How well am I waiting? But here's the deeper question that Genesis is asking us today. Why is it that our hearts work like that?

[9 : 19] You know, why is it that we don't grow naturally closer to God over time? Back to the scandal then. Okay, let's dig in deep to this. Look, Sarai says to her husband, the Lord has kept me from having children.

Go sleep with my slave and perhaps we can build a family through her. So just to open this up, Sarai's idea is that her slave, Hagar, okay, could be forced into becoming a surrogate mother for the family so that Abram would sleep with her, she would get pregnant, but the child would be counted as her and his, part of the covenant family.

What are we meant to do with that? It is really horrible, isn't it? It's hard to read about. It's hard to speak about. Sometimes people will point to things like this in the Bible and say, how can you say that this is a book that we're meant to learn from?

But is Genesis actually recommending this to us? Well, okay, look at the pattern here. It begins with a lie or a twisted truth.

The Lord has kept me from having children. Now, that's a deceptive thing to say because in one sense, God is sovereign and he has shown that he is perfectly capable and perfectly powerful enough to have given them children.

[10 : 46] He is the God who made the stars. He can create human life. But it also strongly suggests, doesn't it, that God is wrong for not having done that in the right time frame?

He has not done it in time, says Sarah. It implies, doesn't it, if he's not done it yet, well, we need to take this into our own hands. God can't be trusted with his own plan.

We need to take it on ourselves, see it through. So, it's deceptive because it contains enough truth to make it convincing, but twisted so violently that it casts such a deep, dark shadow on the character of God.

Is he not good? Is he not trustworthy? See how it is a cunning thing to say. And unbelievably, okay, the man who had had this conversation with God already, okay, he'd had this conversation, hadn't he, in chapter 15.

Are you not good? Are you not powerful? And he had seen God's power, his willingness displayed. The man who had had that conversation says what? Okay, let's try it.

[12 : 00] He doesn't say, does he, no, no, no, that's not what God said he would do. He just goes along with it. And so, verse 3, Sarai, his wife, took her Egyptian slave, Hagar, and gave her to her husband to be his wife.

Now, if you give something to someone, you don't say to you, I'll take it and give it to you. You would just say, I'll give it to you. So, doesn't this read a bit weirdly?

She says, she took her and gave her. Why took and gave? Well, here's the key to this puzzle. Just turn back, please, to Genesis chapter 3, a few pages.

Genesis 3, and when you get there, just have a look at verse 6. Genesis 3, verse 6, says, when the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it.

She also gave some to her husband who was with her and he ate it. You see that? She took, she gave, he ate.

[13 : 19] And that is the decisive moment in history where humanity decided God, what wasn't to be trusted, was not good and turned against him. Now, just turn back to where we were in chapter 16, back to the story, verse 3.

Sarah, his wife, took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar and she conceived. So, you see the pattern she took, she gave, he slept.

And so, friends, what is the pattern that we see? This is Genesis telling us that we are not watching a new episode. This is not a new release. This is a repeat. This is a repeat of the fall, a repeat of the original sin starring this time the father of the faithful and his wife.

It is the same root problem, doubting God's goodness. It is the same solution. We will do what he has told us not to do.

And it is the same outcome, isn't it? A terribly broken family. It is hard to know who to feel most sorry for. Is it Sarai?

[14 : 31] Her heart so twisted by this lie that she throws another woman into the arms of her husband only to have that woman take her position and look down on her.

Is it Abram tempted by his own wife to short circuit God's plan by sleeping with another woman? Surely it has to be Hagar, isn't it? Helplessly passed back and forth between husband and wife, impregnated and then dropped.

Friends, Genesis is not holding up this family for us as an example to follow. It is holding up this family to us as a mirror so that as we see this family, we see ourselves looking back.

Why do we get it wrong again and again and again in the same way again and again and again? Why can we not change that pattern?

Because our first parents believed a terrible lie that God does not want our best and he cannot be trusted and that lie has not left our hearts ever since.

[15 : 46] Whether you're hearing this for the first time or you've been a Christian all of your life, that lie inhabits you. It is part of your life. If you wouldn't call yourself a Christian today, what would you think if I told you that your whole life you had been living this lie?

that every decision that you had made was actually a decision to run from this God out of the deep-seated fear that he cannot be trusted with your life?

That is who the Bible tells us that we are, all of us. Perhaps you find yourself running from him today and do not know how to stop running.

Well, friend, this is why. This is the lie at the heart of a human life. And even when we do know Christ, this lie still tempts us to run from God again, doesn't it?

Even though our hearts have changed and we know he can be trusted, that he is good. Isn't it telling that this all happened after chapter 15, verse 6, Abram believed the Lord and he counted it to him as righteousness?

[17 : 00] Abram is a justified man, but he is not fully sanctified. In other words, he is as right with God as it is possible for him to be.

And yet, he isn't free yet from the presence of sin in his heart. So the lie lives on in him, powerless but still kicking. And brothers and sisters, we need to acknowledge that that is still true of us today.

Okay, this family, this family, the Bonacord church family, God's family, this, this is a broken family. We are fallen people.

That lie will come out of our lives in all kinds of different ways, in our thoughts, our words, our habits, our relationships, our families, our church life. And we are too afraid to admit that.

But this is how deep the problem goes. But here's the thing, the more honestly and openly we see the sin in ourselves and own up to it, you personally and us collectively, the more clearly we will see, personally, collectively, the power and the willingness of God to meet us in our sin, to redeem us, deliver us, save us.

[18 : 25] we do not need to be afraid today to admit that we are this broken because, next point, we see that our God is a compassionate God.

Let's catch up a bit with the story Abram sleeps with Hagar, Hagar gets pregnant, Sarai then says to Abram, this is all your fault. Abram says to Sarai, well, she's your slave, Sarai mistreats, abuses Hagar, Hagar runs away from the family.

What an indictment on this family. This is the family God said he would use to bless every family of the earth. I wonder, did you notice where Hagar is from?

Where's she from? She's an Egyptian. So once again, God's chosen family has not only failed to bring God's blessing to the nations, they have heaped harm on the nations through the way that they have treated Hagar, the Egyptian.

Remember, they did this before to the Egyptians in Egypt when they went there and brought God's curse. And some of the language here is even an echo of the Exodus story, except this time it's not God's family being afflicted by Egyptians.

[19 : 46] It is, it's the other way around. It's the Egyptians being afflicted by God's family. So who are the bad guys in the story? Who are the bad guys here? The thing that Genesis wants us to see is that it is this Egyptian, the outsider, the outcast.

She is not outside the pale of God's grace. Though God is equally compassionate, she is rescued by God just as his family were from slavery.

You see his compassion there, just look at verse 7. The angel of the Lord found Hagar, found her near a spring in the desert. He has come to her.

The Lord has come to seek and save this lost sheep. He's intent to rescue this outsider, this outcast, even when his own family have lost sight of his gracious character and purpose.

And look what Hagar calls him in verse 13. What an intimate name this is. You are the God who sees me. I have seen the one who sees me.

[20 : 58] He knows her name. He knows where she's come from and where she's going. He sees her to her very heart. He is the God who knows, who speaks, who seeks and finds.

See, here is God sovereignly and independently carrying out his own purpose to bless the world even when his family have done the very opposite thing and lied and raped and harmed others for their own gain.

And there's a special point of contact here, of course, isn't there, for those who have experienced that kind of hurt at the hands of others, who have been mistreated and abused, perhaps by spiritual leaders or church, perhaps by family, maybe by strangers.

And as a result of that, have perhaps questioned, how can God love me or care for me if this has happened to me? Well, look who this God is.

Look at the God who sees. See how God comes near to those who have suffered that and cares for them. Here is a woman who has been chased out of God's family but chased into the arms of a loving God.

[22 : 19] He is there, he sees, he cares, he loves. Whatever you have suffered, he sees. But think for a minute how this would have sounded to the first hearers of this book.

They themselves have been slaves in Egypt. God has rescued them, brought them out to himself, and now they hear that long before that he saved them, he saved an Egyptian from the tyranny of their own ancestor, Abram.

How would that have hit you? Surely you would think, wouldn't you? So the fact that God has chosen and rescued and saved me cannot then be a reflection of who I am or the family that I was born into or anything that I have done for him.

It must therefore be because God is gracious and compassionate, because he shows his grace and his compassion to those of every family of the earth.

He extends that grace beyond the family he chose to the world he loves because he is the God who sees and who finds the lost. Now that does not mean that God saves Hagar or Ishmael or his family in any other way than through his covenant.

[23 : 38] That is how he has promised to save. And that's still really important for us to see as vast, as great, as infinite as God's love, grace, and compassion is that he has one way that he rescues.

It's important for us to see that here in this chapter particularly because rightly or wrongly there are billions of people on earth today who actually trace their ancestry back to this event and to Ishmael, the son of Abram, namely Muslims.

And the challenge of this text is holding then those two things together. God's grace extends surely, doesn't it, to people of every tribe, language, people, and nation.

He could not make that more clear than here. And so to bring this right up to date, here's the scandal of God's grace that we, we Christians today, are not more worthy of God's grace than our Muslim neighbors or people of any other religion.

We are not more worthy than they are to receive the grace of the living God. Now we don't say that, but perhaps we might think that, perhaps we might feel that.

[24 : 55] So then, does that mean we shouldn't try to speak with our Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish neighbors, anyone else about God's rescue through the gospel of Jesus because we are so undeserving and no better than them?

No, it is the opposite, isn't it? We should want to all the more because how is it that God's grace comes to us? God's grace that we do not deserve comes to us only through his one promised son given to us out of his one promised family, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we are not more worthy of him than anyone else in our lives. And so then, we love our Muslim neighbors best not by leaving them to get on with life, but by lovingly sharing the gospel of the Lord Jesus with them because God has so loved the world.

that he gave his one and only son that whoever would believe might not perish but have eternal life. Where is that in the passage? Good question.

Notice, God's covenant love will come to Hagar, but only through the family that he chose. That's why he sends her back in verse 9. Maybe that made us uncomfortable.

[26 : 19] The angel of the Lord told her, go back to your mistress and submit to her. Now, that is not God supporting slavery or affirming the harm that was done to her.

It's God saying that to be included in his blessing, Hagar will have to belong to the covenant family again. And God says, doesn't he, he will grow the family of Ishmael, verse 10, but notice that he doesn't promise that his blessing will come through that family.

He says, I will increase your descendants so they will be too numerous to count. Ishmael will enjoy this token of the fact that he is a son of Abram, but he won't receive the promise.

So that while there is a gracious rescue offered, it comes only through the one promised son of the one promised family.

Which is another way of saying that it does not matter which family we're born in, what kind of special kudos we think that gives us. God's grace to humanity, whoever we are, wherever we come from, is in pointing us to his one chosen son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[27 : 34] He is the only source of God's eternal blessing for us, for the world. There is no family in the world for whom he is not the only savior, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved.

Because ultimately, he is the one who came to Hagar that day, the one who came to seek and save the lost. This is the first time we meet this mysterious figure in our Bibles, the angel of the Lord.

So here is a special, unique messenger sent from God to speak for God, to reveal God's heart, who it turns out, verse 13, did you see, is God.

She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her, not only the angel of the Lord, but the Lord himself. And so it is widely believed that the angel of the Lord, the angel, is in fact none other than the Son of God sent before his coming in the flesh to rescue and to redeem.

And if we know him, if we know the Lord Jesus, this is so like him, isn't it? It is so like him to do this. So prepared this week, I couldn't help thinking of that time that we read of at the beginning of our service when Jesus came and found and spoke to another woman, equally shamed, outcast, outside by another spring or well, how he saw her, how he told her all that she had ever done, how he pointed her to himself.

[29 : 16] We are waiting for the Messiah to come and tell us everything, she said. I, who am speaking to you, am he, he said. And she went and got the whole village together to meet him and told him, what, here is the God who sees.

Come and meet a man who told me everything that I had ever done. He knows my life. He sees my heart. And that whole family, remember, of outsiders and of outcasts came to the Lord and believed in him and received God's eternal blessing through his son, Jesus.

This is so like him, isn't it, to do this? And I said earlier, we have all lived the lie, the lie that God is not good and he is not trustworthy. We have run from God and we have done wrong against him.

So how can then we be saved and forgiven only by this God of compassion and grace, only through this one chosen son, the Lord Jesus.

And so if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian this morning, I hope that this chapter of the Bible gives you hope that whoever you are and wherever you have come from, and not only that, but whatever you have been through, that there is a God of compassion, grace, and love, who is willing and is able to rescue you through Jesus.

[30 : 44] That is what he is telling you even now, as you've come, as you've heard this word. So do not feel then that you are too far from God or could ever be too far from God for him to see you, for him to come, to find you, to seek and to save you.

That is why Jesus came, so that he could seek and save the lost. And brothers and sisters, do not think that that is the end of our need for him.

We never ever get past our need for the gospel, do we? Why? Because we never get past our sin in this life. And so the gospel then is not stage one of the Christian life, and then we move on to stage two and stage three.

The gospel is the beginning, middle, and end of the Christian life. Because his grace is the antidote to that poisonous lie in our hearts.

It does not go away from the beginning, does it? It will be there at the end. And so we need that grace, that compassion of his day by day by day by day to see Christ, his character, his goodness, his compassion and love, his death, his sacrifice.

[32 : 02] And as we look at him, how could we doubt that God is good? How could we doubt that he is trustworthy to keep his promise, that he is faithful to save completely all those who draw near to him through his son, the Lord Jesus?

Let us do that now as we pray together. Amen. Gracious Father, how we thank you for your grace and compassion that we do not deserve.

Father, we thank you that you did not leave us in our sin, and that when we believed lies about you, and when we turned away from you, and insulted your name, and offended your heart, that you drew near to us in love.

We thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ, who has presented to us in all of his goodness and grace and glory in these pages. And Father, seeing him, we pray that you draw us to him.

Lord, we pray especially, Lord, for anyone here who does not yet have their trust resting entirely upon him. And pray, Lord, today that you would grant them the faith to come to him.

[33 : 35] Lord, we pray for those who have experienced incredible trauma in their past. Father, we pray that your grace and compassion would meet them out of these pages.

Help us, we pray, as your family, never to be like that, but always to be a reflection of your grace, compassion, and goodness, Lord, to those who are hurting.

And Father, for those of us who know you, how we pray that day by day, this day, tomorrow, and the day after, Lord, that you would draw us to Christ and refresh us by him and his grace.

Keep us in him, we pray, our hearts and our minds, for we ask in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen.