

## MERCY GRACE LOVE: OUR LIFETIME TRAVELING COMPANIONS

As the psalmist approaches the finale of his masterful poem, he declares: "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." (Psalms 23:6)

This verse is one of the most revealing and exciting in the Bible for it describes how God loves us and will never abandon us regardless of how wayward we may become.

The words follow and mercy demand explanation to make them more meaningful. Follow should be translated to pursue, to track down, to chase, to follow someone or something until they are found and taken control of.

The word mercy is a translation of the Hebrew word *hesed*, more commonly translated as "loving-kindness." It is best thought of as unconditional or unearned love. Christians call this grace, which is the special word we use to encapsulate the quality of divine love, love that is entirely unmerited, undeserved and that knows no limit.

In contrast to this, Francis Thompson, in his poem "The Hound of Heaven," says, "human love needs human meriting." God's love has nothing to do with meriting. Nothing we can do or say will make God love us any more or any less. We can do nothing that will surprise God, or make him tired or weary of loving us.

David Tomlinson says: When we have a bad day, God still loves us. When we choose a wrong turn, God still loves us. When we cannot muster the faith to believe he exists, God still loves us. When we live selfishly, when we behave like a spoiled child, when we make a complete twit of ourselves—God still loves us. The hound of heaven pounds on after us. In a nutshell the twenty-third psalm has one uncomplicated message: God loves us just because we are.

Jesus told the story of the lost sheep and how the shepherd relentlessly hunted until he found it. He followed with the story of a woman who lost a coin who also searched until she found it. The prodigal son was not literally pursued by his father, but he was hounded by the awareness that his father's goodness, love and grace were begging him to come home.

Every man, woman and child needs to understand that they are loved for no other reason than they are. Some readers may call this cheap grace. However, God's grace is not cheap. It cannot be bought with any amount of money, or earned by good deeds. Grace cannot be bought because it is free. Jesus died for our wrongness and sinfulness and we must accept his love and forgiveness as a free gift.

However God will continually say to us, "If you keep traveling down the wrong road you are going to get badly hurt. But be assured that I will be right with you, I will pursue you, and I will always love you even if you never return my love."

That is the grace that John Newton describes in his song "Amazing Grace": "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see."

When Johnny Cash was asked which verse of Amazing Grace was his favorite, he immediately quoted the third verse, "Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come. 'Twas grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."

God's grace and love travels with us down a thousand roads and is manifested in countless ways. Thank you, God, that your love has companioned us all the days of our life and will lead us all the way to heaven.

## AMAZING GRACE by John Newton 1779

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.  
'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved;  
How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.  
Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come;  
'Twas grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.  
The lord has promised good to me, his word my hope secures;  
He will my shield and portion be, as long at time endures.  
Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail, and mortal life shall cease,  
I shall possess, within the veil, a life of joy and peace.  
When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun,  
We've no less days to sing God's praise than when we'd first begun.