

Special Favor



Gary Wilkerson March 19, 2018

Hearing God's Call to a Higher Love

Everyone wants to be special. The world knows this, and businesses capitalize on it. It's why we're offered different levels of "specialness" for doing business with them. Hotels, airlines and others tout gold, silver and bronze levels for its participating members. The more you patronize their service, the higher you get bumped up in membership, with all kinds of favor for discounts and rewards. They make you feel special for choosing their business.

There's another kind of special favor we can receive; it comes on a more personal level. This is the special favor shown by friends who go the extra mile for us. I needed this kind of favor a few years ago when I broke my back and was incapacitated for a while. Suddenly, my family and I were in great need.

That's when a young couple who works in our ministry stepped in. They actually moved into our home to make our lives easier. They went to the grocery store for us, cooked for us, cleaned for us. Household things seem minor when you can do them yourself, but they loom large when you can't. Doing those things for us helped our family get through an extremely hard season. Can you imagine the kind of love that takes?

This young couple blessed us with a devotion I'll never forget. What they showed us truly was special favor. Yet God shows his people a type of favor that's even more special than this.

Paul introduced the Philippians to the concept of God's "special favor." "I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns. So it is right that I should feel as I do about all of you, for you have a special place in my heart. *You share with me the special favor of God*" (*Philippians 1:6-7, NLT, my emphasis*).

Anyone reading this passage would think, "Sign me up! That sounds like God's gold package. I want the best of everything he has for me."

Yet the Lord's favor is a lot different from the world's, as Paul points out completing the last verse: "You share with me the special favor of God, both in my imprisonment and in defending and confirming the truth of the Good News" (1:7).

Wait, what? Paul was shown God's special favor by being sent to jail? How could being shackled and silenced reveal favor? Paul had preached to thousands, seeing crowds fall to their knees crying out for salvation. He appeared before kings and judges and received a personal revelation of Jesus. That's what favor sounds like. So how does descending from all that to a prison cell become *special favor*?

Contrary to all reason, Paul describes his situation as if it were a gold-level club membership. And he was thanking the Philippians for supporting him in his imprisonment, the way that special young couple supported me in my trial. You see, what Paul describes here has to be translated through a spiritual heart. He's showing us that God is likely to bring us into unlikely places when he wants to accomplish a special kingdom work in our lives.

Paul knew God's favor is on us not just when things are going great.

The opposite can be true, in fact. Sometimes it's when life becomes hardest that God does his greatest work in us. I have a friend who was on the worship team of a church I once pastored. When a young woman began attending, my friend was smitten with her. She'd only been a Christian for a short while and had a rough background. But my friend fell in love with her and they ended up marrying. The dreams he'd held for so long in his walk with Jesus were coming to pass. Time after time he told me, "Gary, I'm so blessed to be with her. The favor of God is all over me."

But their marriage took a downturn. The wife reverted to her old lifestyle, falling deeper into an addiction until finally she left my friend altogether. He was devastated, inconsolable—not only over the wife he lost but a sense of losing God's presence. "I thought I was following his leading when we married," he told me. "I don't know what to think now."

As my friend walked through that trial, he could have turned to a certain teaching that many hurting Christians cling to. It states, "Don't worry, everything will be fine. God is going to work it all out for you." It angers me whenever I hear this message preached, because it does Christians a horrible disservice.

People's hurts are real. And when their trials get worse instead of better, they're left scratching their heads. Then, when things take a final, tragic turn, they're devastated even more. Now they have nowhere to go with their broken heart, since God was supposed to make everything fine. It's no wonder so many wounded people limp away from the church for good.

As a pastor, I have to tell you: Not everything turns out fine. Not all marriages last. Not all people recover from their addictions. I've buried some people in our church that I shouldn't have had to, including young people. There are many reasons why tragedies take place. My point is this: The world we live in and the trials we face are real. And we need a real, faithful God who will walk lovingly beside us as we go through those trials.

Is there a crisis in your family? Is it financial? Relational? Emotional? God wants you to know he's with you—that he has his hand on your shoulder, his arms around you, his strength underneath you to carry you through your dark hour.

My friend could have become bitter. So many Christians do when they experience losses like his. They think they've lost any favor they ever had. But that isn't God's way of doing things. He's not a God who looks to take away good things from us; he looks for ways to *bless us*. He's out for our good, even to restore what's been taken away. When my friend's wife returned to a sinful lifestyle, she made a choice. That choice wasn't God's choice for her; it was her own. And it wounded her husband and destroyed her marriage.

Despite his crippling pain, my friend held onto his faith. He battled through that excruciating trial—and God kept building his strength. His circumstances didn't change, but everyone who knew him sensed his heart was gradually moving from bronze to silver to gold in God's kingdom. The Lord had more in store for his life—and it would only come through his special favor.

If ever a child of God might be convinced he lost God's favor, it was David.

If there was one Israelite who obviously knew God's favor, it was the amazing young man anointed to be Israel's king. From a young age David had everything going for him: He was a mighty warrior whom King Saul wanted by his side in battle. And he was charismatic: When Saul's armies returned in victory, the crowds cheered David more than they did the king. David was handsome and talented, a musician who wrote songs that God's people still sing today. Everything he touched seemed blessed by God's favor.

But something went wrong in David's life—in fact, everything did. David's brothers were jealous of him. And so was Saul, who flew into sudden rages and tried to kill David. Finally, David had to flee, hiding in a cave in the wilderness. All that authority—why was it taken away overnight?

I hear from a lot of Christians who wonder the same thing about their lives. They walked in God's divine favor for years when suddenly things fell apart—and now they questioned everything: Did they really hear from the Lord?

Will God be faithful to them? Is it worth it to keep believing? David's response reveals everything: "David found strength in the Lord his God" (*1 Samuel 30:6*). David could have given in to discouragement—but he kept his faith.

Friend, when your life takes a downturn, and you're shivering in a dark cave, that's when your character is formed. For Paul, it was in prison; for David, it was in a cave. As I prepared this message, I studied David's prayer life. Believe it or not, when things were going well for David, the Bible doesn't record him praying. (David sang Psalms, but worship is different from intimate devotion.) That changed during David's crisis. Inside the cave, he became a man of intense prayer.

Your dark cave is also where you find out who your friends are.

Word spread through Israel about David's crisis, and unlikely groups of people rallied around him. Even his estranged brothers came to support him. Then a group of "mighty men" showed up to give David their loyalty. These soldiers didn't want more stripes on their sleeves; they came because they loved their leader.

This all reflects an incredible aspect of God's special favor: As we endure our dark night, he works to reconcile our relationships. Our Lord is more concerned about our relational losses than we are. And beautiful restorations like David's might never have happened without his crisis.

After this, we see a new spiritual authority in David's life. In 1 Samuel 23, he moves in a supernatural power he hadn't known. Yet it never would have happened without the divine shaping that comes through God's special favor.

Your dark season doesn't have to change for you to know you're still in God's favor. Most of us pray for God to change our difficult circumstances. But if we knew the amazing work he's shaping in us, we wouldn't want things to change at all—because the best is about to happen.

Remember my friend, the worship musician? As he walked faithfully through his pain, the Lord sent someone else into his life. She's an amazing Christian with a beautiful faith who was on her way to a top executive position with a firm in New York City. "She's out of my league," my friend confided to me as they dated. But his fiancée didn't think so. They got married, and he went on to become a leader in a major ministry. They are so happy today.

My friend thought he'd lost God's favor—but that wasn't the case at all.

God worked through his tragic loss to design a blessing my friend never could have imagined. He cared about my friend's family life and restored it to him, just as he did with David. And everyone around him witnessed this blessing take shape.

That's the God who shows his children special favor. And he wants to bestow it on you in your crisis. I promise you: If you hold onto your faith, you'll know the depths of God's love as you never have. And you'll find your life changed in amazing ways, marked by his supernatural love. Amen!

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