

FINDING BEAUTY IN THE BARREN

God's grace for a drought-stricken Cape Town

Psalm 145:8 "The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love."

The City of Cape Town is experiencing its worst water crisis in over a century and if nothing is done the city is likely to run out of water before the winter rainy season of 2018. The Cape Metro POPULATION of nearly 4 million has **less than 90 days'** worth of water in its reservoirs, making it the first major city in the world that could run out of water.

For those not living in the Cape Town region here are some statistics:

- Cape Town residents and visitors can only use **50 litres** of water per day, from 1 February. *(The average use in a Western household is **333 litres a day**, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.)*
- Residents are awaiting "**Day Zero**," currently set for the first week in May, when there will be no more water coming from taps, fire services would be unable to extract water from fire hydrants, and residents would not be able to shower, flush their toilets or have access to any water inside their homes.
- The city has already designated **200 collection points** where residents will stand in line, under army and police supervision, to collect **25 litres** of water, per person, daily - for washing, cooking and personal hygiene. Each collection point will accommodate around **20,000 people** per day.
- The level of Theewaterskloof Dam, once Cape Town's biggest provider of water, is currently estimated at **less than 10 percent**. The area is a dry piece of land, with hardly any water in sight.



Facing natural disasters, whether it be droughts, floods, earthquakes or fires, questions are inevitably directed towards heaven. *Is God unhappy with Cape Town? Will it rain again when the people of the Western Cape repent? Is God angry? These are the questions that even local Christian leaders are asking and conveying.* For many this portrays an image of a God who seeks to punish those who step out of line and that He is quick to anger and slow to forgive.

Is this really the God we serve? The Bible clearly describes God as compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness. But to what extent does the drought reflect the character of a compassionate God, or has He finally lost patience with the 'Capetonians'? Is the drought a sign of judgement and is every creature subject to a God who seeks repentance before releasing grace?

In Matthew 5:45 the Lord reveals His character in a very distinct way: *"He makes his sun to shine on bad and good people alike and gives rain to those who do good and to those who do evil."* (GNB) Matthew Henry writes the following on this scripture: *"Note, these gifts of common providence are dispensed indifferently to good and evil, just and unjust; so that we cannot know love and hatred by what is before us, but by what is within us; not by the shining of the sun on our heads, but by the rising of the Sun of Righteousness in our hearts. The gifts of God's bounty to wicked men that are in rebellion against him, teach us to do good to those that hate us; especially considering, that though there is in us a carnal mind which is enmity to God, yet we share in his bounty."*

The challenge for believers is not to view the drought, and the prayers that accompany it, from a transactional perspective, but from a transformational perspective. For most of us, our introduction to Christ was a "transactional" one. The scripture in 1 Timothy 2:3-6 was received with great joy as we were reminded that, *"God wants all people to be saved and that this happens through one mediator, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people."*



We entered faith with a deep love for a Saviour who “gave Himself” and “paid the price” for our sins to become the “sacrificial Lamb” on our behalf. Whenever we approach the Lord in times of trial we do so from this platform. We pray that He will provide rain, and rightly so. We pray that He will intervene in the lives of corrupt leaders, stop crime and restore morality, and rightly so. But, if we remain transactional Christians in this time of drought we might miss the blessing of being transformed into the likeness of Christ. The process of transformation involves that we move from loving Christ because he performed a transaction on the cross, to being transformed into the likeness of the One who performed the transaction.

The challenge is that we often seek God’s providence only by looking to the skies. This will blind us to the evident signs of His transformational grace that is all around us. When reading the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 we are provided glimpses of grace for those who feel alienated from a loving God – the poor, the powerless, those who mourn and the disenfranchised. It guides us to a loving Father and not an angry God. Here are four evidences of God’s grace (*Adapted from a devotional by Richard Rohr*¹):

1. THE GRACE OF DISEMPOWERMENT

Matthew 5:3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

The “poor in spirit” refers to an inner emptiness and brokenness, and to life without the pursuit of personal justification, righteousness or reputation. The Greek word Matthew uses for “poor” is *ptochoi*, which literally means, “those who are crouching, a beggar.” These are the disempowered people who have nothing left in themselves to depend on but to recognise their need for a loving Father to intervene and provide. Maybe the drought is a season of disempowerment for ‘Capetonians’ in order to acknowledge our need for God as the only true source of power. Nothing we do, or plan will bring water from the heavens, only God can. This is a grace beyond measure.

2. THE GRACE OF COMPASSION

Mat 5:4 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

We spend most of our lives in pursuit of happiness, avoiding hardship, pain and suffering. The mountain, the sandy beaches and the glorious gardens have always been a hallmark of what the “Mother City” (Cape Town) can offer. Drought has never been on the radar of ‘Capetonians’ and even though sympathy was present when news of other cities in South Africa was shared, it was difficult to express an empathy that could identify. But sorrow is woven into the very texture of life. The early Syrian Church actually proposed that tears be a sacrament in the Church. Saint Ephrem went so far as to say until you have cried you don’t know God.

Most of us think we know God—and ourselves—through ideas. Yet physical, embodied theology acknowledges that perhaps weeping will allow us to know God much better than ideas. In this Beatitude, Jesus praises those who can enter into solidarity with the pain of the world and not try to remove or isolate themselves from its suffering. This is why Jesus says the rich person often can’t see the Kingdom, because they spend too much time trying to make tears unnecessary and even impossible. This season of drought could be His immeasurable grace by providing an avenue to get to know Him better, and to care more deeply.

3. THE GRACE OF SIMPLICITY

Matthew 5:5 “Blessed are the meek [or the gentle, humble, non-violent, unassuming, disempowered], for they will inherit the earth.”

The translation perhaps most familiar is “the meek.” It is the unique power of the powerless, which people who have always had power never understand. It is the character trait of finding value in simplicity and being in a position of “lowliness”; in attitude and possessions. It is claimed by Mary in her famous Magnificat where she declares: “God has looked upon me in my lowliness... (Luke 1:48). Surely Mary and Joseph modelled this stance for Jesus as a child as well. Their offering of two



¹ <https://cac.org/category/daily-meditations/2018/>

turtle doves at his presentation in the temple (Luke 2:24), which was the offering of the landless peasantry, reveals their social place in Jewish society.

Cape Town is well known for being situated in one of the wealthiest provinces in South Africa, and at the same time hosting some of the poorest communities in South Africa. When we are forced by nature to return to the basics in life, there exists glorious opportunities to experience a new-found simplicity in life and a new-found faith in God. I have personally discovered how I have unknowingly misused God's resources in the past simply because I had an abundance. Now water is a luxury and not a given. What a grace!

4. THE GRACE OF SOLIDARITY

Matthew 5:7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy."



I believe with all my heart that mercy and forgiveness are the whole Gospel. It is this mercy that was exemplified in solidarity when Christ became Emanuel, God with us. The concept of Creator God walking among His creation is the experience of a generous God, who loves simply because of total grace. There's no tit-for-tat with God. Grace isn't for sale. One cannot buy God by worthiness, or achievement, or obeying commandments. God loved us even while we were sinners, before repentance². Salvation is God's loving-kindness, a loving-kindness that is "forever."

But this season of drought has also opened avenues for others to express mercy and unmerited favour, by showing solidarity in glorious ways. Grabouw and Elgin farmers (two farming communities within the Western Cape region) have released 10-million cubic meters of water (10-billion litres) to assist Cape Town with drought relief. Chief Executive officer of Groenland

Water Users Association (GWUA), Johan Groenewald, says the water is a donation from farmers in Elgin and Grabouw. It's coming mainly from the Eikenhof water scheme and private dams in the Upper Kogelberg catchment area. What makes this an even greater act of solidarity is the fact that the Elgin region itself did not have as much rain as usual. What provision, what mercy, what grace!

Theologian Marcus Borg (1942-2015) wrote: *"The path of transformation of which Jesus spoke leads from a life of requirements and measuring up (whether to culture or to God) to a life of relationship with God. It leads from a life of anxiety to a life of peace and trust. It leads from the bondage of self-preoccupation to the freedom of self-forgetfulness. It leads from life centred in culture to life centred in God."*

Could it be that God's grace is revealed in the present drought while His mercy will be revealed in the future rain? After all, grace is getting what we don't deserve, and mercy is not getting what we do deserve.

This is the character of God.

² Romans 5:8 "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us".