

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Lessons from Bible birds: The Raven - the grace of God

Good morning and thank you for listening to "Truth for Today". Over the next four weeks we will be looking at "Lessons from Bible birds." About a year ago, I was considering what to speak on at a senior citizens' meeting when I was drawn to look into Bible birds. It is quite a fascinating study as God uses certain birds on different occasions for His own purposes. I have chosen the following birds for our consideration: the raven, the eagle, the hen, and in the fourth talk, the pelican, owl and sparrow. In each of these talks, I trust we will learn different things that will challenge and encourage us as we look at what is said in the Bible about these birds. It is good to remember that on the fifth day of the Creation, God made the birds (Genesis 1:20-23). As with all of God's creation, He cares for every bird, large or small as they are all important to Him. God knows when a sparrow falls to the ground (Matthew 10:29).

Today the title of our talk is: "The Raven - the grace of God".

According to some bird experts, the common raven in the United States is 24 inches long from beak to tail, with about a four foot wing span. Its plumage is entirely black and it has a large heavy bill. Its tail is wedge-shaped and it has long shaggy feathers on its chin and throat. The raven is larger than a crow and has relatively short legs. You can find them in solitary places; in deserts, forests, canyons, foothills, mountains, and other places. They are often seen along highways eating road kill. One of the most famous places you will find them is at the Tower of London where the Raven master feeds them daily with 170g of raw meat, plus bird biscuits soaked in blood. Legend says that the Tower will fall if the six resident ravens were ever to leave the fortress. Because of this, the raven master has always an extra one in case one dies!

Ravens are from the same family as crows, jays and magpies. The two ravens found in Israel are the Brown-necked raven and the Common raven. Ravens are very clever birds and they are always very quick to take the opportunity of stealing food. They are very ferocious eaters and very greedy. Ravens rely upon things that die or are killed, then they tear and devour the flesh from the carcass. Ravens are really not very pleasant birds, but I suppose you can say that they are useful as they remove dead things that would lie about and rot. Ravens are known to neglect their young but in Job 38:41 we read that young ravens cry unto God when they have no meat and God provides. God's care for the raven is a picture of His loving care for us in grace.

Some Bible facts about the raven: the raven is mentioned 11 times in the Bible. The first mention is in relation to Noah's ark in Genesis 8:7; the raven was the first to leave. Noah opened the window of the ark and let the raven fly out, to find out if the waters had dried up. The raven flew back and forward until the earth was dry. It is interesting to note that the raven was never taken back into the ark as the dove was (Genesis 8:9). Why was this, I wonder? The raven would be in its element when, as the waters dried up, it would gorge itself on all the dead flesh that had drowned in the flood. The raven was an unclean bird as he appears in the unclean list of birds that were not to be eaten in Leviticus 11:13-15, so maybe if the raven was brought back into the ark it would have corrupted it, since it itself was "unclean". In 1 Kings 17:4-6, ravens at God's command fed Elijah at the brook Cherith, which we will look at later. In Song of Solomon 5:11 we read, "*The hair of the bridegroom was as black as a raven.*" In Psalm 147:7-9, we see God's provision for the raven and their young. The last mention is in Luke 12:24. In this scripture, God illustrates His care and provision for us as He takes care of the ravens.

The raven is not a beautiful bird; in fact, it's an unattractive unpleasant bird. But God chooses to use the raven in a remarkable way with His servant Elijah (1 Kings 17:4-6). When we look at ourselves, don't we see similar things in us? We are unclean; the Bible tells us that "*all have sinned and come short of the glory of God*" (Romans 3:23). God made mankind perfect but because of sin, he is filthy, horrible, and at times vile. God made us and He loves us! The greatest expression of this love was in the gift of His only Son, the Lord Jesus, who came to pay the penalty of our sin on the cross of Calvary with His own blood. God desires that we should have our sins forgiven and be cleansed from them. God does not only want to save us, He wants to bring us into favour. He wants to bless us and use us for His purposes and His glory. Yes, no matter how unworthy we think we are, He never stops loving us. God delights to use His loved ones for His work in this world. Look how God provided enough food for the multitude but asked His disciples to hand out the food (see John 6:1-14). What a wonderful God we have! He not only shows us mercy, but He showers us with His grace.

Grace is a word that over the years I have struggled to understand fully. Many have used different definitions like **"God's Riches At Christ's Expense"** which is OK, but I like to simply think of grace as God's kindness and favour which is lavished on an undeserving world.

God has a great history of showing grace throughout the ages. In the very beginning, Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD. Grace is much more than mercy because God not only forgives us, He gives us favour and brings us into spiritual blessings in Christ Jesus.

David wanted to show kindness for his best friend Jonathan's sake (2 Samuel 9:1). David found Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth, who was a poor cripple (2 Samuel 9:3) and he brought him to the king's table to eat and to enjoy his company for ever (2 Samuel 9:4-7). What a wonderful picture this is of where we have come from and where God has brought us to.

Let's turn to Song of Solomon 2:4: *"He brought me to the banqueting house, and His banner over me is love."* God wants us to take time out in our busy days to sit at His table. He wants our company and our fellowship. He wants us to understand and appreciate more of His wonderful grace.

If you care to look at all the references to grace in the Bible you will see that grace is needed for every aspect of our lives:

Hebrews 2:9 tells us that Jesus *"by the grace of God should taste death for every man."* Titus 2:11 tells us that *"the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men."* Grace is required for initial salvation: Ephesians 2:8 tells us *"for by grace are ye saved."* Titus 3:7 tells us that *"we are justified by His grace."*

Grace is also required for our daily salvation: Hebrews 4:16 assures us that we will *"find grace to help in time of need."* Whatever we have to face in our lives, God will give us enough grace to cope with it. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 12:9 what the Lord told him. Let's read it together: *"and He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me"* (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Paul had an illness which was unpleasant and he had asked three times for the thorn in his flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7) to be taken away (2 Corinthians 12:8). Instead Paul is promised that he will receive abundant grace to cope with it, such grace that the thorn will become an asset rather than a liability (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). The Lord answered his prayer but not in the way he wanted or thought. Grace is also given to the humble as we read in 1 Peter 5:5.

In 1 Kings 17:4-7 we read the story of Elijah and the ravens. Just before we go into the story, we must look at the background as to why God told His servant Elijah to flee to the brook Cherith. Ahab had reigned as king over Israel for thirty eight years after his father Omri had died. According to 1 Kings 16:25, we read that Omri had done more evil in the sight of the LORD than all his predecessors. Ahab, however, took things to an even lower level by setting up Baal on a par with the LORD, Ahab served Baal and worshipped him (1 Kings 16:32-33). Ahab even goes as far as trying to provoke the LORD (1 Kings 16:33). These were dark days in Israel's history. But during periods like this, the LORD always has His man on the ground. Elijah, although being a lone voice, was used by the LORD. You might feel like Elijah sometimes when you feel you are the only one standing up for God and for what is right (1 Kings 19:10, 14). God knows how you feel and He will give you enough grace to continue. Be encouraged, dear brother or sister in Christ, to continue on as God would lead you and stay faithful to Him. He will have His way: Psalm 37 tells us that the wicked shall not prosper. The people were influenced by the King and they followed his wicked ways. God commands Elijah to tell King Ahab that there would be neither dew nor rain in the land for some years, Elijah tells the king (1 Kings 17:1). God then tells Elijah to go and hide by the brook Cherith near Jordan (1 Kings 17:2-3). God also tells Elijah how he would be cared for during this time of drought and famine. He was to drink from the brook and God had commanded the ravens to feed him with flesh and bread (1 Kings 17:4).

What a great attitude when the servant of God, immediately and without question, does what God asks him to do, no matter how strange the command is. Elijah never questioned the LORD! Elijah could have questioned God's choice of bird, as ravens eat flesh as their staple diet, so how would they not devour it before it got to him? Can you imagine Elijah sitting at the brook in a quiet secluded valley in the hills, the only one in Israel not suffering because of the drought, spending time in quietness before the LORD, finding God's grace in time of need? God in His faithfulness and kindness toward His servant cares for His every need. God has great resources, you know. He has all creation at His disposal.

But what about the ravens: the unclean horrible flesh eating birds, flying in with prepared meat and bread for Elijah? Why did God not use some beautiful bird? Maybe because the ravens were in their natural habitat and no attention would be drawn to the hideout of God's servant. It appeals to me that God desires to use a bird that in the eyes of men is of no consequence.

In God's grace, He loves to use you and me! Once we were unclean sinners but now we have been blood bought and reconciled to Himself for His purposes in this world. Peter is a great example of God's grace in his life. Peter truly loved the Lord but, as we know, he denied the Lord with oaths and curses (see Matthew 26:69-75); he let the Lord down. You and I would struggle to recover from such a sin. You would think that the Lord would decide not to use someone who denied Him, someone who let Him down so badly, but by His grace the Lord gave Him the commission to feed His sheep, His loved ones (see John 21:15-19). The Lord knew Peter's heart; He knew that Peter loved Him. What a God of grace we have! Another question to think about: Who prepared the meat and the bread for the ravens to take to Elijah? It was some other precious unnamed servant of the living God whom only God knows!

The brook dries up (1 Kings 17:7), but God has already His next servant in place to care for Elijah: a woman from Zarephath who had only one son and they were finding things tough in the drought (1 Kings 17:8-9). Elijah met her while she was out collecting sticks so she could prepare a meal for her and her son (1 Kings 17:10). It was to be the last meal because they had no food left because of the famine in Israel (1 Kings 17:12). God feeds her and blesses her as she cares for Elijah His servant (1 Kings 17:15-24). God tells Elijah to meet again with King Ahab to tell him that He was about to send rain once more (1 Kings 18:1). Obadiah, who was the governor of the king's house met Elijah and brought him to King Ahab (1 Kings 18:2-16). King Ahab accused Elijah of causing the famine (1 Kings 18:17) but Elijah faithfully tells King Ahab that it was his wicked ways that caused God's anger (1 Kings 18:18). Elijah sets out a challenge to the king on Mount Carmel as we read in 1 Kings 18:20-40 to prove to the people that the false prophet, Baal, was no match for the God of heaven and earth. God proves His greatness through Elijah (1 Kings 18:39) and the prophets of Baal were shamed and defeated and Elijah slew them all (1 Kings 18:40). The people turned again to the LORD and acknowledged His greatness. The rain then came in abundance (1 Kings 18:41).

Elijah had been used of God in a great way, a miracle in fact. You would have thought that nothing could discourage Elijah. But, like us, Elijah was only human. In 1 Kings 19:3 we read that fear set in when he received a message from Jezebel that she would kill him because of what he did. Elijah unfortunately ran for his life, I say unfortunately because he was going under his own steam. God never told him to go anywhere; he was stepping out of God's will. How many times are we like Elijah? Elijah was terrified for his life. How often do we do something because we are scared and we don't put our trust entirely on God? Sometimes it is because we are headstrong and confident in ourselves. It is dangerous to step outside of God's will, or to plan for our lives without reference to Him. Elijah runs over eighty miles to get out of Jezebel's jurisdiction until he feels safe (1 Kings 19:3). Elijah leaves his servant in Beersheba and goes a further day's journey (1 Kings 19:4).

Elijah had had enough! He was tired of hiding from God's enemies and running in fear for his life. He was fed up with being the lone voice that was standing up for God, at least so he thought!(1 Kings 19:4) Elijah was so fed up and feeling sorry for himself that he sat down under a juniper tree for shelter and requested that God would let him die (1 Kings 19:4). He felt useless, unworthy and hopeless; he had come to the end of his tether. Elijah fell asleep! Have you ever felt this way? *"I am the only one who cares, I am the only one working for God and no one is helping me"* (1 Kings 19:10, 14).

Dear friend, it is when we reach that point like Elijah did that we see the abundant grace of God in our lives. God steps in with His abundant grace. Look at Hebrews 4:14-16 and we see that while passing through difficulties in life, we can *"go to the throne of grace and receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."* God's grace was sufficient for Elijah and for Paul, so it's sufficient for you and me!

Look at Elijah: God could have judged Elijah for going on without guidance from Himself. But no, God shows grace to his servant, He knows how he was feeling and He provides Elijah with food again (1 Kings 19:6). The angel sent from God commands him to arise and eat (1 Kings 19:5). Elijah eats and falls back to sleep again. God again shows Him grace by providing more food (1 Kings 19:6). In fact, God tells Elijah that the journey was too great for him in his own strength (1 Kings 19:7). Elijah needed the strength that was from eating the meat God had provided for him. Elijah was instructed to go to Mount Horeb, the Mount of the LORD (1 Kings 19:8). Elijah complained again that he was the only one left and that they wanted to kill him (1 Kings 19:10, 14). The LORD gives Elijah instructions (1 Kings 19:15). The LORD then tells Elijah that there were actually seven thousand men who had not bowed the knee to Baal; he was not alone! (1 Kings 19:18) We sometimes get so blinkered thinking about how good we are and all that we do is so important, we think we are the only one who is serving God and the burden is too much to bear. God will always have a remnant that will be faithful to Him throughout the ages.

God's grace is wonderful and indescribable! He was not only willing to save a wretch like you and me, but He has promised that He will give us enough grace for our pathway as we live for Him in this world. I would like to leave you with the words from a verse of the great hymn 'Amazing Grace':

*“The Lord has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.”*

John Newton (1725-1807)

May you find the grace of God sufficient for you.

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