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**Sunday 20 September to Sunday 27 September**

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Sunday 20 September 2020

# Amazing mercy

by Pastor Peter Bean

**‘Shouldn’t I show concern for the great city Nineveh, which has more than one hundred twenty thousand people who do not know right from wrong?’ (Jonah 4:11).**

Read Jonah 3:10–4:11

God’s mercy never ceases to amaze. And upset! And anger!

I like to hear about God’s mercy for me. I’m sure you like to hear about God’s mercy for you. But when it comes to other people; well, we mouth the words that mercy is for all, but in reality?

Whether, like in Jonah’s time, it is the people of Nineveh, or in Jesus’s time, the prostitutes and tax collectors. Or in our time, the corrupt politician; the cheating spouse; the dishonest business person; the premier who closes borders; the premier who leaves them open; the lazy no-hoper (who decides that?); the overpaid selfish sportsperson; those who avoid tax; the one who has offended us greatly … mercy for them? C’mon, God, you’ve got to be kidding.

That’s what Jonah said, what the Pharisees say, and, if we are honest, what we think and perhaps even say. As a generality, mercy is wonderful, but when it comes to specific people, mmm … not so easy.

That’s why we have this ending to the story of Jonah. Jonah, God’s servant, remembered for his journey in the whale, had a much more difficult journey to go on. It was a journey of understanding and accepting God’s mercy for himself and his enemies. God does not have favourites, and his generosity has no bounds. Whether we are obedient or not, God offers mercy to us. And he offers mercy to those we think don’t deserve it.

Yes, God’s mercy never ceases to amaze. May we live in that mercy, that grace, and in turn live merciful and gracious lives, looking for God’s presence in the lives of others, particularly those, who in our judgement don’t fit the parameters. Seeking God’s mercy, experiencing God’s mercy, and practising God’s mercy will allow people, animals, and all of creation to join us on this merciful journey.

**Thank you, merciful God, for your mercy and grace. Help us to live, ever aware of it in our lives and in the world around us. Amen.**

Monday 21 September 2020

# Shortcuts!

by Pastor Peter Bean

**‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the Lord (Isaiah 55:8).**

Read Isaiah 55:5–9

Thank goodness for that!

My brother and I are known rather (in)famously for our shortcuts – the ones where you don’t need a map, which saves time and distance, and where you don’t listen to your wife – and regularly finish up at a dead-end ... thus necessitating retracing the route and taking up extra time, distance, and patience! (Possibly, we’re not the only males in history with that story.) For us, it was ‘my way or the byway’. And, invariably, the byway won!

Now, before you laugh at us too much, consider if that’s not a parable about what Isaiah is saying here. How many times in life do all of us determine to take a shortcut? We think we’ve got a handle on things, or we’ll fix that situation our way, only to end up at a dead-end, or in a mess of our own making?

It’s pretty easy to want to go our own way, to think our thoughts are pretty clever, to discard advice, to reject conversation, to neglect prayer. And to end up in a mess.

That’s why I began this devotion with ‘Thank goodness for that’. Or more correctly, ‘Thank God for that’. Thank God that his ways and thoughts are so different and so much higher than mine and yours. Because the simple fact is that not only does God have a better way, a clearer thought, God also does not beat up on us when we mess up. When I end up at a dead-end or when I mess up, I’m not too impressed with my thinking and my way, and sometimes, even often, I berate myself.

I reckon God simply looks down, has a laugh, and says: ‘Yep, Peter, you messed up. But I [God] haven’t. I made you in my image. I love you despite what you do, how you think, the various ways you try to go. Try again. My ways are higher than yours’. There’s that amazing mercy again!

**Thank you, God, for your thoughts and your ways – they are so much higher than mine. Let my thoughts and ways constantly be permeated by yours. Amen.**

Tuesday 22 September 2020

# God pays attention!

by Pastor Peter Bean

**‘My God, pay attention and hear me. Open your eyes and see all the terrible things that have happened to us’ (Daniel 9:18a).**

Read Daniel 9:1–4,18,20–24

Are you beginning to notice a theme? Pray what you like and as much as you like, but it’s not your prayer, nor your way of living that sways the Lord. It’s God’s mercy.

God knows, without a doubt, that many of us could pray this prayer. Some of you will have prayed very similarly at some stage this year. What, with disastrous fires, then floods in some areas, then COVID-19 with its resulting lockdowns, church closures, death of loved ones, border closures, job losses, and so on. How many of us have possibly said or thought, ‘Our lives have been ruined’? Which of us couldn’t speak of ‘the terrible things that have happened’? We want you, God, to pay attention!

And God has – not because of our entreaties, but because God is God. And because of mercy. We can't always see it, and mercy can sometimes seem a long way off. But God’s mercy is present. In our lives, our prayers, and the answers to our prayers. And, of course, the answers are not always what we want. But they are sufficient. Many years later, the author wrote: ‘I will not send more than you handle. My grace is sufficient for you’.

So, rest in that grace. Pray your prayers, knowing God hears and answers because of the wonderful gift of mercy and grace.

**Thank you, God, for the freedom to ask for your attention. Remind us that you always attend to us. Thank you for your mercy and grace. Amen.**

Wednesday 23 September 2020

# How big or small is your faith?

by Pastor Peter Bean

**If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted, and planted in the sea’, and it will obey you (Luke 17:6).**

Read Luke 17:5–10

We have two mulberry trees in our yard. Both are young, but already rather large. I cannot imagine transplanting them, let alone telling them to get up and plant themselves in the sea. I guess my faith is much smaller than a mustard seed. And a mustard seed is tiny!

Fortunately, Jesus’ words are not actually about how big or small our faith is. Yes, it’s important that we have faith. But much more important is the Lord who provides faith, who cultivates it, and allows it, even when smaller than a mustard seed, to achieve mighty things.

I can identify with the father in Mark 9:24 when he says, ‘Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief’. I suspect my unbelief is often larger than my belief. Yet God works with that. He has done that throughout history and continues to do so – in my life and in yours, too.

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), Jesus talks about blessing those who we wouldn’t consider part of society’s elite. I suspect many of those he mentioned – the sad, the humble, the poor in spirit – have small but tenacious faith. And that tenacity and faith are blessed. It is used to share grace, mercy, and justice.

Luckily, my mulberry trees don’t need transplanting, but there are plenty of big issues in the world that need the attention of my small faith. No, I can’t change everything or everyone, but I can be faithful. I can allow God to go to work in my heart and through my actions. I can allow Jesus to take my mustard-seed-sized faith and use it for wonderful blessings.

I can enjoy God restoring hope where there is no hope; bringing justice where justice does not seem to exist; spreading grace where grace does not seem to be present; and blessing faith where faith seems so small.

**Thank you, God, that it is not the size of my faith that counts, but your nurture, presence, and grace that brings blessings through me. Amen.**

Thursday 24 September 2020

# Wisdom or foolishness?

by Pastor Peter Bean

**‘Even the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength’ (1 Corinthians 1:25).**

Read 1 Corinthians 1:25–31

As I have grown older, I like to think I have become wiser; however, my wisdom is still pretty scant. At times, I think my ideas, my ways, and my truths are more important or better than others. It only takes one small incident to help me realise that it wasn’t such a good choice after all. And so, I get to the point where I recognise that my wisdom isn’t so smart after all and can be downright foolishness.

God’s foolishness is of a different kind. God’s foolishness is only foolish because we think it is. We think our wisdom is better, our ways are higher, and our thoughts are smarter – until they’re not! I know I wouldn’t do things the way God does, and God certainly doesn’t act in ways that I can always make sense of. Yet, I feel reassured by this paradoxical situation. You see, if my ways were best, if my thoughts were perfect, if my wisdom was absolute, I would be God. While I would never use that term, and I am sure you wouldn’t either, the reality is when my wisdom takes precedence over God’s, I am putting myself in place of God. Either God is God, or I am!

That’s why this verse is music to my ears. No matter how valuable my wisdom, God’s foolishness is so much more. No matter how unhelpful my wisdom (even when I think it is valuable), God is stronger than my weakness. Who in their right (human) mind would promote the way of the cross, sacrifice, turning your cheek, and laying down your life? Fortunately, the wisdom of God, Christ Jesus, does just that. And he not only promotes these things but puts them into practice. So, we can share in this wisdom, this life, and this light.

**Thank you, God, for your wisdom and your foolishness. Thank you for the gift of Christ and for life itself. May we live in your wisdom and strength. Amen.**

Friday 25 September 2020

# The miracle of growth

by Pastor Peter Bean

**‘I planted the seed, and Apollos watered it. But God is the one who made it grow’ (1 Corinthians 3:6).**

Read 1 Corinthians 3:1–9

I am fortunate enough to spend quite a bit of time in my garden. With 80+ fruit and nut trees and berry bushes, I need to. A reasonably-sized vegetable garden also requires maintenance. So, safe to say, I know a fair bit about planting and watering. Some might say I have a green thumb, but in reality, anyone can plant – there’s plenty of expert tips and videos to help – and anyone can water, with the right amount of cajoling.

But what never ceases to amaze me is the miracle of growth. How does a tiny carrot seed grow into a carrot? What distinguishes it from a tomato or radish seed? I know the gardening answer (and possibly even the scientific answer), but how do they grow into the adult plants? The tulips and irises that are currently flowering are beautiful, but they’ve developed from what looks like a disfigured bulb! And what differentiates them from the artichoke?

I don’t know. But I do know that if I plant them at the right time and water them a reasonable amount, they grow and bring pleasure. I also know the scientific reasons they grow – sunshine, photosynthesis, and so on. But to me, it is a miracle. And only God can provide that. It is God who provides the sunshine, the mechanism in the leaves to bring growth.

I am at the time in life where I can look back at some of the seeds I’ve sown in people’s lives and where different folk have watered them as times goes by. I can think of other people where I have watered seeds sown earlier by someone else. In all of these cases, I marvel at the growth, and I know quite clearly that it has been our faithful God who has provided the growth. Can we continue to plant and water, trusting God to provide the growth?

**Thank you, God of growth, for all you do to bring forth flourishing people from the seeds we faithfully sow and the water we hopefully provide. Amen.**

Saturday 26 September 2020

# Mercy and love

by Pastor Peter Bean

**‘Lord, remember your mercy and love that you have shown since long ago’ (Psalm 25:6).**

Read Psalm 25:1–9

Mercy and love. Mercy and love. Mercy and love. It all comes back to that.

In the world we live in, different for each of us, but with many similarities, as well as many competing ideologies and beliefs, it’s important to have a foundation, to have something we can return to. Something simple, yet complex. Mercy and love.

Complex because often we make it so. Thinking we need to do this to please God, or we need to do that to set things right. Complex because there’s a whole history of mercy and love being rejected. The Hebrew Scriptures (also known as the Old Testament) are full of stories of God’s people rejecting mercy and love. The history of the world and our nation is full of stories of people rejecting God’s mercy and love. Complex because God chose a path we would not choose: a path of sacrifice, death, and resurrection.

Mercy and love, complex yet simple. Simple because mercy and love is the very essence of God. Simple because they are offered over and over again. Simple because they are offered freely. Simple because mercy and love are not ours to earn or to work out, but only to accept. Simple because Jesus lived and died mercy and love. Simple because mercy and love live forever.

Because of our similarities and despite our differences, we can all pray for God’s mercy and love, which we know has been shown throughout time. And because of that, in our complex world, we can return to the foundation offered by God in Jesus: mercy and love.

Mercy and love. It all comes back to that.

***Lord, remember your mercy and love that you have shown since long ago. Amen.***

Sunday 27 September 2020

# Sitting on the fence

by Norma Koehne

**‘By what authority are you doing these things?’ (Matthew 21:23).**

Read Matthew 21:23–32

‘Sitting on the fence’ has always seemed to me to be a very uncomfortable place, especially with the barbed wire fences we have here in Australia! But this is exactly what the chief priests and elders were doing. They were not willing to acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God, even after his triumphant entry into Jerusalem earlier in this chapter, his authoritative cleansing of the temple, which he referred to as ‘my house’ (verse 13), and his subsequent miracles as ‘the blind and the lame came to him … and he healed them’ (verse 14). The question, ‘By what authority are you doing these things?’ was meant to trick him into declaring that his authority came from God, so they could call him a blasphemer.

Rather than answering them, Jesus challenged them with a question, ‘John’s baptism – where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?’ One can almost picture the scene as they go back and forward trying to decide the answer, thinking of how it would look in the eyes of men, rather than looking for the truth. In the end, they opted for, ‘We don’t know’. The subsequent parable points to the sad truth that those sitting on the fence would miss out, but thankfully many who did not yet know the truth would be led by the Holy Spirit through repentance and faith into the kingdom.

Let us be bold to confess the truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, revealed to us through Scripture, and that he has the authority to make us his children through baptism, forgive our sins, and bring us to be with him in heaven.

**Father, forgive me for the times when I sat on the fence and was afraid to boldly declare your truth. Strengthen me through the Holy Spirit to acknowledge your authority, power, love, and mercy. Amen.**