

Meditations on Grace

An Easter Devotional

Fox Valley Christian Church

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Dedication

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power forever and ever! Amen. Revelations 1:5-6 (NIV)

Introduction

I cannot believe how fast this last year has flown by, and here we are again, with the Easter Devotional that has been written and produced from within the community of Fox Valley Christian Church. It is my privilege to be a part of this church, to consider it my home, and to consider you to be my church family, my brothers and sisters in Christ.

This year we are focusing our devotionals on God's grace. It seems to be such an easy thing to write about, but as Dan Fields wrote, when you get deep with the subject of grace, it takes time.

So come on this journey with me. Learn how God's grace has been shown in our lives, read of some of our past mistakes and grace in the midst of them, read from the artist how God creates light out of the darkness in our lives, read from Pastor Josh how we can be set free from the cage that surrounds us. These writers will take you on a journey you will not want to miss, not even one day. So start on Palm Sunday, and read a devotional every day for 10 days. This will take you two days past Easter, so please don't miss those at the very end. They have important things to say.

This is not a theological dissertation on grace. Rather, this is written by everyday people who have shared from their hearts and experiences on how they see grace, and often how it has worked out in their own lives. Each devotional is backed up by scripture and reviewed by an elder. That doesn't make them perfect, as each of us are not perfect. But thankfully God can work through our imperfections, and He can also use us for His glory.

It is all about grace.

Ruth Anne Boone
Editor
Easter 2013

Palm Sunday – Share the Good News of Grace

Ruth Anne Boone

The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David! "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! "Hosanna in the highest!" When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?" The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

Matthew 21:9-10 (NIV)

It was a parade! And all of the crowds wanted to see Him. They had been on the road, traveling toward Jerusalem, some of them, for days. They were hot, dusty, tired, hungry. Children had been asking, "How long, Mother, until we get there?"

They were coming to Jerusalem for the Passover, still a week away. This was the time of year when the Israelites remembered God saving them from slavery in Egypt. They remembered the blood on the doorposts, the flat, unleavened bread... unleavened because they had been in a hurry, and had no time for the bread to rise properly with yeast. They remembered that their

forefathers had eaten with their shoes on, ready to leave at a moment's notice, waiting for Pharaoh to finally let them go.

Now, here they were, and it was a joyous time. They were here to celebrate! And there, there was the wonderful prophet from Nazareth, the one who listened to the people, and who spoke with such compassion of the love God had for them. And look, he was riding on a donkey! That could mean only one thing. He was even more important, even more wonderful than they had thought. Now, he was even fulfilling the prophesy of a king coming, riding on a donkey! Here was their king, and he would bring peace to them. At long last! Peace!

And so they followed Him and went before Him, laying palm branches and coats on the road in front of Him, proclaiming who this was to all who didn't know, to all who asked.

And here was grace. The Messiah, the King himself, presented himself to the lowly crowds first, rather than to those high in authority. He had shown it again and again. God had come to Earth to show his love and compassion to everyone... but first, to the shepherds when Jesus was born, to the old man Simeon, who knew by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before seeing the promised Messiah, to the widow Anna who prayed in the temple day and night, and who was there when Jesus was brought to be circumcised. And later, throughout Jesus' three year ministry on Earth, he reached out to the poor, the humble, those who truly sought after God, and in so doing, showed God's grace to them.

Now, that day on the road to Jerusalem the crowds did not know, did not understand, that Jesus was not to be an earthly king who would set them free from the Romans. Rather, he was and is the King of Heaven, who came to set them free from their sins... from *our* sins. All we have to do is believe, and in believing, surrender all we are to Him, including the past and daily sins. This is grace, in that He gave of Himself so that we would live.

So let's celebrate, and let's remember the road to Jerusalem filled with crowds who paid homage to Jesus, who would soon become the Passover Lamb, and forever pay the penalty for our sins. Through Him and Him alone, we can have fellowship with God forever. This is grace.

Application

1. Do you know Jesus, the King of Heaven? Have you made Him King of your heart? If you are ready, pray to God and ask Him for forgiveness for the things you have done wrong, surrender your life to Him and promise to always follow Him and love Him.
2. If you believe in Jesus, yet have not told anyone that you do, go tell someone! Make a phone call, a text, get together with a Christian friend or spouse, call the church, talk to an elder or anyone on a ministry team, but tell someone today!
3. When the crowds entered Jerusalem, they told those who didn't know who Jesus was. In the next week, have at least one conversation with someone who

doesn't yet believe in Jesus. Make sure it is someone you already have an established relationship with.

4. Begin building relationships with non-believers, and in easy, non-threatening ways tell them that you are a Christian. This is not a scary thing! Tell them about an event we have coming up in church, tell them about your small group, if they tell you about something hard in life, tell them you'll pray for them.
5. Invite someone, a neighbor, a co-worker, a friend, to come to church next Sunday to celebrate Easter. This is an easy invitation. So many people go to a church, any church, on Christmas and Easter. They are more likely to come if someone they know invites them. Let that someone be you.

Prayer

Dear God, we praise you for who you are, for sending Jesus to Earth to show the way back to you, for loving us and showing your grace to us. We want to wave palm branches in your honor, and to proclaim you before the world, to those who don't know who you are. Give us your power to reach the world around us, Lord! We have the best, the biggest news ever, and we want to share the news of your grace with everyone you put into our path. In your name we pray, Amen.

Grace in Weakness

Art Carlson

Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

II Corinthians 12:8-9 (NIV)

What if? All of us have "what if's" in our lives. You know, like if I was richer, younger, stronger, better looking, musically talented, could speak better, lived in a better place, knew the Bible better, had more time, then I could have a greater effect in this world for God. And others say if my health was better, if I didn't struggle with depression, if I wasn't grieved by the death of a family member, if I wasn't struggling with my marriage, or struggling with my children, struggling to keep my job, or pay bills, and the list goes on and on, then I could have a greater effect in this world for God.

Too often we get weighed down and stalled by our ideas of how things need to happen. Reading this, you are most likely a Christian and if you were to examine your life, where do you see yourself in your service to

Christ? Stop and take a moment to reflect on where you are. Then come back to reading.

Did you first run through your check list? Like, I believe that Christ is my Savior, I was baptized, I come to church regularly, and I give my tithes to the church. Now, those are clearly a part of being a Christian, but is that all Christ wants from us? Or did you think about serving in a church ministry, greeting, singing, helping with the children? Again, these are all things that are a part of being a Christian, but is that all Christ wants from us? So far these are things that we currently do and in most cases do very well. But then there is the list of things that we don't do but could do if our "what if's" happened. We need to understand that God is not looking for us to be perfect or for us to have our plan in place in order to serve Him. We are called to serve God as we are right now. What God will teach us will prepare us for another day.

All of us are here because God has a plan for us. And in our lives we have made and are making a series of choices using our free will, and then added with the free will of others, this combination makes us who and where we are today.

We live in a world that requires and demands instant gratification to our life. If our plan does not go as we have directed it, then it seems easier to scrap the plan rather than to fix it. Or worse, just lay dormant and do nothing because our plan failed. We can become so overwhelmed by our circumstances that we can even feel let down by our belief in God.

Then part of our plan can get interrupted by the situations in our life, situations that can cause us to question serving our God. Unlike the “what if’s” of our life plan that just don’t make it into the plan, we can be hit by unforeseen incidents that seem insurmountable and uncalled-for so much to the point that we may believe that we cannot move forward unless God removes them from our path. Each one of us has had these times in our lives when we called on God to remove or replace or make something happen to change the situation because it looked too hard, too painful, or simply not what we expected. We turn to God for action, not grace.

It seems that we can accept the fact that at the time of our born again experience that God could send us the grace to make us worthy to be called his children. This grace came unmerited and undeserved to forgive all of our sins, thus giving us the ability to spend eternity with Him in heaven. We can accept and understand that grace. We can understand that grace continues to be granted when we sin.

But during our circumstance when we pray and pray and pray and it is not done according to our desires, what are our thoughts about grace? When our requests to God almighty do not seem to be answered, shouldn’t we really be hearing what Christ told Paul: *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”*

When Paul said *“Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me,”* do not look at Christ’s response to Paul’s three requests as Christ is saying ‘no’ to Paul. Rather, Christ was promising to demonstrate his power

through Paul's weakness. When you stop depending on your own strength and stop asking for God to merely become an instrument in your plan and turn to Christ for your needs, His grace will be all you need.

When Jesus instructed Paul that his grace was sufficient for him, he was saying that he gives us whatever is needed to face our current situations whether it be trials, temptations, fears, pain, suffering or whatever. We do not need more than Christ as he is with us, and through him we draw our strength, comfort, as well as his loving kindness and mercy.

We need to accept the fact that Jesus knows what is best for us, and that through our trust in Him the grace that He bestows upon us is all we need. The truth is, everything for our walk with Christ and all that we need to do in our service for Christ comes from God's grace. For 2 Corinthians 9:8 says: *"And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work."* NKJV

God promises us that no matter what we face in our lives as his servants in our relationship with Him, His strength and power will be all that we need. Let us never forget that Christ will bless us with an abundance of grace to do His will while we are here on earth.

Application

1. When was the last time you were hit with a life situation, and what did you ask God for?

2. How did God answer your prayer? If it wasn't exactly what you asked for, how did you react?
3. What do you need to do in order to better accept God's grace in all situations?

Prayer

Heavenly Father, I pray that you draw each reader closer to you, help us to understand that you need to be the one in control of our lives. Help us to see that no matter what the thorn in our lives is, our relationship with you and the grace you provide is sufficient. Make it as clear as possible that in our time here we need to surrender our lives to you and remain in humble service to you, never doubting or flinching in our love for you. Show us that you have the power, wisdom, and knowledge that is needed to successfully live our lives for you. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.

Undeserved Love

Teresa Hempel

*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his
grace to me was not without effect...*

I Corinthians 15:10 (NIV)

Ken and I were dating when his Mom invited us to dinner. It was my first time meeting his family. I was a bit scared because they were Christians, and I was not. We arrived, and I was received with such love from Ken's Mom and Dad, his brother and wife, it was a love I did not know before.

It was my birthday, but I didn't expect any recognition because I did not think they even knew. Much to my surprise, Mom made a cake, and gifts were given to me. I could not contain my emotions. I cried with tears of joy! This love was so different from what I came from.

As time went on, Ken and I were attending a Lutheran church in Chicago. This is where I realized it was the Grace of God and His Holy Spirit working through Ken and his family with their love for me. See, I really never knew this kind of love existed. But this love has been constant in the 30+ years we have been married. It never ceases to amaze me, when I am feeling so worthless, and in the pit, God sends His love through

Ken and his family. In my mind, I do not deserve this love.

Many things in life will fail us. Friendships will come and go. Health can be an unsure thing. Riches and wealth will often remain just beyond the reach of our fingertips. Those we love pass on and leave a void in our hearts hard to be filled. However, there is one thing that every child of God possesses that can never fail, never end, never run out, and that is the Grace of God!!

Have you ever received a gift you did not deserve? This gift of love that was given, which I received, was of God's love. Grace is God showing His love to you and me even though we do not deserve it. Grace is God sacrificing His Son on the cross so that we can have eternal life. Grace is everything we do not deserve. A gift we are welcome to if we believe in our hearts, and confess with our lips that Jesus died a horrific death for us and was raised from the dead three days later, so that we may have life, life eternal, knowing Him now and living with Him forever.

Application

1. Have you ever received a gift you didn't deserve?
2. Can you think of a time when you have been touched by someone's grace in your life? Thank that person today and thank God for that person.
3. Thank God for His grace that gave us life through His Son, Jesus!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, Thank you so much for your Grace that is truly amazing and made known to us in so many ways! I thank you for your Love, it has taught me to love, please keep working in me to completion. Thank you for sending your Son to die, that we may live!

In His Holy Name Jesus Amen

*Amazing love,
How can it be?
That you, my King should die for me?*

Chris Tomlin, Amazing Love

Life after Grace

Josh LaGrange

Now the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ Jesus, will personally restore, establish, strengthen, and support you after you have suffered a little."

1 Peter 5:5-10 (HCSB)

There once was a man named George Thomas, a preacher in a small Texas town. One Sunday morning he came to the Church building carrying a rusty, bent, old bird cage, and set it by the pulpit. Eyebrows were raised and, as if in response, the Preacher began to speak. . . .

"I was walking through town yesterday when I saw a young boy coming toward me swinging this bird cage. On the bottom of the cage were three little wild birds, shivering with cold and fright. I stopped the lad and asked, "What do you have there, son?"

"Just some old birds," came the reply

"What are you going to do with them?" I asked.

"Take 'em home and have fun with 'em," he answered. "I'm gonna tease 'em and pull out their feathers to make 'em fight. I'm gonna have a real good time."

"But you'll get tired of those birds sooner or later. What will you do then?"

"Oh, I got some cats," said the little boy. "They like birds. I'll take 'em to them."

The preacher was silent for a moment. "How much do you want for those birds, son?"

"Huh?? !!! Why, you don't want them birds, mister. They're just plain old field birds. They don't sing. They ain't even pretty!"

"How much?" the preacher asked again.

The boy sized up the preacher as if he were crazy and said, "\$10?"

The preacher reached in his pocket and took out a ten dollar bill. He placed it in the boy's hand. In a flash, the boy was gone. The preacher picked up the cage and gently carried it to the end of the alley where there was a tree and a grassy spot. Setting the cage down, he opened the door, and by softly tapping the bars persuaded the birds out, setting them free. (Author unknown).

After reading this, I couldn't get these birds off my mind. I couldn't help but wonder and be troubled by what happens next. The author tells us that they were set free, but what happens next? Of course their story can't end there. Is it happy ever after? Or do they go and get

themselves trapped by another boy? Are they grateful that they are free? Do they ever wish they were back in the safety of the cage? Do they even realize what they have been saved from?

Moses leads the Israelites out of slavery to the Egyptians. They were enslaved for 430 years. It was all they knew. It was a horrible life, but all they knew. As he leads them out of slavery we picture dancing and laughter, tears of joy, hugging and kissing, the celebration of celebrations. Exodus does not tell us of any celebration as they walk out of slavery, but we have to imagine they were slaves for 430 years. No one was alive that ever remembered freedom. And here they were, just walking out the cage door and into the world, FREE.

We see immediately in scripture that Pharaoh, after realizing what just happened, chases them down, and as the Israelites come to the Red Sea they start to second guess this freedom. 'Why did you bring us here to die? We were better off being in slavery than dying here, now, free.' Even after God saves them and shows them that He is their God, we see them wandering and complaining about food and water. 'At least in slavery we had food. Now we will die out here without food.' We read the story of these people who saw God do the impossible, but they still disobeyed. They saw a God who was willing to do anything for them, and they still turned from Him when things got a little scary. We want to reach into our Bibles and shake these people, "Hey, God is with you! Just listen and obey! Don't you know what He saved you from? Don't you realize His love for you?"

Jesus gave His life so that we could be set free from the cage we were in. We were not held captive by an empire. Instead, we have been slaves to sin. It starts with an action, that turns into a lie, that fills you with guilt, that creates an anger in you, that causes an action, that fills you with shame, that causes another action, that makes you ...

Soon we find ourselves trapped in this labyrinth of sin. Every decision leads us deeper in. Every action causes us to become more and more lost. We are desperately searching for a way out, but without hope.

Jesus gave it all, for us. The cage door has opened. The walls to the labyrinth have collapsed. We don't have to do anything more than to just walk out. This is what we want. This is what we have been searching for. He gently taps the cage, we make our way to the door, and we hop out, FREE.

I can't help but wonder and be troubled by what happens next?

Is it happy ever after? Since I have been set free from the bondage of my sin, I have still cried. I have still been hurt. I have still suffered. Family has died and my heart was filled with sorrow. I have experienced those "everything that could go wrong has gone wrong" moments and my bank account has left me feeling in despair. I walked through the door, I'm out of the cage, I thought it was supposed to be great out here. If it isn't perfect, why did you set me free? Why did I even leave? At least in the cage when I hurt I had things that masked the pain. Did you free me so that I had to feel the pain?

'God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your care on Him, because He cares about you. Be serious! Be alert! Your adversary the Devil is prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for anyone he can devour. Resist him and be firm in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are being experienced by your fellow believers throughout the world. Now the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ Jesus, will personally restore, establish, strengthen, and support you after you have suffered a little.

1 Peter 5:5-10 (HCSB)

With or without slavery to sin, there will still be suffering. When we are in slavery to sin, Satan causes us pain because it is fun. When we have been set free from the slavery to our sin, like Pharaoh, Satan chases us down and attacks us. He is not attacking us for fun any longer, now he is upset and angry, and more than anything wants us back in that cage. He is prowling like a roaring lion and his attacks will hurt. We can resist him by standing firm in the faith, but his attacks will still hurt. They will cause us to second guess the freedom. That's what he wants. They will cause us to look for ways to mask the pain. That is what he wants. They will cause us to question if God really cares. That is what he wants.

“But the God of ALL grace will PERSONALLY restore, establish, strengthen, and support you after you have suffered a little.”

1 Peter 5:5 (HCSB)

Those birds just flew out of the cage. Unaware of what this man had done for them. Unaware of the pain that he saved them from. Maybe they looked back and blamed him for their sufferings outside the cage, not knowing what would have been. We will not know what would have been, because the God of all grace has personally set us free.

Application

1. “Be serious! Be alert!” Satan knows us. He knows where we are weak and where he can attack us. He wants us in that cage, a slave to sin. Where are you weakest? Where is he most likely to attack?
2. I can know that a rock is going to be thrown at my eye and it will do me no good if I am not prepared to defend myself. Knowing where the attack is from coming is great, but be prepared to “Resist him and be firm in the faith.” What can you do to reinforce the areas of your life where you are weakest? What barriers can you put up to protect against attacks?
3. *“...knowing that the same sufferings are being experienced by your fellow believers throughout the world.”* You are not alone in your suffering. You are not the only Christian whose weak spot is anger, greed, jealousy, guilt, lust, etc. You are not the only one being

attacked. Who has become great at defending that same area in their life that can help teach you how to fortify yours? Who, with your years of experience defending, can benefit from your support?

Prayer

Father, the God of all grace, we humbly give ourselves to you. Lord, if it is greater for you to live in us than to walk with us, how great then is the slavery that enslaves us from within? Let our hearts be free from the sins that enslave us, give us the wisdom to know and the humility to admit where we are weak. Give us the strength and courage to stand strong in our defense, and send us allies in the body that can stand with us. Lord, we know that our sufferings are inevitable, but we praise you for personally restoring us, personally establishing us, personally strengthening us, and personally supporting us. We will never understand what our sufferings would have been if Christ had not paid, with everything He had, for our freedom, but we pray that we never forget the time we spent in the cage and the way it felt when we took our first step out of it. Amen.

Forgiveness and Restoration

Kirsten Hertel

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.

Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV)

What an amazing verse! What an incredible statement; *“this is not from yourselves; it is the gift of God”*. God has given us the most amazing gift and it is just that, a GIFT! We do not have to *do* anything except repent of our sins, learn about God’s ways, obey His will for our lives and have faith that He is who He says He is and He will do what He says He will do! That might seem like a lot, and honestly, nobody ever said that those things would be easy, but once we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, giving us the power to take up our crosses daily and follow Him. There would be no salvation without Grace; we are saved BY GRACE, through faith. We could never measure up or do enough to deserve what God has for us if we have faith in Him. Grace, what an amazing gift in and of itself.

Here is my own personal story of GRACE:

I grew up in a very dysfunctional family. My mother was an alcoholic. Thankfully, I had (and still have) a wonderful father, who tried his best to “pick up the slack” and give us a good life, but obviously, he could never do enough to make up for our abusive mother. I have two older brothers, who were scarred from our childhood in many ways I’m sure, but speaking for myself, as the only girl and the baby of the family, I grew up with a hole in my heart the size of Texas. I needed love from a mother and I never got it.

I remember growing up and feeling terrible about myself. If my mother didn’t love me, why should I love myself and why would anyone else love me, for that matter. I remember being focused on boys at a very early age. I now understand that I just wanted someone to love me.

My father was a Lutheran pastor for the first few years of my life, but was forced to “retire” due to my mother’s alcoholism. We did grow up in the Lutheran church, but we never “got it” back then. We prayed at meals and at bedtime, but were never really taught and it was never modeled to us at home, that a personal relationship with Jesus was what being a Christian was all about. Once I was confirmed, I decided that I didn’t really want to go to church anymore and just became a “holiday Christian”, attending only at Christmas and Easter.

My adolescent years were filled with bad relationship after bad relationship, which included pre-marital sex. When I was young, I remember thinking, “When do you have sex?” Nobody ever told me! So I made up my own

rules. I thought that when you were with someone for a year, it was okay to have sex with them. As we all know, when you are 16, 17, 18, a year is like a lifetime. I figured if you were with someone for a year, you were probably going to get married. Boy was I naive! And there was one huge flaw in my thinking. I never figured out what happened after you were with someone for a year, you had sex with them, and then you DIDN'T get married! Now what rules apply? So as you can imagine, I was a very confused young lady with no direction and no relationship with God. Back then, I'm not even sure I believed there was a God!

So life went on, and when I was 22 years old I became pregnant. I thought I would keep the baby, but then realized that since I had just started a new job and my cobra had just expired from my old job, I was without health insurance. I basically had no money and was living with my Dad in a two-bedroom apartment. I felt sick to my stomach thinking about the financial aspects of being a mother. How in the world would I support a child and take care of it in the way that he or she deserved!? So instead of considering adoption, I decided that I would have an abortion. One thing that is still hard for me to deal with is the fact that I had waited until the very last minute to make this decision. I was about 13 weeks along and back then, if I had waited much longer, I would not have been able to get an abortion, so I went ahead and did it.

My Dad took me to the clinic. I'll never forget sitting in the waiting room with a bunch of other girls. I overheard two girls talking. The one asked if the other

was nervous and when she said yes, the one proceeded to tell her that it's no big deal, she'd done it many times before. I remember thinking, "what am I doing?" But I also remember feeling like I had no choice. They performed an ultra-sound prior to doing the actual abortion, and I remember wanting to just get it over with. The waiting was torture. Looking back, I wish they would have shown me the baby moving around on the ultrasound screen. Maybe that would have stopped me. They didn't. I was taken into a room and strapped onto a bed. I remember I was freezing and I was shaking uncontrollably. They started an IV and told me to start counting backwards from 10. I think I got to 7 and that is all I remember, until I woke up. When I awoke, I remember it being the strangest and most sickening feeling ever. I thought "I was just pregnant. There was a baby inside of me when I walked in here a couple of hours ago, and now I'm not pregnant anymore." I didn't really think about the baby. I couldn't. I went home and slept and slept some more. I accepted what I had done and I went on with my life.

Years later, after becoming a Christian in my late twenties, I had a dream about my baby. I felt like God had told me that my baby was a girl. I decided to give my baby a name, and the name I chose was GRACE. I know that God forgives me for what I did. I have forgiven myself, but that doesn't change the reality of what I did and the fact that I have to live with that reality for the rest of my life. I thank God that I will have the chance to meet my baby in heaven and I look forward to that day. I grieve over the loss of my child, at my own hands. It makes me sick to think about, but at the same

time, because of God's amazing grace, He has wiped my slate clean. I am forgiven.

When I started out writing for this year's Easter devotional, I found the wonderful verse above relating to grace and then I sat, not knowing what in the world I would write. Do I just write about God's grace, do I share some personal story; I had no idea what to write about. Then, as I stared at the word "GRACE", God spoke to me and I knew exactly what I was to write about.

My baby in heaven is named Grace. I never got to meet her this side of heaven, I never got to hold her, but because of God's grace, I will get to do those things and spend eternity with her and for that, I am eternally grateful. God's grace is sufficient. God's grace is a gift! Have you accepted it?

Applying to Your Life

1. Do you have a spiritual check-list? Do you feel that in order to be a "good Christian" you have to do x, y and z?
2. Is your walk with God more about DOING, or is it more about BEING?
3. God does not want us to have a spiritual check-list. He does want us to help others and serve, but not just to check it off our list, but because we feel led to do so and we do it with love in our hearts.

4. Your walk with God should NOT be about DOING, it should be about BEING! Being a person filled with the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control of God – and all of those things overflow from our hearts onto those around us. We shouldn't read our Bible because we think that is what we "should" be doing. We should read our Bible because we desire to learn more about God and to know Him more intimately.

Prayer

Lord, I pray for our church family this Easter. I know that I am not the only one with a story like this. I know there are many who have hurts and many are hurts who have not been healed. Father God, I pray that you would help those who need healing, to open their hearts to you and ask for your healing power. Help them to forgive themselves, just as you have forgiven them. I pray that we would be REAL with each other and stop wearing the masks. We are one body, help us to encourage each other so we can grow and love each other the way you intended. I pray for healing, for guidance and for complete surrender to your will. Thank you for your gift of grace. Lord, help us to see that it is a gift.

In your precious son's name, Amen

Erasure

Chuck Boone

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

II Corinthians 3:17-18 (NIV)

Real artists use erasers—and the more talented they are, the more often they use an eraser. That's not what most people expect. We often assume that the best artists always put down the right mark exactly as it should be ... "perfect".

That assumption is based in a misunderstanding. We assume that erasers remove mistakes. Erasers don't remove mistakes, they put light into darkness. On a crisp white sheet of paper, a charcoal drawing is an elegant thing. But a single erasure spoils the clean, clear contrast of black on white. It looks like a smudge and no matter how many times the eraser is scrubbed across the paper, a smudge will remain. So it was with the first sin. So it is with guilt. No matter how hard we try, we can't clean up what we've done and make the world or ourselves perfect.

However, if the paper is covered in charcoal, if darkness is the norm, the eraser replaces darkness with light--it becomes a tool of grace. The darkness doesn't completely disappear—a smudge always remains as a trace of what the drawing has been. But the new light becomes warm, soft, and thus attractive. The eraser doesn't remove darkness; it transforms the darkness into light.

So it is with the world—and with each of us. We allow darkness to reign. Our lives are a muddied and dense mess. When we repent, the Holy Spirit enters us and like a great eraser, scrubs at our lives. What we were never really disappears, but it is transformed into something warm, inviting to those lost in a similar darkness.

When God erases our sin, He does not alter the past. Instead, He alters appearance of our future in a darkened world. He uses what was, to create what will be ... rather than reach for a clean sheet of paper.

So the drunkard becomes sober and affords a way out of drunkenness to those who are too ashamed to turn to a “perfect” Christian. Likewise, the fornicator becomes chaste and offers a safe confessional to those with similar struggles. The comparisons are endless.

If the eraser removed all of the dark marks, the drawing would be ... white. The paper would be blank and uninviting.

Remember the Samaritan woman at the well? Her five husbands and her sinful lifestyle were forgiven, but the

memory of these still remained when she returned to her people. Her story, including her history, was the reason many Samaritans were willing to listen to Jesus and believe in Him. (see John 4)

Our past, our failings, become our testimony by their erasure. Those shadowy things that once defined us will always do so to some extent. But the marks of light in our darkness gradually become our new identity—we are soon defined by the transformation of our darkness and not by the obliteration of it. Our lives become a shadow of things to come.

Paul used that phrase in Colossians and in Hebrews in describing the law and the tabernacle as analogies to the new kingdom. Our lives become an analogy to God's judgment in the end. If we embrace the notion that all is forgiven and we are made whole in Him, we should have no trouble acknowledging our sins. That willingness to acknowledge our sins becomes the testimony that brings others to believe that God can use broken people to build the Kingdom—that the application process for the Christian faith does not require a clean record.

That's why we call forgiveness an act of grace. We don't deserve it--nobody does. Nevertheless, it is ours by divine erasure.

Application

1. Do you believe *in* Jesus Christ as your savior? Have you come to trust his ways and His will? Are you ready to erase whatever needs erasing? "Ask and it will be given to you;..." Matthew 7:7 NIV)

2. Have you written your testimony? Do so in three versions—under 1 minute, 5 minutes, and 20 minutes in length.
3. Have a meal separately with at least 5 non-believers in the next five weeks. (Hey, you all have to eat anyway...)
4. Give your testimony to three of those non-believers in the next five months. (Build a relationship first—let them see you as transformed before explaining how it happened).

Prayer

God, forgive me for denying you by hiding my sinful nature. Help me to be an inviting light in darkness. Teach me to use my failures and my transformed nature as a call to faith for others. Never let me forget what has been done to me and for me—that my perfection is not of my own strength, but by your action in my heart. Amen.

Grace and Peace

Karla Findley

*Grace and peace to you from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ
Philemon 1:3 (NIV)*

I am wandering through a tough time with my daughter's coach. As parents we sit on the sideline, our stomachs in knots. We complain to each other. We suffer together. We cannot talk directly to the coach. Some parents were talking litigation yesterday. It's bad. Watching the girls play and interact with the coach is agony for us.

Then I woke up this morning and found this status on Facebook:

*"Believe the best about people.
Pray for their short comings.
You are not the standard.
We all need grace." ~ [Lecrae](#)*

I was convicted. Lecrae's Facebook status is not the standard by which I live, but he provoked me to remember some things that God, who is my Standard, has to say.

I contemplate whether I believe the best about the coach in every situation. Do I believe that she knows the sport? Do I believe that she has some skill? Do I believe that the people who chose to put her in that position have any brains? Do I believe that she is learning to coach, just like my daughter is learning to play? Or do I focus on only the negative things, ignoring some of the obvious positives? (See Matthew 7:1, 7:12)

Do I pray for her? Or do I spend ALL of my time commenting on her short comings without taking them to the God who can either fix them or help me accept them? Even if I don't know specifics to pray for, I certainly can pray for the things that I see as shortcomings. Incidentally, I believe that as I pray for her, God will change my heart. It is very difficult to pray to the Creator and complain about His creation. Eventually, I may find out how it works into His plan. He does not create mistakes. (Matthew 5:4, Psalm 37:4)

His plan. Oh, how I struggle with His plan. So many times I tell Him MY plan and expect Him to concur. I fail to give Him the proper authority in my life. I want to make the rules and the standards by which everyone else should live. And over and over again, He cautions me not to do that. He warns me not to think too highly of myself. He is my Standard, I am not His. And by extension, I am not to be the standard for anyone else. (See Romans 12:3, Philippians 2:3. Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

The final statement of Lecrae's quote is "We all need grace". That statement reminds me that even the coach needs grace because even I need grace. I am overwhelmed with God's grace, extended to me when I

don't deserve it. As I think about that, it compels me to extend grace to others in my life as well. (See Ephesians 4:7, Romans 3:24)

But in all of this talk about grace, God's grace and the grace I should extend to the coach, an interesting correlation came to light. I have never thought about grace and peace being so tightly knit. Paul says it in Colossians 1:2, 2 Thessalonians 1:2, and Philemon 1:3. Peter say it in 2 Peter 1:2. And John says it in 2 John 1:3. Grace and Peace. Grace and Peace to you. Grace and Peace from God.

Grace and Peace. Maybe, just maybe, if I accept God's grace and extend it, I will have peace. If I can extend grace to the coach, maybe I can sit on the bleachers in peace. My stomach will not be in knots. Because I am looking for the best in her, praying for her and aware I am not her standard, I will have peace. I will be able to enjoy the game and the team. Grace and Peace be with me.

Application

1. Who is a difficult person in your life; someone who causes you much anguish, someone who you seem to constantly be "griping" about? Or who is someone in your life that your family would say you have a problem with? (Just write initials or code name)
2. Do you see a correlation between extending grace to that person and having a peaceful relationship with that person?

3. If you desire peace, and peace comes through extending grace, what specific action can you take to extend grace and therefore claim peace?

Prayer

Dear Lord, There are some tough people in my life. I complain. I cut them down. I don't support them. I accuse them. I'm pretty sure they do it on purpose. Yet, I do the same sort of things to you, and you shower me with grace. I am so thankful for the peace that I have in you. Teach me to extend the same grace to others that I have in you. By doing that, let me experience the peace that you promise. Grace and Peace be mine through You, Amen.

Celebrate the Grace of Easter!

Ben Pauley

"...it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast."

Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV)

When I was a youngster, Easter was a powerful day. We spent weeks building up to it. It wasn't just about the bunnies and candy baskets. It was the year's main event at our church. We saved pennies in our little Easter banks. We invited everyone we knew who wasn't a Sunday regular to make Easter Sunday the one time they did attend. It was the time of the year to buy new church clothes. A time for Sunrise Service and singing "Up from the grave He arose!" A time for a big family dinner.

Easter and Christmas were the two big events at church every year. It is true that it was easy to be distracted by toys, parties and Santa Claus at Christmas. Even so, we always observed the true meaning of Christmas. Christmas was the day to rejoice in God's gift to mankind, and to celebrate the baby Jesus' arrival on earth. The Christmas story was pretty easy for me to understand as a child.

Easter was different. I understood the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, but I couldn't come to a full appreciation for Easter from a spiritual standpoint until I got a little older. As we grow and mature in the faith we come to know that Easter takes the Christmas story and completes it. Easter is about hope. Easter is about grace. In fact, Easter is the climax of the story of God's grace, written before time began as described in this scripture:

"This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." (2 Timothy. 1:9-10).

But what has happened to Easter? Every year Easter has a smaller presence in our society. There just doesn't seem to be the energy and excitement that was there a generation ago. Every year, more of those who grew up just like me have simply stopped observing the holiday like they did when they were young. Are we too busy? Is it because we are an increasingly secular society? Or is it that more and more Americans just feel they have outgrown Easter?

These questions were asked 150 years ago by President Abraham Lincoln. I've always been interested in reading about our 16th president. In one of my readings, I ran across something significant he did during the week leading up to Easter 1863. Lincoln was facing some of the biggest challenges in American history. The nation's future was uncertain. The Civil War

was threatening the very foundation of America. Americans were killing each other by the hundreds of thousands. Lincoln was being personally attacked from all sides. In this dark time in American history, both the North and the South claimed to have God on their side.

In Lincoln's point of view, America had become proud and obstinate. Looking to God for help, on March 30, 1863, he proclaimed April 30, 1863 as a national day of fasting and prayer. Below is an excerpt from that proclamation.

"We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us! (emphasis mine) It behooves us then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness."

Lincoln's assessment of the nation was that it no longer needed to pray, and in fact felt that it was above the need for God's grace! Prior to the Civil War, America had done well, growing from a colony to a strong and

prosperous nation in about 150 years. In the 150 years since the Civil War, America has continued to do incredibly well, developing into the most powerful and prosperous nation in the history of the world. But in a generation or two our attitude toward God as a nation has changed dramatically. We've done well, but perhaps so well that, as Lincoln said, we have become "*... too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace...*"

Above the need for grace puts us outside the safety of God's love. Too proud to pray makes us too foolish to realize that, "*...it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.*" (Ephesians 2:8-9 NIV) We would be better off humbled and asking for God's grace than to be exalted and feel above the need for grace.

What a shame if our attitude towards God's grace is so nonchalant. Proof of his grace is abounding around us every day, manifested in little things that make us smile and in incredible and awesome ways that fill us with wonder. And especially on Easter, God's gift of grace seems so very big. Jesus fulfilled His mission. He lived, taught, died in our place, and overcame death that we might have life. Because of Easter, the Author of grace continues to live among us.

So let's bring back Easter! --Easter eggs optional. Make it a tradition to tell the Easter story and to teach our children about grace. Ignite the Easter flame that burned in generations past, and renew our passion for the story of God's grace personified in Christ Jesus.

Let's humble ourselves and prayerfully acknowledge that it is by God's grace that we have the honor of living in and serving our God in a free nation. And it is through grace that we who were once dead can live.

Application

1. Is celebrating "secular Easter" a bad thing? Any Easter discussion is a great opportunity to let others know about Easter from your point of view. Make it a point to think of the word "grace" every time you hear the word "Easter."
2. How is God showing grace to you? Make a list for each day of one week. At the top of each day, write, *"It is by God's grace that I am saved. I did nothing to deserve it."* Then underneath this statement make a few notes of God's grace manifested to you in everyday things. Start each note with "I am thankful for God's grace in..." for example, a prayer answered, or healthy children, or a good friend.
3. Reflect on how being *"...too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace"* could be an unintended attitude in your life.

Prayer

Father, thank you for your many, many blessings. You have been good to our nation. You have been good to us. May we never become too independent or too proud to acknowledge your abundant grace. Thank you

for revealing your grace plan to us through Jesus, our risen Savior. Amen.

Grace in Discipline

Ruth Anne Boone

“Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness.”

Hebrews 12:10 (NIV)

“NO! I will NOT do that!!”

“You will do as I say, or you’ll get the consequences for your actions.”

How often have we heard this in our homes, or something similar to it? The child absolutely does not want to do what he is told, and of course, also doesn’t want the consequences when he decides to disobey.

Philip is a hugger and a lover. He enjoys snuggling, hugging, kissing, and reading books together. Jonny also enjoys these things, but he longs to be rocked on my lap in the big, soft rocker while I sing to him, as I used to by the hour when he was a baby. It is a rare treat for my big 8-year old son. These things feel like love, and they are some of the many expressions of love I bestow on my boys.

During the first 4-5 years of child-rearing, I most often had the problem of wanting the snuggles with my boys,

but not wanting to give them discipline. I spoke with them sharply when they disobeyed, but a one-year old is not going to get the message simply by speaking the words to him. I called it being too generous with grace.

But was it grace?

There was a time in my life, a very short time, when I walked away from God. I claimed I still loved Him, still tried to get to church when I could, but my lifestyle did not show a love for God. For a summer, I lived in a 3-bedroom “party pad” with a couple of people I called friends at the time. I drank heavily, bummed cigarettes every day, and occasionally slept on a neighbor’s couch when one of my roommates was too drunk and I was afraid of him.

Did God treat me like a child who needed discipline? Yes, but not in the way you would think. When the prodigal son walked away with half of the family fortune and spent it on drink and wild living, his father let him go, but never stopped loving him or watching and waiting for him to return. The consequences for the son’s sinful behavior were brought on by himself. He ran out of money. He lost all of his so-called friends. He had nowhere to sleep and no food to eat. But the father never stopped loving him or waiting for his return. This is grace.

Did God discipline me for my behavior? Yes, but not as you would a young child. I became afraid of the very people I thought of as friends. I began to loath my life. I longed for safety. I longed for true friendship and true

love. And I knew I wouldn't get these things where I was.

So I moved out. But I had to be rescued. I owed my roommate money for rent. My dad willingly supplied the check. I needed a truck to move my things. A young Christian guy renting from Mom and Dad for a few months supplied the truck and helped me move out while my roommates were at work. I left the key and the check on Mike's dresser, and I hightailed it out of there.

Back at home, my bedroom was being used by a young woman who had moved to the area and was engaged to one of the guys at church. With gratitude in my heart, I moved into the basement rec room, put a sheet up on the doorframe, and slept among boxes and a ping pong table. I felt safe for the first time in months. I quit drinking, quit smoking, went back to church, and was welcome with open arms by the family who really did love me. (They welcomed me even when I was the prodigal come for a visit.)

This was grace. But grace started in the discipline in my heart by the Lord of my heart. It started by the conviction of the Holy Spirit in my inner spirit. And my actions away from God showed how dark my heart was without the washing of my sins whiter than snow that is only made possible through Christ's death on the cross. When we don't know how dark our hearts really are, we cannot possibly understand that we need a Savior, that we need His grace. I had trusted in Jesus as my Savior since I was a young child, but until I walked away from Him, I didn't clearly see how sinful I was. I had always

been the good little girl, and didn't see the sin until I couldn't ignore it.

So even in the midst of sin, God uses it to show us how much we need Him in our lives, and if we are truly seeking Him, we will come to a place of repentance, a place where we loath that sin so much that we turn 180 degrees around and run the other way straight into that never-ending love of God. And it is in the act of true repentance that our Savior also becomes our Lord, the one to whom we surrender everything we have, everything we are, to the only one who can offer us true grace.

Proverbs 3:11-12 says, *“My son, do not despise the Lord’s discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.”*(NIV)

Who among us delights in the discipline of the Lord? Yet, if we call ourselves children of God, and claim Him as our Father, we also ought to willingly submit to His discipline, since the very act of discipline is grace.

Now, it is not only in the huge, ugly sins that are so obvious we call them rebellion that our hearts wander, and we sin. It is often in the little, everyday things we do, think and say that we sin. How often do our words sting harder than we intended, and a child or a spouse or a friend winces? How often do we insist on kindness in the home, yet we are guilty of unkindness ourselves? How often do we think about things we'd like to have, and spend too much time thinking about how great it would be.... How often do we waste our time under the guise of

research, and it simply becomes a way to avoid doing the things we ought to be doing? How often do we spend time on Facebook, yet don't pick up the phone to call a hurting friend? How often do we see the shortcomings of our family members, and the people around us, yet fail to see our own?

In Romans 6:1-2 Paul says, *"What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?"*(NIV)

But praise God, for His grace is sufficient for us, and as we daily run to Him and ask forgiveness for sin, and endure His discipline, His grace abounds. And as we see and understand His grace in our lives, we can gently, and even joyfully, share that love with those who might not know Him yet. Perhaps, through the grace given us, we can introduce someone to God Himself, who loves us with a never-ending love.

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Romans 8: 38-39 (NIV)

Application

1. Do you run away from God when you've done something wrong? Today, when you mess up, run to

Him instead, and ask for forgiveness. God will help you to make changes in your life if you need Him to.

2. Do you think God is disciplining you for something you have done? Don't resent Him for it. Rather, rejoice that He loves you as a father loves a child. And learn the lessons He has for you.
3. Learn to listen to the Holy Spirit in your life. He is there to comfort, yes, but also to guide and direct and convict. When we listen to the direction of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we are more likely to avoid sin, and thus, discipline.
4. Rest in God's grace today, even if it's an uncomfortable grace.

Prayer

Dear Father, please forgive me for the things I have done wrong today. Thank you for loving me so much that you discipline me when I am outside of your will. Help me to grow closer and closer to You so that I recognize the sin in my life quicker, and I do something about it faster. Thank you for loving me as a father loves his child. Help me to become more and more like you. Amen.

All of Grace

Dan Fields

*In him we have redemption through his blood,
the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the
riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with
all wisdom and understanding.*

Ephesians 1:7-8(NIV)

When I first received the letter inviting me to contribute to this year's annual collection of Easter devotionals, I was pleased to be invited. As I read further and found that the theme this year would be "Meditations of Grace" I felt a sense of comfort--first from the thought that it would be an excellent and appropriate theme for Easter and secondly from the thought that writing my part should be a fairly easy task to accomplish. After all...I've been writing weekly sermons for over forty years. A short devotional on grace--not to worry.

I soon lost sight of the assignment, as I officially entered into semi-retirement and faced a host of transitional responsibilities that required my time and attention. When I finally found the time (i.e., actually I had to discipline my schedule better...perhaps I should also write a devotional on the sin of laziness and procrastination...a later project) I realized what I should

have realized with the invitational email. The topic of grace is far too deep and important to be approached as an "easy" task.

From the beginning of the Bible to the end, it is filled with the message of "God's unmerited favor"--a simple but adequate definition of grace. And the Easter message of Scripture is especially all of grace. At every step and every point of the Biblical Easter record--Jesus' arrest, His torturous and humiliating beating, His trial by Pilate, His crucifixion, His burial, and finally His resurrection--God's love-driven, mercy-motivated, acts of "unmerited favor" are connected and tied together.

All that Jesus suffered and endured that last week was done for people--that's you and me--who did not deserve it. It was all a gift of lavish grace. Paul summarizes it this way: *In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.* (Ephesians 1:7-8, NIV)

Easter should be a gigantic reminder of how the riches of God's grace have been lavished upon us--a time to better understand the redemptive power of grace. But the power of grace is not only redemptive--opening the door of salvation to us and freeing us from the penalty and power of sin. Grace is also transformational.

In our living room, in the cabinets on both sides of our television, Candy has artistically displayed various selections of family pictures and favorite books. Several of those books are about God's grace. One of those books, written by Jerry Bridges, is titled Transformational

Grace. In his well-written book, Bridges reminds us that we are not only saved by grace, we are also daily empowered to live out our Christian lives in and through the power of grace.

In other words, the experience and power of God's grace is not simply something associated with that initial step of submission and salvation that we must each take. Grace is a continuing and dynamic experience and power that leads us into and through the ongoing process of Christ-like transformation.

So this Easter season, as your mind is turned to the core events of the gospel message--Jesus death, burial, and resurrection--may it also see and hear the melody of grace that is revealed so clearly in these events. And this is also an excellent time to make sure that you are allowing God's saving grace to continue its transformational work in your life as well. For it is all of grace!

Application

1. What is it that unleashes and actualizes the power of God's grace in our lives?
2. What is essential for both the saving power of grace and the transforming power of grace to have its full impact? Consider Jonah 2:8; Romans 5:1,2; 6:14; Galatians 5:4; and James 4:6.
3. In what ways has God given you undeserved grace?

4. How is God's grace transforming your life?

Prayer

Dear Lord, we thank you for your grace in our lives. The world tells us that we deserve everything and more, but we know that we do not deserve this grace that you have given us. Help us to live a life that shows the world that your love and your grace is more important than anything else. Thank you for your forgiveness when we fall far short of that undeserved grace. Amen

Epilogue

*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your
spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.*

Galatians 6:18 (NIV)