

Rags to Riches

(Ragamuffin-style)

"All our righteousnesses are like filthy rags..." Isaiah 64:6

Some stories in the Bible really sober me. One such story is that of Achan. It takes place in the time of Joshua and is found in Chapter seven of the book of Joshua.

Here's what happened –

The host of Israel had just crossed the Jordan River and had defeated Jericho. Now, they faced a little stronghold known as Ai. It was so small that they decided to send just 3000 men against it. Clearly, they expected to make quick work of this little town but instead, they were trounced and 36 of their men were killed. Israel ran away that day and the whole camp was traumatized.

Joshua fell before the Lord in desperate prayer thinking everything was lost, that they would soon be surrounded by vengeful Canaanites and be massacred.

But the Lord said, "Get up!" and led him through a process of supernatural detective work which ended in the identification of the problem – one guy – Achan.

With the leadership of Israel looking on, he admitted to taking some booty during the Jericho campaign, something which had been strictly forbidden. And as he described, the loot was found hidden in his tent.

At this point, with the truth of his sin evident before all, he and his family and his livestock and his possessions are first stoned, then burned and then buried in stones – wow! It's not the least bit fuzzy, is it? God hates sin and deals severely with it. And we must

remember that He has the right to do this and He is just.

And this sobers me, frankly. It can scare me to pieces because I've done much worse than Achan – I make him look like Billy Graham by comparison.

And the devil is always reminding me of it. Hmmm

Now, I don't know about you, but if you're like me, as you grow older in the Lord, you're becoming increasingly aware of your own wretchedness – the sin-nature of the 'old man' that fights against the redeemed 'inner man'.

You see, it's kind of like the prophet Isaiah who in the first chapters of his book is going, "Woe to you," and "Woe to you!" and so forth until chapter six where he sees the Lord, high and lifted up in His glory. And then he says ruefully, "Woe is ME for I'm 'un-together' and my 'mouth is unclean'" (slight paraphrase). For at this point, he realizes that the standard is our Lord before Whom we are awed and pained by our 'un-togetherness'.

Yes, I certainly blow it. I don't want to or sometimes even mean to, but I do – and some of Satan's most powerful weapons against me is to try to make me believe these lies:

That I'm uniquely bad

That I'm beyond the forgiveness of God

That God regrets His choosing me

That God's disappointment with me has limited or diminished His love for me

That my weaknesses make me useless to Him

That repentance means I need to get up and prove my worth – to show God that 'I'm really better now.'

That I can't turn to the promises of God because I've over-used them.

And you know, I'm stupid enough to believe some or all of them at times!

Yes, God hates sin. Our world and our hearts are thoroughly polluted by it. If something were killing my child, I would hate it too – and I have. And I think God, knowing that although His

righteousness demanded the expression of His anger, that it demanded justice – and knowing that doing so would consequently obliterate anyone or anything upon which it was vented except Himself – chose to do exactly that. He put his anger upon Himself on the cross – compelled by His love and grace.

When my own son was dying, I begged God to let me take his place, but I couldn't. This attitude of love is by comparison just a small reflection of the infinite love of our Father who looks on our condition and not only desires to take our place but in fact, He did.

And this brings me to grace. You see, God is truth and I need truth, truth about my weakness, my wretchedness, my utter need of a much higher power. The Old Testament is full of illustrations of God's truth. But truth in isolation only brings death in this sin filled world. And now, there's a choice – we can allow ourselves to be confronted with the truth about ourselves here and now or just slip by it time and again. In the latter case, we will ultimately be confronted with it before God's throne – too late to change. In the former, we will find ourselves in a desperate state – perhaps broken, humiliated, even drowning and overwhelmed – way, way out of our comfort zone. But then, as the truth about ourselves hits hard, destroys our fanciful impressions, fills our personal throne rooms with manure, the truth about our God brings freedom. And we see grace. Do you know what grace is?

It's totally unmerited favor. You see, God didn't invent grace for me or anyone else. He just IS gracious – always has been, always will be. It's not like someone just getting an impulse to buy me a gift cause I'm so nice. It's not about me or you; it's about God. Grace is who He is, not some 'effect' I've 'caused'. I'm simply the beneficiary, period.

And you don't really begin to comprehend it until you realize how desperately you need it. As long as you think you can "make it right" with God, that you can somehow show Him you are

or were worthy of His forgiveness and goodness – you are really still seeking to atone for your own sins, to observe a law of works.

And much Christian life and service is spent in this pursuit of worthiness – when Paul wrote, "Walk worthy of the calling..." he wasn't saying, "Try to prove your worthiness" but simply, "Walk in the light, walk with the Lord, walk the 'talk' – be an example of the believer." You see, that's totally different inwardly even though outwardly, it can look the same. However, one leads to spiritual barrenness while the other nurtures a garden.

"The Kingdom belongs to people who aren't trying to look good or impress anybody, even themselves. They are not plotting how they can call attention to themselves, worrying about how their actions will be interpreted or wondering if they will get gold stars for their behavior."

"Maybe this is the heart of our hang-up, the root of our dilemma. We fluctuate between castigating ourselves and congratulating ourselves because we are deluded into thinking we save ourselves. We develop a false sense of security from our good works and scrupulous observance of the law. Our halo gets too tight and a carefully-disguised attitude of moral superiority results. Or, we are appalled by our inconsistency, devastated that we haven't lived up to our lofty expectations of ourselves. The roller coaster ride of elation and depression continues." (Brennan Manning)

As I said, when I sin, I am tempted to believe that I've somehow gone beyond the limits of God's grace but, "We must keep in mind also that the grace of God is infinite and eternal. As it had no beginning so it can have no end, and being an attribute of God, it is as boundless as infinitude."

"We can never know the enormity of our sin, neither is it necessary that we should. What we can know is that "where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." To "abound" in sin: that is the worst and the most we could or can do. The word abound defines the limit of our finite

abilities; and although we feel our iniquities rise over us like a mountain, the mountain, nevertheless, has definable boundaries: it is so large, so high, it weighs only this certain amount and no more. But who shall define the limitless grace of God?" (A. W. Tozer)

Grace is a purifier, a godly fertilizer for the soul, not a license for licentiousness.

"We who feel ourselves alienated from the fellowship of God can now raise our discouraged heads and look up. Through the virtues of Christ's atoning death the cause of our banishment has been removed. We may return as the Prodigal returned, and be welcome. As we approach the Garden, our home before the Fall, the flaming sword is withdrawn. The keepers of the tree of life stand aside when they see a son of grace approaching." (AW Tozer)

"If Jesus appeared at your dining room table tonight with knowledge of everything you are and are not, total comprehension of your life story and every skeleton hidden in your closet; if He laid out the real state of your present discipleship with the hidden agenda, the mixed motives, and the dark desires buried in your psyche, you would feel His acceptance and forgiveness. For "experiencing God's love in Jesus Christ means experiencing that one has been unreservedly accepted, approved and infinitely loved, that one can and should accept oneself and one's neighbor." (Brennan Manning and Walter Kasper)

C. S. Lewis wrote, "Grace substitutes a full, childlike and delighted acceptance of our need, a joy in total dependence. The good man is sorry for the sins which have increased his need. He is not entirely sorry for the fresh need they have produced."

But Satan wants us to look inwardly in self-deprecation and/or to hang on to our pointless march for merit. That is, to be absorbed in our unworthiness or our drive to attain worthiness. On the

other hand, receiving grace takes grace – that is, there is an attitude which is itself an unmerited gift that positions our hearts to receive from God His unmerited favor. John put it, "...of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace." Jn 1:16

"...that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." Ephesians 2:7

This is heavenly mindedness – you're not bound up in continual self-pity nor enslaved by earning any of God's favor – pro-actively or post-factively. This is the understanding of His goodness that naturally brings forth our repentance; this is the aroma of heaven's sweet breeze, the refreshment of living waters; this is the joyful confidence of grace.

Dear Friend, if you are lacking absolute assurance of where and with Whom you will spend eternity, make the decision now to receive the complete forgiveness of all your sins. Jesus the Christ died for you personally – He took your place, took the judgement you and I are both worthy of there on the cross. Just accept that fact and confess it. It is all grace – see Ephesians 2:8,9 God deeply loves you.