

What is Your God Really Like? 2024
 Psalm 63:1-8 Mark 10:46-52

Psalm 63:1-8 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. ²So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. ³Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. ⁴So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name. ⁵My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips ⁶when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; ⁷for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. ⁸My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

Mark 10:46-52 (New Revised Standard Version)

⁴⁶They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. ⁴⁷When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁸Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁹Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” ⁵⁰So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.” ⁵²Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

**What do you think that the Lord is really like,
 and what do you suppose God wants from you?**

When I was little boy, curious, inquisitive and into things,
 fairly often that got me into endless trouble and difficulty.
 Then having finally overwhelmed my mother’s patience and endurance,
 I’d hear, **“just wait until your father gets home!”**

Later when my father heard about my fun and misbehavior that day,
 he would convincingly instruct me in the error of my ways,
 which might involve his anger, correction and punishment.

That traditional approach to childhood discipline and learning
 was a significant influence on how I envisioned the Lord God,
 fully aware and keeping track of all my mistakes and failures,
 and therefore mostly angry and disappointed with me.

That harsh and unpleasant perspective was my impression of God,
 a fear-driven image of a powerful, angry and punishing judge,
 emphasizing the Law, obey and behave well, or else...
 ... so any good I did was mostly about trying to avoid punishment,
 trying to balance my failures, mistakes and sinful behavior.

But then on a high school youth group trip in rural Pennsylvania
the retreat speaker described a totally different perspective ---
--- a wise, patient and understanding God who loves us,
the opposite of an angry God ready to pounce & punish.

In her first talk, she urged us to look at nature all around us,
and notice the incredible beauty and wonder of the mountains.
Then she asked, does that really look like the work on an angry God,
who is somehow shocked and upset that we fail and make mistakes?
Would such a wrathful God bother to create this amazing world?

Then she went on to discuss the events, life and teachings of Jesus,
and didn't he consistently proclaim a God who already loves us all,
even the outcast & sinner, the struggling & most unlikely?
Didn't Jesus always reach out to lost sinners with gracious love,
even before they responded with any good deeds or acts of faith?

Consider the story we just heard read about a man who was blind
and reduced to begging along the road that went into Jericho.

This passage begins
when Jesus, his disciples and a crowd were leaving Jericho.
The name of the man who was blind and begging was Bartimeaus.
In Aramaic, "bar" means son,
and "timeaus" means one who is honored or valued.

So by name, Bartimeaus was a much valued and treasured son.

But something in his life had gone awry,
as he struggles and begs for enough alms to survive, vs. 47-48,

When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "**Son of David, have mercy on me!**"

Bartimeaus cried out referring to Jesus as the "Son of David"
which is a theological title from the Old Testament prophets
that refers to the long-promised Messiah of Israel.
Clearly this blind man saw something about Jesus the others did not.

Jesus noticed and had compassion for Bartimeaus.

Jesus valued him and wanted to hear what the man everyone else
considered a useless bother and nuisance **had to say**, vs. 49-50,

Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.

It is a significant detail that he threw off his cloak,
probably his only possession, security and place to sleep.

This infers his eager enthusiasm, desire and commitment,
and trusting faith that Jesus had something better for him,
in throwing off any encumbrance against rushing to Jesus.

Continuing with the story, 51-52,

Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight **and followed him on the way.**

What do I want? I want to be healed, my life restored.

I want to live out the blessings given by my Creator.

And when Bartimeaus receives his eyesight,

he also receives insight and so he chooses to follow Jesus.

Just as we sang earlier,

Amazing grace (how sweet the sound) that saved a wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.

It's important to recognize that this text is not saying,
that because you had **enough** faith, your faith made you well,
but, by turning to me in faith, **by grace** you were healed.

The power of God set us free, and it's not **our** good works or deeds.

**It is not because we are worthy or qualified or deserve it,
but simply because God set his heart on us – because God loves us.**

All through Scripture we read of a patient & loving God who blesses,
such as our Psalm 63 reading, vs. 1, 3, 7-8

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you... for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

Or as the prophet Nehemiah announces, vs. 9:17

You are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you do not forsake us.

We can count on and rely on God's grace and mercy without limit,
and are called to respond to that Good News & compassion
by letting that gracious love flow freely through us.

The Bible is the most incredible love story ever written,
about our God whose infinite love & mercy continues throughout
calling for a response from his beloved & precious children,
but somehow sometimes religious folks miss seeing that truth.

The Church during the 1500's missed believing that message & truth,
but instead envisioned an angry wrathful God who must be placated.

The medieval church of Martin Luther's time taught that **only**
good deeds, acts of love, obedience & devotion to the church,
could make one worthy and deserving of God's mercy and pardon.

But Luther was unable to cleanse and relieve his guilty conscience,
and reassure and satisfy his sense of fear, sorrow, regret & dread.

**For all his efforts, good deeds, confession and fervent trying,
he still couldn't shake the death-grip and hold of fear & sin.**

His was a rigorous life of prayer and spiritual disciplines,
and Luther spend up to 6 hours each day confessing his sins.

Yet still fear haunted him, that he might forget some sin,

or hadn't done enough to placate God's wrath toward him.

That was the consuming issue and struggle of Martin Luther,
because no matter how hard he tried, he could not achieve
or accomplish the assurance of forgiveness that he sought.

In 1515, Martin Luther was appointed to teach a course
on the biblical writings of Paul at the university in Wittenberg,
and in preparation was pushed to study Scripture for himself.

From his studies, he discovered that forgiveness and righteousness,
don't come through our good works or religious observances,
but as God's gift of grace, a **righteousness through Christ**,
accomplished when Jesus died and rose again from the dead.

Righteousness is not earned, but by grace is received through faith.

For Martin Luther,
this was an overwhelming and transforming revelation,
that the institutional church had missed or rejected.

As Luther put it,
"It was as though the gates of heaven were opened to me."

That reminds me of something I saw in Washington state one time.
There was a young mule deer caught in a mudslide,
and the more it kicked, the more stuck and trapped it got.
Whenever would-be rescuers would try to approach the deer,
it would frantically struggle and bury itself even deeper.

Finally it was too exhausted to struggle any more on its own,
and only then some rangers were able to get a strap around the deer,
so that they could hoist it up from the mud and onto solid ground.

Luther was exhausted by his constant struggles to do enough good,
to love and accomplish enough, but then the word of God's grace
came like a strap of God's power pulling him up from the mud,
as God's gracious love
accomplished what by his own efforts, Luther could not.
That is the message of the Gospel, **God's Good News for sinners.**

It's an entirely different picture and understanding of God
than that proclaimed by the medieval church that made
Luther feel so fearful & hopeless about his sin & guilt.

Martin Luther wasn't trying to split the church, but to reform it,
and **the critical question at stake in that conflict was,**
what does God want and require from us to be righteous
and for us to be cleansed, healed & saved from our sin?

Is it something we achieve through **our good works of faith**,
or is it something we simply receive, **a free gift from God?**

God wants to have a growing and intimate relationship with us
and to build something wonderful by transforming our lives.
True righteousness isn't earned or achieved by our good works,
but comes only by grace, justification is a free gift from God,

which is pretty much the theme of the Reformation.

Maybe it's not all that heavy nor about some complicated theology.
Maybe it's simple, as it's explained and illustrated,
by that deep thinker & wise theologian, Dennis the Menace.

In one of my favorite cartoon strips, Dennis and Joey
are leaving Mrs. Wilson's house with hands full of cookies.
Joey says, "I wonder what we did to deserve this?"

Dennis answers, "Look, Joey, Mrs. Wilson gives us cookies
because she's nice - not because we are!"
Friends, that is grace! And that is what God is like!

And when we begin to accept and trust that the Good News **is true**,
and we begin to experience that grace for ourselves
and how much God really does love us, even just as we are,
**it becomes the most significant truth of our lives
that can reorient everything about how we live.**

It is not God's intention for our lives
to be defined by guilt and shame, or by fear and regret,
nor for us, through good works and religious observance
to try and earn God's love or make-up for past mistakes.

This isn't about an angry God poised to pounce in fierce judgment,
**but a gracious loving God blessing and rejoicing over us,
with loud joy and gladness celebrating that we are his.**
It's God pouring out his love like a fountain overflowing with grace.

The lesson of the Gospel, rediscovered during the Reformation,
is that we are not saved by our own good deeds or righteous works,
and that God doesn't imprison us in the mistakes of our past,
but is redeeming our tarnished lives toward our unique best.

By grace God calls, invites us to receive and respond to his love,
which is far more powerful & huge than even the worst of our sins,
and so we are invited, called, blessed and well-equipped
to share in **the reformation of our whole life and being.**

**That is the true Gospel message of God's grace and compassion,
the Good News by which we are healed & saved into Jesus Christ,
and the true message of God's grace that the Church
is called and equipped to live out and proclaim.**

Therefore, the most critical question in our life
is not, are we trying hard enough or are we being good enough,
but, how is our relationship with and through Jesus Christ?

This suggests to me that instead of asking, are you saved?,
a better and more meaningful question to ask might be,
**how is the gracious presence of God's love changing you?,
and am I being attentive to the power of God's grace?**

If we see the Christian life as something **we have to accomplish**,
then we are failing to see, recognize and appreciate that

Christianity is really about **our relationship with God**,
a relationship of love, grace and joyful gratitude--
-- and it is by that grace that our faith redefines how we live.

It is a simple and wonderful truth **that as we draw nearer to God,**
it allows God's presence and grace to reform more of our lives.

Truly there is grace, hope and good to be found all around us,
if through eyes of faith we're willing to see & receive new life,
for if we will look, then we will see the difference,
the blessing God's grace has been making all along.

I believe that the single most significant task of this church
is to create a caring, faith and hope nurturing environment
where we do faithfully reflect God's gracious love
by welcoming all and being attentive to human needs.

We are called to be a community which helps form Christian character
which means that here, all people should experience God's love.

As Paul wrote to Corinthian Christians amid their conflict, vs. 1:10

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.