

AMAZING GRACE – Part 2

'A Prison Without Doors'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Can you remember your early days as a Christian? Can you remember the joy, the excitement and the wonder that gripped your heart? Can you remember that powerful desire to know God and the longing to receive all that He has for you? How long did that last? Do you still feel that way now? Do you desire to know God more than anything else in the world? If you do, then I rejoice with you!

Sadly as I've rubbed shoulders with my brothers and sisters in Christ over many years across the Church, I have been grieved to observe that many of them have lost a lot of that deep, passionate yearning for God. They no longer have that reckless abandon and desire to be an explorer and adventurer in the Kingdom of God. I also know this from personal experience because that's exactly what happened to me many years ago.

As new believers we become part of the only community in this broken world where our new-found joy and excitement should be encouraged and fed (i.e. the Church) often to find that we are a square peg in a round hole. When we begin with the Lord, we are bursting with love for Jesus and love for others; we are involved in every ministry we can and this new-found relationship with God is absolutely wonderful and all-consuming.

Then, more often than not, something happens over time and the fire starts to lose its heat. Before long the inevitable happens, the square pegs start to lose their edges and very soon they are conformed to the round holes and now they fit in very well. The fact that this happens is sad, but the fact that most Christians are unaware of it is tragic! It's a gradual process that most of us are not even aware of as our passion and zeal for God Himself is slowly replaced with programs, ministries, meetings and events. For many in the Church, their once-vibrant relationship with God is subtly overtaken by exhausting, life-draining religious activity.

We may not know it at the time but we are allowing Satan to take God's people captive in the prison of religion. The Apostle Paul knew all about religion and the deceptive work of the enemy who always wants to hold God's people back through false teaching and deception. As 'Saul the persecutor' he was an expert on religion. His religious qualifications, experience and performance were second to none prior to meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus. But once his eyes were opened by the Spirit of God Paul declared in Philippians 3:8 that he considered all of that rubbish, that he may gain Christ.

From that day when the Church was born and thousands of people were set free from the chains of religion and brought into the freedom of a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, the enemy of God, Satan, has been running a relentless campaign to drag God's people back under the bondage of the law. He has blinded so many believers to the spiritual reality that lies beneath much of the religious activity that can consume our time, energy and focus.

What grieves me most is that the majority of those believers who were taken captive again are no longer listening to sermons like this – because they have already gone. I am preaching this important series to those still in the Church because it is vitally important for us to stay alert and remain free from the chains of legalism and religion.

But my heart is also breaking for the thousands of people who used to be part of the Church. In every community across our nation there are more ex-Church members than those currently involved in the Church. Regardless of our location, I believe that if we could round up all those people who were once part of a Church ministry but have left, we would not have an auditorium large enough to fit them in. We have to face the fact that the 'ex-Church community' is now larger than the Church community. We can mourn that reality and wish it were different, or we can find out why this has occurred and change it.

There are lots of reasons given by those who have left the Church and by those who may have willingly or unknowingly helped them out the door. They didn't like the Pastor or the music or the theology or the leadership direction - and the list goes on. I believe that's all a smoke screen for what ultimately made it easy for them to walk away. In my opinion, and from observing this dynamic in the Church for over 40 years now, the main reason why such people chose to break fellowship with the family of God is far less complicated and far more serious. I believe they were no longer hearing or receiving the good news. The gospel of God's amazing grace was not being role-modelled, preached, taught and lived. Consequently the living, reigning Christ was no longer observably present and central.

A community of faith which encounters the true gospel and understands grace in all its truth will always encounter God in their midst and when God is truly present in a community of faith, people are usually drawn to that community, not pushed away or given a reason to leave. As I have observed this dynamic over many years I now understand why Jesus spoke out so strongly against religion - He knew who was behind it. We may think that Satan does his best work in the world. We may look at the sin, moral decay and desperation in the world around us and think that's Satan's best efforts at work. I don't believe that's true.

The devil doesn't have to work very hard at all to keep the world from encountering God - his greatest goal is to keep believers from truly understanding, embracing and living the gospel. If he can replace New Testament, New Covenant, Christ-centred, Spirit-empowered Christianity with religion, then he has effectively disempowered all that Jesus did in the life of the believer and all that His Spirit desires to do in the Church. Jesus tore off the doors of the prison of sin, death and religion, but so many believers are still living as captives, oblivious to their true freedom.

I recall a time many years ago when we had a visitor in our Church one Sunday. He was the son of a Maths teacher at the local High School where Michelle and I had been students many years earlier. He was actually a Baptist Pastor at the time in Victoria. At the end of the service he came to me and asked if he could share a vision with me which he believed the Lord gave him in the middle of the sermon. I was happy to listen. The picture he described was as simple as it was confronting. He saw a group of people in a prison cell and it looked like they had been there for some time and were very familiar with their surroundings.

They were not stressed or trying to get out or protesting their lot in life. They actually seemed resigned to their fate. But when he looked closer into this vision he could not believe what he saw. This prison had no doors. They had been ripped off and there was a huge gaping hole where they used to be. Everyone was therefore free to leave and yet they were so used to life inside the prison, they either didn't notice there were no longer any doors or they did notice but were too afraid to step into the unknown and embrace their freedom. I have never forgotten that vision and over the following several years in that Congregation I had the incredible privilege of seeing hundreds of people finally venture out of that prison into the freedom which Christ died to give them. That prison is religion. That prison is what the visible Church will always become when God is not given free reign.

I believe Satan has worked in two major ways to rob the Church of her experience of God. Firstly, by convincing believers that they already have all there is; that their current experience is as good as it gets and to pursue more would make them fanatical. As a result they settle into complacency and disappointment.

The second main way the enemy works within the Church is by loading us with heavy burdens of religious expectation to exhaust and discourage us and rob us of our energy and enthusiasm. Both strategies work equally well for his purposes and there is a body of false teaching to support each view and lead people further away from a personal experience of God and His amazing, empowering grace. A deadly mist of deception has settled over parts of the Church which has caused too many Christians to forget that they are on a spiritual pilgrimage. All of the riches of heaven are in Christ and as Christians we are in Christ. So those riches are all *available* to every Christian from day one. However they do not automatically *experience* them. That's why Paul encouraged believers to 'press on' into the heart of God and claim those riches one by one.

Many teachers today deny this necessity, teaching that to seek more is unbelieving or fanatical. In so doing they either leave a trail of frustrated, unfulfilled and hopeless Christians behind them; or they develop a breed of satisfied, self-assured Christians who are blinded to the possibility of a deeper, more vibrant and more fruitful relationship with God.

The Apostle Paul amazes and humbles me as I read his words in the third chapter of his letter to the Philippians. His earnest desire was to press forward and become all that a disciple of Jesus can become in this life. He had no desire to be average or mediocre. He detested the very idea. Paul humbly but intensely breathed his great desire, with passion and longing with words like: *"That I may gain Christ."* ... *"That I may be found in Him."* ... *"That I may know Him."* His Christian faith was an ongoing, exciting journey with God, as he testified: *"I follow after; I press on toward the mark... I have not obtained.... I am striving to lay hold of that for which Christ laid hold of me."*

An alarming number of people who identify as Christians across the world are complete strangers to the desire, the longing and the Spirit which drove Paul forward each day. Many are content to believe that this is as good as it gets and that we should just be thankful and cultivate what we already have. Why are so many Christians deaf to the clear appeals in the Word of God concerning spiritual desire, longing and progression in our walk with God? Why are we so quick to accept the view that we have arrived at some spiritual plateau and that we just need to maintain what we have in Christ? Some days it feels like the Church is in a holding pattern just waiting to land in heaven - going round and round in circles waiting for their home-coming. Have we forgotten that Jesus brought heaven here over 2,000 years ago and commissioned us to tell the world that the kingdom of heaven is here?!

There also exists a strange view in the Church, which has been with us from the very beginning, that assumes because we know chapter and verse and may even be privileged to understand the original Greek or Hebrew - that we also possess the content, the experience and the powerful reality of the Word of God. The spirit of the Pharisees lives on and I think this is one of the deadliest, most chilling breezes ever to blow across the Church!

There has never been a time in the history of Christianity when believers have known so much *about* God. We have dozens of different translations of the Bible at our fingertips; thousands of Bible commentaries and books; computer programs that can search every word in the Bible in two seconds; devotional books written by people who have had very special experiences with God. We have so many wonderful teaching institutions where we can absorb more information about God and ministry in a few years than most can in a lifetime.

In fact if spiritual vitality were judged by the amount we know *about* God, we should be seeing an unprecedented movement of God's Spirit right across this nation and many others! The reason we are not seeing such a revival is clear. The Bible, and all of history, tells us that the only thing that will bring about revival is the fire of God being ignited deep in our souls. When that happens all that wonderful knowledge *about* God is suddenly and supernaturally transformed into something that is truly *ours*.

We no longer have to just believe it because it's in the Bible or because some respected author or preacher says so. We *know* it's true because the Spirit of the living God has burned it into our experience. When we have become convinced that our experience of God is complete, our spiritual life stalls. When we forget that our journey into the heart of God is progressive and dynamic, then we will not grow in our relationship with the God and we will fail to fully embrace the mission of Christ.

We may have heard truth that we are just not willing to act upon. As a result, we are brought to a dead halt in our spiritual journey. We dry up on the vine. If there's something that we will not do for Him, some confession we will not make, something we refuse to straighten out – something we lack the courage to do for God's glory – then we might still be saved, we might still be heaven-bound - but we will come to a sudden stop in our spiritual journey this side of heaven.

People are sitting in Church buildings all over this country each week having made no significant spiritual progress for years. Many have been rendered useless by accepting a chronic state of discouragement. As a result, they've become resigned. They have rationalised their situation and are convinced that this condition is normal for all Christians. If we are in this category - we are believers, but we're not believers for ourselves. We say we believe in this progressive, victorious, abundant Christian pilgrimage ... but we're forced to concede it's for others, not for us. We've gone forward to every altar, we've been to all the seminars and conferences, we've read all the latest books, but the blessings and joy and wonder and power and effectiveness of kingdom living seem to be for someone else - not us.

What Jesus is saying to such people is exactly what He said to the man lying by the pool at Bethesda, "*Do you **want** to be made whole?*" Jesus made that man whole and raised him up because he wanted to be healed and delivered more than anything else in the world! If Jesus had found in that man the same attitude as He finds in too many Christians today, I believe He may have passed him by!

Another reason why many of us make no progress with God is that we've joined the 'Respectability Club.' We've learned the art of 'becoming adjusted.' We've chosen to be cool and proper, poised, self-controlled and well-rounded. We would never want anyone to think that we've taken an extreme position, particularly in spiritual matters. For many years, I accepted just an average spiritual state and I had no deep desire for God. So many Christians are living like that today: 'going to Church' week in and week out and rarely feeling an extra heartbeat; rarely feeling any kindling of Godly desire or passion. God made it clear to me years ago that unless I was willing to surrender to Him absolutely and allow Him to move in and have His way, I was never going to have the spiritual adventures like those who have been explorers in His kingdom.

God will light the fire when we lay on the altar.

There is so much more for us - so much more. We don't think often enough about those who have been the prospectors in the hills of God's kingdom, the spiritual adventurers, the trail-blazers.

God wrote about them in the Bible because they were seeking a better land, a better life, a better tomorrow and we should thank God for their example. Why did Abraham leave his home town of Ur? Because God promised him spiritual adventures and he moved out at God's bidding. But that didn't make Abraham a hero at home. Just think of what the contented people of Ur must have said to Abraham. *"What are you doing Abe? What's the matter with you? Everyone else is satisfied with their current religion (they actually worshipped the moon God), but you talk about hearing a voice that told you to 'go into the land which I will show you.' You're a fool Abraham! A demented fool."*

But Abraham would have simply said, *"I heard the voice of God, plain and clear. I'm moving out!"* At that point Abraham was no hero. He was the laughing stock of his home town, I'm sure. But you know the rest of his story, don't you? God blessed that man and all believers since, because of his willingness to step out of his comfort zone and follow God.

All of the heroes in God's 'hall of fame' had something happen inside each of them. An internal fire had to be lit before anything happened externally. Far too many Christians still believe that outward changes in life and character and habits is what God expects. Many have made decisions to enter full time ministry or to go to work on some foreign mission field because of advice and pressures from the outside. That's religion – that's what Jesus condemned – that's what *real* Christianity was supposed to replace! This is a journey that must begin in the heart. But some of God's dear children have not embarked upon such a journey – or they started and got scared and pulled back. So now they lack that deep longing for His best pastures because they've not found the delight of experiencing for themselves the glorious riches of Christ!

I recall a statement made by an old Hindu writer. He said, *"You, who are busy learning texts and not living them, are like the man counting other people's cattle without having a single heifer of his own."* Translated for our context: A lot of professing Christians are busy 'counting other people's cattle' - studying theology - reading lots of other people's books - even studying the Bible for hours - but they have very little from God which is truly their own. They have this enormous amount of acquired knowledge *about* God which really belongs to somebody else.

The second major way the enemy deceives us, is by leading us to trust in our own performance. The zeal of those who want it all and want it now, can cause these enthusiastic believers to run ahead of God and not realise how they have been led astray from the gospel that saved them. This is the essence of religious behaviour and it totally distorts our love relationship with God. One line of this kind of thinking is that God saves us and forgives us – He gets us into the race by His free love and grace, but then we have to run it.

The idea of two stages in our Christian walk is a common error which has been taught in the Church for centuries. This is a lie perpetrated by the enemy and one that has caused more burn-out and pain in Christian's lives than any other. When people believe it is their responsibility alone to make their lives work, they punish themselves when the work goes slowly, or when they fall back into sin, or don't seem to get a grip on their emotional or spiritual life or those disciplines - as if this work was waiting for them to get their act together.

We need to understand one thing here: **what God starts - God also finishes.**

That's what God's amazing grace does - it frees people to tell it like it is and not feel condemned. People have been surprised when they have come to me over the years and felt comfortable to confess things they've been carrying around for years and I have not reacted in shock!

I certainly hope I was sympathetic, but my calm response to their confession was because I never trusted them with their life anyway! I don't trust you to get it right any more than I trust myself! If I had faith in your commitment to the Lord; or in your resolution to follow the Lord; or if I put faith in your disciplines, then I would be distressed – but I will never do that. I trust the Holy Spirit within you and I need you to trust the Holy Spirit within me and not place your trust in any fallible human being.

You see, I read in the New Testament that God decided a long time ago that He would take charge of your life, and He would take final responsibility to save you, to go on saving you and to perfect you in the end. From the first to the last - building on grace is God's building project - not yours. Let me illustrate this to you with another clear statement from the Apostle Paul:

"Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed - not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence - continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." (Philippians 2:12-13)

Paul is not saying work out your salvation because God has *begun* a good work in you and now it's your turn to shine - he says work out your salvation believing with the faith God has given you, that God has decided to continue working in you. He doesn't just get you started and hand the reigns to you. We see this nailed down even more here:

Philippians 1:6 *"... being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."*

God will not stop carrying it on until it's completed. When we work out our Christian lives in the midst of a fallen world - with all its temptations and all its opposition - we have confidence that God, Who by His grace began a good work in us, has taken personal responsibility for completing that work.

So when someone says: *"Things are really happening - my life is being transformed by God's grace I can't believe how great I feel ..."* I thank God for continuing His work in that person. When someone comes to me broken and upset and overwhelmed by sin - past or present - I thank God for continuing His work in that person too. The mere fact that they even desire to struggle with this issue is evidence that God is at work. If He wasn't, they would simply submit to the sin and relax. It is God Who builds on His grace in you. Your responsibility is to co-operate with Him and very often - just get out of His way and submit to His Spirit's work in you. Our faith must be in God's work - never in our own work. Our job is to believe and receive, believe and receive, believe and receive. It's all by grace alone.

The experience of exhaustion, discouragement or quiet despair which is the outcome of both of these errors, has produced a further misunderstanding, which the enemy uses to keep Christians bound by guilt and shame. I am talking about the idea that there are 'first-class' and 'second-class' Christians. The first class Christians are those without any observable serious sin - they are victorious or fully committed or Spirit-filled or powerful or whatever. The second-class Christians are the strugglers, the ones who can't quite get it together, who have not yet yielded to God or died to self or 'ticked the right box' to reach the 'higher levels' of Christian life and experience.

We can start off with this false assumption that we have two classes of Christians and from that comes thousands of books, videos, podcasts and teaching on the deeper Spirit-filled life - *how to* seminars, sermons and talks aimed at getting you to 'qualify' for God's 'higher purposes.'

From this teaching comes the terms *carnal Christians* or *worldly Christians*. These teachers would tell us that if we can just get these carnal and worldly Christians into line, everything will be fine. I don't believe we have a problem with 'carnal Christians' - because I don't believe they exist and nor does the Bible.

It's my belief that when you're looking at the Church and see what you think are worldly Christians or carnal Christians, what you're actually looking at, are either non-Christians who think they are Christians; OR, Christians who have been discouraged and disempowered - largely by bad teaching. There is no two stage Christian life! There is only one kind of Christian - and that is one who is in Christ. It's that simple. That is the clear teaching of the New Testament. You can't be a little bit pregnant - you either have a life within you, or you don't. The same is true for us: You either have Christ in you - or you don't.

Let me be very specific and practical here. As I said earlier, many people have come to me and said, or implied: "*I've blown it big - I guess I'm not a first-class victorious Christian after all and now I wonder if I ever will be.*" Those may not be their actual words but the hopelessness that comes into their eyes tells me that such people have bought into this lie.

They believe that because they've stumbled or fallen they are now somehow relegated to a second-class status and that they may never get out of it. There is no such thing as a second-class Christian! You are simply a first-class Christian who has stumbled. The reason I know this is because you were knocked down and got up again - that's what happens to true believers. Unbelievers get knocked down and stay down. The desire to deal with that sin or that problem is evidence that God is working out His purposes in you. He's completing that which He decided a long time ago to begin in you by His grace.

God will not allow you to completely sabotage your life. Look at the entire flow of your life. Do you keep coming back to God? Yes or no? If you don't keep coming back to God, then you're not a Christian - your heart has not been regenerated by the Holy Spirit yet and we need to share the gospel with you - it's that simple. But let's never say: if you don't keep coming back to God you're just a backslidden or 'carnal' Christian. No you're not - you're not a Christian! Wake up!

Now, some would not appreciate this, but when dear old Grandpa Joe comes to me and says: *Pastor, I'm really worried about my little Billy. He's not walking with the Lord, but when he was 8 he made a profession of faith. He hasn't been with the Lord since, but I know that God honours that profession.* No He doesn't! This kid isn't a Christian. Look at his life. Christianity isn't some theory that you need to guess at - look at a person's life, not today, not tomorrow - not even over the stretch of a year - but over the long haul - and you will see who is a Christian and who is not. Those who are, will keep returning to God and are working out their salvation because God is still at work within them. When they fall they get up - maybe not immediately, but sooner or later they are drawn back because there is a hunger and thirst for God. He has a hook in their heart and they can't deny it. You have to look at the whole thrust and direction of a person's life to determine if they are in Christ or not. Here's a quotable quote.

The authentic Christian life is characterised by a hunger for God and a desire for righteousness, yet it is marred by sin.

Until the new heaven and new earth comes - that statement is true of every one of us. If God has begun a work in us, there will be a hunger for Him within us and it will keep bringing us back to Him. This is not a do-it-yourself project. God is doing it Himself - in us.

Now if we want to speed up that process there are some things we can do to co-operate with God's work in us. If you want to co-operate with the grace-building that God is doing in you then read the Bible - it will inform you and give you faith. Pray - it will bring power into your life. Worship - it will release you and heal you. Give - it will set your priorities straight. There are certain Christian disciplines that you do, not in order to be a good Christian - but as a response to what God is doing in you and so you can co-operate with the life that God is building in you. God is the builder but you should throw Him a few bricks occasionally!

When you believe into Jesus Christ, you believe into a great, broad, fast-flowing river of redemptive power. You are caught in its grip, being carried along, and it's easier to swim with it than to swim against it or to deny its reality. So when you ask: *When will I conquer my sins?* and *When will I have joy?* and *When will I really experience the power and presence of God?* ... the answer is: When you start to believe God; when you relax and cheer up in light of His promises and His faithfulness; when you take seriously what He has said and what you can observe all around you. That is when these burdens and barriers will begin to disappear at a faster and faster rate. So cheer up; take heart; have faith in God; practice His presence; rejoice in His provision - because His grace is sufficient to complete what He has started!

What's the very first thing you did when you became a Christian? You had faith in the work of Jesus, right? Well why stop? You need the same faith in the work of Jesus today as you did back then. The entire Christian life is making a choice to believe God - every day, in every way.

The entire Christian life from your end is lived by faith: that is, making a choice to believe something that may be very radical for some, but entirely reasonable. God is trustworthy. We've seen enough of His character to know that He can be trusted. If you can say that - then you can have a happy Christian life, despite your inconsistencies and occasional sins.

Friends, Jesus Christ came to set the prisoners free! He tore the doors off that prison cell over 2,000 years ago. Thousands upon thousands of those early converts were freed from the religion of the Pharisees. Two thousand years later, the Pharisees are still active and the visible Church has once again allowed itself to be imprisoned by the law and religion in spite of our freedom in Christ.

Do you want to experience the fullness of the radical freedom which is yours in Christ? Do you want to become one of the adventurers - an explorer in the hills of God's kingdom - one who will do anything possible to find the treasures that God has for those who are prepared to look away from themselves and look to Him? Are you fed up with being average ... mediocre ... frustrated ... depressed ... defeated ... wishing you had something real in your relationship with God? Do you want to know God *personally* - not just know *about* him? How strong is that desire really? How badly do you want to be close to God and set free from the physical, emotional or spiritual torment that you are enduring? Many of us say that we want something more in our life but we are reluctant to admit it and face it head on. Are you prepared to admit your need to God ... to yourself ... to others?

Are you prepared to swallow the pride that the enemy will put there, and confess that you haven't got it all together - you're struggling - you want something real from God? If you are then that desire has come from Him. As we journey together through this teaching series I want us to explore the wide open spaces of God's freedom and the grace He has given us in Christ and I want to encourage you to pursue Him with all the energy and passion you have and not let anything or anyone get in your way - especially not your pride. The enemy of God would try to catch us in the traps and snares of religion to destroy that freedom, render grace ineffective in our lives and bring us under bondage again, so we must learn to recognise his work in us and around us.

Galatians 5:1 *"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free!"*

So don't stop! Don't stop! Press on! Jesus Christ came to set captives completely free and destroy the work of the enemy. When we first knew Jesus we felt the wonder of His grace and forgiveness. However, we put ourselves back into prisons of our own making when we believe the lies of the enemy.

From beginning to end, our journey is by His grace, for His glory and through His Spirit. God has committed Himself to you totally, completely and forever. He has promised to bring you safely home. Understand that and you will understand God's amazing grace in all its truth.

1. Read through the sermon once without taking notes or highlighting anything ... just to get the big picture.
2. Then go through the text more closely. Highlighting or underlining key phrases or paragraphs which stand out as significant. Jot down any questions you have in margin and come back to them later and see if God has answered them.
3. Using your own words, summarise the central truth of this whole sermon in one paragraph.

4. Think back to your eighth birthday. Describe the house and neighbourhood you lived in. What was the best memory you have of that time in your life and explain why you think this memory is the one which came to mind. Why is it special? How has it impacted who you are today? Where do you think God was at that time in your life – how can you see His hand at work looking back now?

5. Looking back over this week's sermon, note down the two most important statements for you personally and explain why you think they are important.

6. Spend some time reflecting on your spiritual journey. Are you as keen, committed, passionate, involved etc. as when you first became a Christian? Is the fire burning brighter inside you ... or are there just a few coals glowing ... or perhaps no heat at all? Talk to God about this and ask Him to reveal some of the choices, circumstances or events which may have contributed to this 'cooling off' in your spiritual life. List them below and then commit them to prayer and ask God to lead you out of this place and into the future He has prepared for you.