

# Communion weekend- The Grace of Jesus Christ: Restoring grace

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, if you have a Bible in front of you, I think you'll find it helpful to turn to these verses in John 21. As you do so, just let me say for a moment, it's a pleasure for me to be here. I'm grateful to your minister, your pastor David, for inviting someone he doesn't know. That's always dangerous, but I'm very thankful to be here. I did once speak in the Free Church in Aberdeen when I was a student. Goodness, the late 1970s, I spoke to the FCSA, Free Church Students Association. I can't remember what I spoke on, but I remember it was in D Street. I remember that. I'm here with Joan. Joan's sitting in the back row. She's my better half. I'm married above myself, which is a lot for a Glaswegian to say about marrying a girl from Edinburgh. Married above myself. We have four children, one in London, one in Cambridge, one in Edinburgh, one in Inverness. As you heard, I preach occasionally at Smithton. I teach actually a full-time course crammed into two days a week at ETS, and I teach at two other seminaries, one in England, one in the USA. They like the accent. So in the middle of my 60s, I thought, well, it's now or never. So for 37 years, I was a pastor, 20 years in the Church of Scotland in

Ayrshire, which we loved. 17 years minister at Cambridge Presbyterian Church, which we also loved, and now we've come to the frozen north. But we're happily settled and settling into life in Inverness.

When you think about God, what's the default thought that you have? What is the default thought that you have when you think about God? I was marking a dissertation earlier today on John Knox, and if you ask a lot of people their default thought about John Knox, well, he was a misogynist, which he actually was. He was a tub thumper, which he actually was.

He was not too fond of women, especially women who were in authority over him, and that's very true. But my default thought of John Knox is, while I know all those things, he was a man of God, deeply flawed, but a man who loved the Lord and who expended his life in seeking to serve the cause of Jesus Christ. But what is your default thought about God? From the very beginning of time, Satan has sought to insinuate to God's creatures that God at heart is narrow-hearted. Remember in the garden, Satan comes in the guise of a serpent to Adam and Eve, and he says, did God say that you are not to touch any tree in the garden? Well, God had never said that. God had never said they were not to touch the trees. He said there was one tree that they were to avoid, not because there was anything magical about the tree. God was testing their willingness to obey

Him lovingly from the heart, to trust that God knew what was best for them. But Satan comes and insinuates, you know, God really is narrow-hearted. And that's something that he sought to insinuate throughout the length and breadth of Holy Scripture. We find even our Lord Jesus Christ teaching in his parables. One of the men in one of the parables to whom the Master had given one talent, he had done nothing with it, he had buried it in the ground. And the Master comes back and he says to the man who had the ten talents, what have you done? Oh, he says, I've got ten talents more. The one who was given five, I've got five talents more. The one who was given one, oh, he said, I just buried it in the ground.

[ 4 : 26 ] I knew you were a hard man. I knew you were a hard man. And it's the same with that great parable Jesus taught of the two sons, the younger son and the older son.

The younger son who wasted his inheritance in riotous living, wine, women, and song. And the older brother, and I actually think Luke 15 is about the older brother and not about the younger son.

The older brother, when he hears about how generously the father has welcomed back this profligate younger son and brother who had so besmirched the family name and trampled it through the mud and the mire, and how he had embraced him and given him new clothes to wear and shoes for his feet and a ring in his finger. The older son comes to the father and he says, all these years I have slaved for you.

Slaved for you. His relationship with his father was not one of love and tenderness. He thought of his father as a taskmaster, a hard man. What is your default thought about God?

In this passage in John 21, we are presented with a remarkable, beautiful, touching illustration of the large-heartedness of God. Let me sketch again the context for you. Peter, you'll remember, has greatly and tragically denied his Lord and Savior three times. Three times he had publicly said, I know not the man, the final time with curses. I know not the man. Can you think of anything more heinous than openly, publicly denying the Lord of glory with curses? Is there a more awful sin a more egregious, vile, wicked sin than that? Denying the Lord of glory publicly?

[ 6 : 52 ] Now, Jesus had told Peter he was going to do this, but Peter thought he knew better than the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus says, Peter, before this night is out and before the cock crows, three times you'll deny me.

Not me, he said. You've got it wrong. They might all deny you. They might all fail you and forsake you, but I never will. He never thought in a million years. He, Peter, the rock, that he would deny the Son of God who had come into the world to rescue him from a damned eternity and bring him to the glory of God. He never thought in a million years. He would have dared to do such a thing.

But he did. Which is why Paul, writing to the Corinthians' words, many of you will know well, says, let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. Not one of us here tonight is immune from temptation. Not one of you, not David, not me, not any of us is immune from the temptation openly and publicly to deny the Son of God who redeemed us by His precious blood. And if you think you are beyond that, that you would never in a million years do that, you're on dangerous ground. If Peter could do that, don't you ever think, I would never do such a thing. The recent history of our denomination is punctuated with tragic falls that no one ever expected, no one ever thought would happen, but they did.

And the Bible doesn't gloss over the even vile sins of God's people. Do you ever wonder why David's adultery with Bathsheba is told us in such technical or detail? Don't you, when you read it, say, Lord, did I have to know that? Did you have to tell me the details? Could you not just have said, well, David blotted his copybook? David committed adultery and just passed it over? No, you have this excruciating detail of David seducing this woman, and then, and then to compound the sin, to conspire, to murder her husband, to hide his vileness. And you think, Lord, why did I need to know that? Because the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.

If a man like David, who penned the 23rd Psalm, who penned the 103rd Psalm, bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name, bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits. If a man like David, the prototypical king, God's created Messiah, as he's called the anointed one, if David could sink to such depths.

[ 10 : 27 ] The Bible is saying to us, don't you ever think you're beyond that. That's why when the disciples came to the Lord Jesus Christ and said, Lord, teach us to pray.

Jesus says, when you pray, say, our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth. Give us today our daily bread.

Lead us not into temptation. Lead us not into temptation. Right in the midst of this prayer that Jesus is teaching his disciples, as if to say to them, now, your life is going to be assaulted and assailed by a myriad of temptations, because there is a tempter who is out to get you, and if he cannot keep you from being converted, he will seek to divert you and ruin your testimony to me.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from, and I think it should be the evil one, hoponeros, the evil one, not just evil as if evil was some kind of autonomous entity.

It's the evil one who is behind all the assaults. It's the evil one who catches Peter off guard, just as he caught David off guard.

[ 11 : 59 ] And so Peter capitulated, and three times, not just once, not just twice, but three times, he publicly denies the Lord of glory, the Son of God who had come into the world to seek and to save the lost.

Peter denies him. That's the background. Secondly, consider the reason or the root of Peter's tragic sin.

What was the reason for Peter's threefold denial of the Lord Jesus Christ? Well, maybe you're thinking, Ian, that's a bit of a no-brainer.

The answer is surely obvious. There was a capitulation of courage. At the moment of crisis, bold Peter. And if you thought, if Peter was going to fall, he wouldn't fall through a failure of courage.

But where we often think we are strong is where we're at our weakest. And so you read the narrative and you think, well, the answer's plain.

[ 13 : 21 ] At the moment of crisis, his courage failed him. And his courage did collapse, didn't it? Almost in a moment.

Almost in a moment. You see, Satan knows how to bait his temptations. One minute, Peter is saying, almost one minute, I will not deny you.

He's the one with the sword who cuts off the ear of the high priest-servant Malchus in the Garden of Gethsemane. An hour? Two hours? Whatever. Shortly before this?

And the next moment, he's lying to a servant girl. I know not the man. Me? Not me. Jesus? Never heard of him. Jesus?

Don't think I know him. Where Peter thought he was strong, he was weak. But Peter's failure was not fundamentally a failure of a lack of courage.

[ 14 : 27 ] If it had been a failure of a lack of courage, don't you think Jesus would have said to Peter as he begins the work of restoring him, Peter, do you promise from now on to be bold and courageous?

But Jesus doesn't say that. Why does Jesus say three times to Peter? Do you promise to be bold? And there are two different Greek words used, but by this stage, I was going to go into some little talk about Greek verbs and Greek nouns.

Just take my word for it. The two nouns, the two words for love, friendship and love, they really coalesce into one. Why does Jesus say, do you love me? Do you love me?

Do you love me? Why doesn't he say, do you promise to be bold? Do you promise to be courageous? Do you promise to be defiant? Because Jesus wants Peter to know that his failure was fundamentally, foundationally, principally a failure of love.

Every sin, every moral and every spiritual failure can be traced back to this.

[ 15 : 45 ] A lack of love to the Lord Jesus Christ. You see, it's love to the Lord that more than anything guards us from the assaults of Satan.

It's when your love to the Savior begins to cool, when it begins to drift, that you become more susceptible to the assaults of the enemy.

And that's why the Bible is so pressing on saying to men and to women, love your husbands, love your wives. That more than anything will armor you against all the seductions.

Remember in Genesis 39, Joseph has been sold into slavery by his brothers. Life has gone belly up for Joseph.

It seems as though everything and everyone is against him. And where is God? He's now a servant slave in the house of Potiphar. And then Potiphar's wife comes to seduce Joseph.

[ 16 : 53 ] And you might think that Joseph would have thought, well, you know, life has gone belly up for me. God has abandoned me. I'm left here bereft of family and friends.

I may as well snatch at whatever life holds out for me before it's too late. And Joseph says to this woman, how could I do such a thing and sin against God?

You know what Joseph was saying? My heart belongs to another. My heart has been claimed by the covenant God of my fathers.

You think that's remarkable because life has turned out so bleak and black and dark for him. But Joseph never let this go, that God in covenant love had come to him and to his fathers, to Abram, Isaac, and Jacob.

My heart belongs to another. How could I do such a thing and sin against God? More than anything else, it's love to the Lord Jesus that gives us the courage not to yield to temptation.

[ 18 : 09 ] And I think the big question that I need to ask myself every day of life, perhaps you need to ask yourself this, is how can I grow in love to Christ?

That I might be the better armored against sin and against the temptation to sin. How can I love him better who first loved me?

Well, there's much we could say. Let me just mention two or three things before I hurry on. Remember his sinless life. Remember that he came into the world to live the life you could never live.

To stand before God as the representative covenant head of all his people. And to do for you with every breath he breathed what you could never do for yourself before God.

He did it all for you. He did nothing for himself. From the very moment he was conceived in the virgin's womb and lived as a zygote in her womb. And then grew out from her womb and took that life from womb to tomb.

[ 19 : 21 ] Everything he did, he did for you. Not for himself. He needed to do nothing for himself. And then remember his sin-atonement death.

I'm amazed at how little, how little, how poorly I ponder every day. The greatest act in the cosmos.

The sin-bearing sin-atonement, blood-shedding wrath-quenching death of the God-man Jesus Christ. And he did it all for you, for me, for those who would believe in him.

He didn't do it for himself. He needed to do nothing for himself. He had the beloved endorsement of his father. This is my beloved son. With him I'm well pleased.

He needed to do nothing to make himself pleasing to the father. Remember, everything he did, he did for us. And then we can remember, as we'll do maybe tomorrow at some point, his present life and ministry at God's right hand.

[ 20 : 38 ] What has our Lord Jesus Christ been doing these past 2,000 years? He is ever living to make intercession, says the writer to the Hebrews, for his people.

Moment by moment, he's pleading our cause. Praying, watching over us, defending us from our enemies. And then we should remember his coming again in glory.

His coming on the clouds, the glory clouds of God. To consummate history, to make a new heavens and a new earth. And to welcome those who are waiting eagerly for him.

We have every cause to love him better who first loved us. And we should be praying, should we not, that the Holy Spirit, whose great ministry it is, to glorify Christ in the new covenant.

John 16, 14. When he comes, he will bring glory to me. We should be praying, Holy Spirit, help me every day of my life to behold something more of the multifaceted glory of my Savior.

[ 21 : 55 ] John Owen, the great English Puritan, said, the glory of the Christian church is. Now, how would you complete that sentence? The glory of the Christian church is what?

The hypostatic union. You're thinking, well, what on earth is that? The union in Jesus Christ of Godhood and manhood. The ineffable uniting without confusion and without division and without separation.

The glorious uniting in the one person of Jesus Christ of two natures. Because God had a plan and a purpose that in those two natures, he would come in his son and make atonement for sin.

Peter's failure was a failure of love. And so easily, like Peter, we can hide the poverty and the paucity of our love behind our words, our boldness, our preaching.

We can hide how cold and cool and lukewarm our hearts are towards our Savior, behind a multitude of evangelical language and piety and singing.

[ 23 : 13 ] And all the time, all the time, the Lord is saying, my son, my daughter, give me your heart. Give me your heart.

Give me your heart. I'm a head-to-toe Westminster Calvinist. I would love everyone to embrace everything in the Westminster Standards.

I love the Westminster Confession. But that doesn't define me. It shouldn't define any Christian. What defines us, what should define us, is that we love Him who first loved us.

That we love Him who first loved us. But then thirdly, what I've said so far is preparatory to this, but I'll say this very briefly. Consider the greatness of the Lord's restoring grace to Peter.

You know those words, the end of Romans 5, where sin abounds, grace does much more abound. Grace is a word we sing about.

[ 24 : 23 ] We've sung it in two hymns this evening. When were you, when was I at last, overwhelmed by the wonder of grace?

We often think of grace as if it were a substance, a kind of blessing that God gives to believers who are faithful.

That's Roman Catholicism. God doesn't have a big treasury where He scoops out grace and dollops it around. Grace is God giving Himself in His Son. Grace is Jesus Christ.

He is incarnate grace. And it's Jesus Christ as incarnate grace who is reaching out to Peter. Now, Jesus doesn't gloss over the seriousness of Peter's sin.

Maybe you're here tonight. And maybe you're thinking, If you knew, or if anyone knew, the awfulness of my sin, you just wouldn't believe it.

[ 25 : 30 ] Well, I don't know you and you don't know me. But Jesus knew the awfulness of Peter's sin. He doesn't gloss over it. That's why three times He says, Do you love me?

To remind Peter of this threefold denial. And it must have been like a red-hot poker into Peter's conscience. He's being reminded of this tragedy in his life.

You see, restoration does not come without humbling repentance. Peter needed to be brought to an end of himself. That's why the third time He says, Lord, You know everything. First time Jesus says, Do you love me?

Well, yes, Lord. You know that I love you. Second time, Do you love me? Yes, Lord.

You know that I love you. And then the third time, Do you love me? And Peter simply says, Lord, You know everything. You know my heart.

[ 26 : 36 ] You see the thoughts and the intentions of my heart. You know that I love you. Peter needed to know how greatly he had failed in order that he might appreciate the loving embrace of a forgiving God.

And not only is Peter restored to fellowship, Jesus says three times, Feed my sheep, feed my lambs. He's restored to service. The grace of God is literally out of this world.

It's unexpoundable. Some years ago, I tried to think who wrote the book, What's So Amazing About Grace?

Was that Max Lucado? I've never read the book. I thought the title was brilliant. What's So Amazing About Grace? What's so amazing about grace?

It was grace that brought the impeccable Son of God to become a spit-dripping, bloody sacrifice on the Roman cross.

[ 27 : 56 ] That's what's so amazing about grace. Can you imagine all heaven looking with wonder at the Son of God being spat upon by men, spit dripping down his beard, we're told?

Can you imagine what heaven must have been thinking? What is going on here? What is going on? What is going on? What is going on? And the Father saying, Behold the grace of God.

Behold the unimaginable kindness and mercy of God to judgment-deserving sinners. Let me conclude with three very brief applications.

Number one, however badly you have failed or fallen, God is rich in mercy. The last word in your life and my life need never be our sins or our failures.

God is not narrow-hearted. Remember when Moses, Exodus 33, so many things pour into your mind when you're preaching.

[ 29 : 09 ] Remember in Exodus 33, Moses prays, Lord, show me your glory. Then chapter 34 begins, the Lord takes Moses and places him in the cleft of the rock and he has this theophany, this God appearing.

And the Lord passes Moses by. Remember the words the Lord spoke? Moses prayed, Lord, show me your glory.

The Lord, the Lord. Almost feel like saying, who can tell me what the next? What is it God wanted Moses to know about him? Show me your glory. You want to know my glory, Moses?

The Lord, Yahweh, Yahweh. What's next? Rich in mercy. Slow to anger.

Abounding in covenant love. Yes, he will by no means clear the guilty. But what's the first thing? What's the great trajectory of God's revelation?

[ 30 : 20 ] You want to know who I am, Moses? Get this. I'm rich in mercy. Secondly, if God is full of grace towards us, we must be full of grace towards others.

It's so much easier to preach grace than to practice grace. It's so much easier to sing grace and to talk about grace than to practice grace.

Grace is showing undeserved kindness to judgment-deserving sinners. That's why Jesus said, if you don't forgive those who sin against you, your Father won't forgive your sins against Him.

We're to practice grace. Be kind, says Paul to the Ephesians, be kind and forgiving to one another.

You see, the Lord's Supper will come to that Sunday morning. It's really not talking about unbelievers not coming to the supper. That's not in Paul's mind at all. Of course, unbelievers shouldn't come to the supper.

[ 31 : 25 ] Paul's not thinking about that when he talks about eating and drinking worthily. He's talking to believers who are looking down their social, prideful noses at other Christians, who are treating them with disdain, who are not recognizing the body, one of Paul's doublet entendres.

And he's saying, you, church members, who are not practicing grace, you shouldn't be coming to the table because you're despising Jesus Christ who is the grace of God.

And the third and last thing, maybe you're thinking, well, okay, Ian, how can I love him better? Well, would we have time to look at Luke chapter 7?

But the simple but profound answer is this, keep close to the cross. You never graduate beyond Calvary. I was thinking a little time ago of a hymn.

I must have sung it, I suppose, in the Baptist church when I was converted in Glasgow. I hadn't sung it for decades. But it came into my mind one day as I was writing, Jesus, keep me near the cross.

[ 32 : 42 ] There, a precious fountain, free to all, a healing stream flows from Calvary's mountain. In the cross, in the cross, be my glory ever.

Jesus, keep me near the cross. That's why the cross of Christ is ever to be at the forefront of the life and ministry of a Christian church.

and it's so profound, so rich, so deep, so high, so wide. It's not that you get fed up hearing the same things, because you shouldn't be hearing the same things, but the same things in a multitudinous variety of ways.

Jesus, keep me near the cross. Peter was restored. Why? Because God is rich rich in mercy. Rich in mercy.

Well, let's sing as we close. Let's sing as we close.