

Our Chapter in the Story of Grace
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Let's start by reading a passage of Scripture that we'll come back to later. So I'll encourage you to turn with me and kinda keep this place marked in your Bible. It's found in Luke 24...only gonna read a few short verses here. Begin at verse 44 of chapter 24. Jesus has met with His disciples after He's risen from the dead. He's verified to them that He is, in fact, alive. And shortly thereafter He's going to ascend into heaven. But this is one of His contact times with them, where He explains to 'em what is happening now. And He says this...He said to them in verse 44 of Luke 24

“These are My words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of My Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”

Luke 24:44-49

The Bible tells a story, a story of God's redemptive grace. From beginning to end it's one comprehensive story. It begins with a good creation gone bad. It ends with a new creation forever good. It's a story of God's answering to man's sin with an even greater grace. At the center of that story that we've talked about these past number of weeks is an event that took place two thousand years ago when, at the cross in Jerusalem, the righteousness of God and the love of God came together in one person named Jesus. And because of who He is and what He did on that cross, He released God's grace for all those who would believe. That's the centerpiece; that's the pivotal moment. That's the point in time when the final outcomes are determined. And it was set that this story will end well. And we have spent the past number of weeks looking at that event.

Which now raises a question—what's next? What's the next chapter after the cross in God's story of grace? And that's what we're going to begin to address today and in the weeks that follow. And we're gonna spend some time in this. We're gonna look at it carefully, because the next chapter in the story of God's grace after the cross is our story. This is the point in the story of God's grace where we become a part of things. You see, the story of God's grace is written from beginning to end, but it is yet to be lived from beginning to end. There's elements of that story yet to be lived, and one of those elements is our chapter, our part in the story.

We're gonna be looking at that over the next couple of weeks. Today we're gonna set a foundation that will set the direction of the coming weeks. And we're gonna try to accomplish a couple things today. Number one is...my intent and my desire is by the time we're done you will have a focused clarity when it comes to what this time, this chapter in the story of God's grace, is about. With all the other things going on, and all all the things happening in human history, all the things going on in our lives, what is God doing with respect to His work of grace in human history? And I want you to be very clear and very focused about that by the time we're done. Secondly, my desire is that you'll walk away from here today confident about your place in the story, confident about your role in the chapter being written right now in the story of God's grace. That's our target today.

We're gonna go through three steps. First of all I'm gonna kind of explain things. I'm gonna give perspective and talk about this chapter of God's grace. Then I'm gonna take us into a passage of Scripture, the one we just read, to make sure you recognize that what I'm saying is rooted in what Jesus said. And then, lastly, we're gonna come back and we're gonna deal with that confidence issue, of how can we be confident as we live in this chapter of God's grace. We'll close with a simple step of action. That's where we're headed today.

So let's start with the explanation point, the starting point of 'what is this chapter of God's grace about?' You know how oftentimes a book will have Chapter 10, and underneath it it'll have a chapter heading, chapter title, so you know what this chapter is going to be about. If I was to put a heading to this chapter in God's grace, if I was to put a title to what happens after the cross, I would simply put “God's Grace Extended”. God's grace extended. You see, the Old Testament covers a story of God's grace promised through one man, a promise given to Abraham that one

of his descendants would rise up among a chosen people living in a holy land, a man raised up in the line of King David, who would become a great and awesome king, a king who would set all things right, including human hearts. That was the promise of grace that unfolds in the Old Testament. Jesus came in fulfillment of that promise. And at the cross He released the grace promised to all men. Now we're into our chapter. The grace promised, the grace released, is now being extended to all. That's a general statement, and we need to be more specific than that. It's one thing to simply say that God's grace is being extended. It's another thing to follow up and say, "But how?" And so I want you to track very carefully here, because I'm gonna state it very precisely.

In this chapter of God's grace, our chapter, the one we live in, which started after the cross and will run 'til our Lord's return, this chapter which we're a part of, God's grace is being extended through our proclamation of repentance and forgiveness in Jesus' name. Let me repeat that. In this chapter of God's grace, His grace is being extended through our proclamation of repentance and forgiveness in Jesus' name. In other words, what's happening right now is God's people, you and I and the generations before us, have [been] called to be witness to the reality that what Jesus did on that cross makes repentance and forgiveness possible for anyone; that those who have rejected God's rule in their lives, who have chosen to go their own way, can turn towards God—in Jesus—and be met with forgiveness, with His favor and grace, forever. We speak of Jesus and we tell people, "You can turn and find grace."

I'll give you a text that goes with that, and it's the one we read earlier, so I'll ask you to turn back in your Bibles to that passage in Luke. And you'll see that that's exactly what Jesus was telling His followers. He has proven to them that He is alive. He's even eaten a fish so they know that it's not a ghost that they're talking to. And then prior to His ascension there's a number of times...His return to heaven...there's a number of times He will speak to His disciples and explain, 'Ok, this is what's gonna happen now.' And this is one of those times, and He will explain it very precisely, very carefully. And so I want you to read through this passage with me. He says to them, beginning in verse 44

"These are My words that I spoke to you while I was still with you..."

'...these things about Me coming back from the dead, and all that; I told you about these when I was with you...'

"...that everything written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."

'Everything in that Old Testament must come to pass. It's God's word, it's His plan, it's what He said will be, and it will be.'

And then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures...

He gave them a clarity, an understanding of what the story is all from start to end. And He goes this way; He says to them

"Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead..."

That is the turning point. Everything built to that point, the Christ suffering for our sins and being raised from the dead. And now the next statement. He says *"...and that..."* In other words, there's something to follow that. And this is what follows Christ's death and resurrection. This is the next step in God's plan. This is the next chapter in the story of grace.

"...and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."

The word 'proclaimed' is a really strong word of affirmation. It's not an instructional task; it is not an informational task; it is not necessarily an invitation task. It is simply announcing to people 'Guess what? You can turn and be met with forgiveness.' It's like an announcement of amnesty in a country that has rebelled against its ruler, and suddenly the message goes out that you can turn from going your own way and rejecting the rule of God. You can turn towards Him in Jesus and be met with forgiveness, and enjoy His grace forever and ever, not matter what sin there has been...a forgiveness that is perfect, complete, forever and ever.

He adds to that statement. The proclamation is gonna begin from Jerusalem, it's gonna go out to all the nations, and He says to that small group of disciples at that point

“You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of My Father upon you.”

The Holy Spirit. But he says

“Stay in the city until you are clothed with power [that Spirit comes upon you] from on high.”

That's Jesus outlining the chapter we live in right now, the proclamation of repentance and forgiveness, the opportunity for anyone, everywhere, to turn and find forgiveness in His name.

We're right, I believe, and confirmed in our understanding of that paragraph when we go on in the book of Acts, and we see exactly what began to happen. And what we find happening is that yes, exactly that, the Spirit of God came upon God's people and they began to witness to the reality of Jesus crucified, raised from the dead; and they began to announce to people 'this is an opportunity to turn from your ways and repent, and find forgiveness and enjoy God's grace forever.' And that initial foundation of witnesses, the apostles, became a community of witness that has gone right on down to the present day in this church and other churches around the world. That's the chapter of grace we're living. And no matter what else goes on, no matter what else happens, that's what God is accomplishing...grace being extended through our proclamation of repentance and forgiveness.

Now let's deal with the confidence question. It that's what's happening, what I find among Christians oftentimes is two things. When I explain this is God's plan, this is what He's doin', this is what our chapter in history is about, I'll tend to find two reactions. One...disappointment. “Hey, I wanna do the Moses thing! I wanna part the seas and walk across on dry land!” Or “I wanna do the Joshua thing around the walls of Jericho and watch 'em come tumbling down!” Or “I wanna be Gideon routing the Midianites” or “Debra gathering the Israelites to go against Moab!” “I wanna be like David takin' on Goliath!” “I wanna be Elijah calling down fire from heaven!” “I really don't wanna be a messenger. Give me a sword to swing, not a story to tell.” So yes, there's at times a disappointment. We usually get over that.

The bigger challenge, I find, is there's a sense of doubt. We don't doubt the message. We're convinced of the reality. We believe Jesus died for us and we, ourselves, have repented and found forgiveness; but we have some doubts 1) about the message, and 2) about us as messengers. The doubts about the message, again, are not about whether it's true or not; it's whether anybody will listen to it. I mean, think about this message. Number one, it's not a message the world finds very profound. Take the wisest philosophers throughout the century, the most profound intellectuals of our day, and tell them to tell us about God, and they would never come up with this story. This is not the theological structure of the wise and the profound and the intellectual. It's a story.

Number two, it's not a very powerful one. I mean, 'Larry, if you could call down lightning right now, **BOOM!** strike that pole over there, then I would believe what you...that's a message of power!' Or 'Larry, if you could raise someone from the dead, then we'd know Yes, there's something to this.' 'Larry, if you could levitate from the ground as you talk then we'd know Yes, there's something here.' 'Larry, show us some power!' This is not a message of power. In our culture, this is not a message of power. I mean, I purposely shut down the PowerPoint today...I purposely just kind of stayed still in the middle of the stage, because I wanna emphasize when the world asks us to show 'em something, this is all we've got to show, is an ancient book...an ancient book. That's like trying to sell a rotary phone in an iMac® store. It doesn't light up. It doesn't go on the internet.

But even worse, our culture not only doesn't find this message profound, doesn't find this message powerful...it's not, in our world's eyes, a positive message. And any communicator in our culture, in our time, will tell us the best thing you can do is tell someone, if you're trying to convince 'em, that they're wrong and they're sinners and they need forgiveness. And when we tell people that there's opportunity for repentance and forgiveness, we're implicitly saying that they are sinners and they are wrong. And that is not heard as a positive message. Now, we can make it a little different. We can begin with “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” But ultimately, when we get to the bottom line, our statement is there's repentance and forgiveness, which implies you're a sinner and you need to change. And in our culture you don't say that. And so we look at this message and we wonder who would ever listen.

I could reply and say yes, wait a minute, it is profound. And if you understand this story and spend time in it you'll discover that it goes far beyond what the wisest and the greatest can ever come up with in terms of a scheme of things, and understanding of God and His reality. There's so much mystery here and wonder here that it takes us far beyond what men could ever come up with, and create, and imagine. I could say that yes, there is a power to this message, an unbelievable power. It's what Joel sang about in his song, that there's a power of God unto

salvation, that there is a power to this message that ignites faith in people's hearts, that infuses them with hope, and breaks the stranglehold of our self-absorption, and breaks their hearts loose to care about others and to care about God. *This is a powerful message that changes people at the very core of their being!*

And I could also say this is the most positive of all messages if you're a sinner. If you're getting life right, and you don't really need Jesus, then I grant you this message is not for you. But if you're a sinner and you know you just can't get things right with God, then this is the most glorious, positive promise you could ever have. You can change direction toward God in Jesus, and be met with forgiveness, and enjoy His grace forever.

It is profound, it is powerful, it is positive, and I know...*I know*...there are people who hear it and respond to it. The first time it was ever preached, that message was ever preached, was in the city of Jerusalem days after Jesus had been crucified and rose from the dead. The essence of the message preached by the Apostle Peter in the streets of Jerusalem, the very place where Jesus had been crucified, among the very people who had crucified Him...the essence of the message as Jesus [should be Peter] looked at the people in Jerusalem and said, 'Guess what? You killed the Messiah. You made a big mistake. You've sinned.' And three thousand people stepped forward and said, 'We repent. God have mercy.'

And through church history there've been people who've responded to this message, over and over again, right up to the present day. Sometimes it's in large groups, sometimes it's just one person in a whole town might respond; but people respond. It's exactly what Jesus said would happen in the first parable He ever taught. He described how the message of the Gospel would spread, and He said very simply it's like sending seed out, as a farmer, on the ground. And some of it lands on hard soil and it's not gonna bear fruit. Some of it lands on rocky soil and it's received, and people kinda like it, but they don't have any depth; and as soon as it gets hard they forget it. Or some of it lands on lives of people that are very excited about it; they think this is great, and they jump on it, they grab onto it, but then pretty soon they're distracted by the worries, or they're distracted by the pleasures or other things that crowd into their lives. And pretty soon the seed doesn't bear fruit. But He says there will be people who, when they hear this message, it will sink deep into their hearts. They will receive it and they will bear fruit. And that's the way it's been, 'cause this message is alive. And there are people who hear it and are forever changed.

You say, 'Ok, Larry, the message...alright. I have more confidence in it, but not me as a messenger. No way.' Number one...'I'm not prepared. I'm not ready to start explaining all this to people'. Number two is 'I'm not a preacher. I'm not a preacher.' And number three, and this is a thing that we don't often admit to...number three is 'I really don't care that much. Now I know I should, and I know I oughta be passionate about getting this message out. But you know, really, I got so many other things to do in my life that I don't live with a passionate intensity about sharing this message.' Respond to that...number one, it's not hard to be prepared. Goodness, it's only a story to tell. And the way we've approached this year of teaching, with the goal that by the end of this school year you'll be able to tell that story concisely and comprehensively...I think it's gonna happen and you're not even gonna work at it. We've been deliberately repetitive; we've been deliberately patterning this whole year so in such a way when you're done you will know this. And you'll say 'I didn't even know I knew it.' It's a simple story to tell. You don't have to be a theologian.

Number two...it's good that you're not a preacher. It's good. I am absolutely convinced that each and every one of you is strategically placed, strategically placed by God, in a web of relationships and contacts where a preacher could never go and be heard the way you will be heard. I'm absolutely convinced of that. Each one of you is strategically placed in a web of relationships, and a web of contacts...placed there by God in a place where no preacher could go and be heard the way you will be heard.

A dear friend of mine...we've been together in this church for decades...a man whose faith, and hope, and heart just always...just cherished. This past fall we were talking, and he had been through an experience, and we had been talking together, and I found out something about his early history I'd never known before. He was talking about how it was he became a Christian. That had happened before I ever met him; during his adult life, though. And he was explaining how he really came to respond to Jesus. And he was explaining how he didn't grow up in a Christian home at all, and he knew, you know, that people talked about God but he didn't really have that much impression about that at all. He just thought it was people's ideas. And then he got to be a teenager and started dating girls. And some of the girls he dated were [from] families of faith. And one particular girl he got to know the family a little bit. And he'd be over at their house for dinner on occasion, and he got to know this girl fairly well. And he says they were a family of faith. They were devout. And they would talk about God things when he was at the house. And he just kinda thought, ok, that's their ideas, and that's kinda...ok, everybody's got their ideas.

And it was one time during the Easter season they'd talked about God a bit. And then he was driving with her sometime after that conversation, and she just made an off-hand comment, like you know, they're driving along and you're just kinda lookin' out the window, and she just made the comment; it was this. She goes, "It must have really hurt when they pounded the nails into His hands." That's all she said. And he's sittin' there, and he says "This thought just came to me...she really believes this is real. This just is not just an idea to her. She really believes that somebody took nails and drove 'em into his hand on a cross." And at that moment he became curious. And the question came to his mind, "Is it real?" And he began to seek the reality of Jesus Christ rather than just a religious idea. And that led him to Jesus.

I'm convinced that girl was strategically placed by our God in a place no preacher could go and be heard the way she was heard. I am thankful we're not all preachers.

And the last thing...our lack of intensity, our lack of soul-winning fervor, our lack of passionate concern for the lost. Let me address that with our passage of Scripture again. Go back to there with me, Luke 24. The last statement Jesus makes to his followers is this. He says "*Behold...*" in verse 49 of that text,

"Behold, I am sending the promise of My Father upon you [a reference to the Holy Spirit]. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

That's exactly what happened. In a matter of weeks, or day, these disciples...intimidated, fearful, gathered together knowing that Jesus is alive, but not sure what to do next...are suddenly filled with the Holy Spirit, and they began to speak about Jesus to anyone they could find! And on through the book of Acts you'll find over, and over, and over again the the Spirit of God moves through His people at the right time and the right place with the right words spoken in the right way to make known the reality of Jesus Christ.

I'm not worried about how motivated you feel right now, how passionate you are about this. I'm not worried about being in here today like a coach in a locker room, firing you up so you go out those doors like out of a locker room onto a field... "Kill somebody!!!", only "Save somebody!!!". See, I am just absolutely convinced that at the right time and the right place and the right way, the Spirit of God will move through you and you will talk about Jesus. It may be to your granddaughter. It may be to a coworker. It may be to another person goin' through chemotherapy in the cancer ward with you. I don't know where, and I don't know how, but I'm convinced the Spirit of God at the right time, the right place, with the right words, in the right way will speak through you.

See, it's very important here. This chapter of extending God's grace is not about us. It's not about us gritting our teeth, marching into the darkness, and extending grace. It's about God extending His grace through us. It will happen to you. I'm not worried about motivating you; I just want you to be able to understand, as it happens, the wonder and the glory and the mystery of what's going on when you talk to that person about the reality of Jesus. The Spirit of God is extending grace.

I'll ask you to stand with me.

I said we would end with an action step, and it's the very same action step the early church took. The first record we have of a prayer of the early church, where we actually have the words they prayed, is a prayer that God in every circumstance would give them confidence to speak of the reality of Jesus; because that is our role in this chapter of grace. And it is our prayer.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

And our next action step...go in that truth and extend that grace. In Jesus' name, amen.