

Series Wrap-Up—See the Grace  
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Our Scripture reading this morning is gonna be a passage we read two weeks ago, and I'm gonna take us back to it because it frames an important part of what we're gonna be talking about today. It's Revelation 5, so it's way in the back of your Bible. And it's a vision that the Apostle John was given near his death. He's the last of the apostles to be alive, and he's nearing his death; and there's a special time when God gives him a vision of the future. And this is part of that, a specific part of it. He is given a glimpse into heaven, and he's given a picture of a moment in time up ahead when the future, the closure of all things, will be put in the hands of Jesus Christ. When the final chapter is ready to be opened and come to pass it is put into the hands of Jesus Christ to bring it about. And that's the vision that John has...that moment when the future, the finale, the last chapter of human history, is put in the hands of Jesus to be brought to its conclusion. It's powerful imagery; it's prophetic literature; it stretches us. And so I'm going to encourage you to approach it with your imagination active here and try to see the wonder that the Apostle John describes. And we're gonna read through the entire chapter beginning at verse 1, when he first describes as he sees into the heavens and he says

*I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne [speaking of the Father] a book written inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals.*

...a book that is the future; it's the final chapter of human history, and it's at this moment closed.

*And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the book and to break its seals?"*

Who is worthy to unfold the future, to bring things to its end?

*And no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the book or to look into it. Then I began to weep greatly because no one was found worthy to open the book or to look into it; and one of the elders said to me, "Stop weeping; behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so as to open the book and its seven seals."*

*And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth. And He came and took the book out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne. When He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying,*

*"Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth."*

*Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice,*

*"Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing."*

*And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying,*

*"To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever."*

*And the four living creatures kept saying, "Amen." And the elders fell down and worshiped.*

We started this year with a very specific goal, teaching goal, for our preaching ministry as we go through the year, and we stated it this way...that our goal was that we would go through this year as a congregation; and through our Sundays of teaching we would become a group of people who know the story, the story of God's grace, from beginning to end; that we would be a people who know the story and see the grace; a people who know the story so well that any circumstance, any condition, any situation, we can tell that story to others. We can start at the very beginning of Genesis and take it all the way to the finish in Revelation. Any circumstance, any condition, we can tell that story. We can tell it comprehensively, beginning to end, and at the same time we can tell it concisely so it's gripable. But we not only want to be a people who can tell the story...we wanna be a people who can see the grace that is there. It isn't meant to be an intellectual exercise, a communication effort in instruction. It is meant to be something that we see with our hearts, that that story from beginning to end is a story of grace.

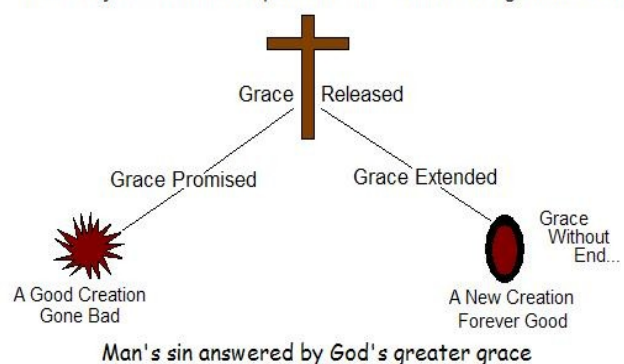
That's been our goal this year. And over this week and next week we're gonna be bringing that project to a close. And I'm encouraged as we come to the end of it. For one, I think we're getting to know the story. I really do. At least I hope so. I have been deliberately repetitive with the basic story. I've gone against what our culture expects in communication. We're a culture that wants information. In fact, we don't slow down for communication unless we're assured we're gonna get some new information. We're flooded with it. We go to the internet; we go to the phone; we go anywhere and everywhere we can trying to get new information. I've avoided that over the past year. In fact, what I've done has been repetitious. I've continually repeated a pattern, the outline of the story; and I've deliberately done that over and over throughout the year with the desire that over the year it will become embedded in your memory even if you weren't trying to remember it. And I think we're getting close.

We could tell the story of God's grace, beginning to end, very simply. It begins, the very start, the book of Genesis, with a good creation gone bad. It ends in Revelation with the promise and a hope of a new creation forever good. And in between is that basic story line of man's ever-increasing sin being answered by God's even greater grace—a grace that progresses, first of all, in a promise given to a world that's turned its back on God. He comes to a wanderer, a pagan, a person who wasn't even looking for God, named Abraham. And God promises to him that someday through one of his descendants all the people of the earth would be blessed; a promise of grace that is then brought to a point, a critical point, where the righteousness of God and the love of God come together in one person named Jesus...a descendant of Abraham who on a cross, in a point in time, releases God's grace for all those who would believe.

And then we come into our time, the time since that cross, when that grace is being extended to all people everywhere through this amazing thing called the church, in all its richness and all its diversity...seemingly so foolish an organization, but in God's eyes a demonstration of His wisdom before all the powers in the universe; ending finally in that great and wondrous time when Jesus will return, all will be raised, all will be judged, and all things will be made new. And there will be grace without end. That's the story of God's grace, beginning to end.

Some of us learn better if we can see something, so throughout the time I've kind of had a little diagram we've used, and something just that you can peg, to track the story with, and it goes through those very basic steps. If you're gonna tell the story of God's grace beginning to end it starts with a good creation gone bad, new creation forever good...a story line of man's sin answered by God's greater grace, the progression of that grace beginning with the promise to Abraham, release of that grace at the cross through Jesus Christ, the extension of that grace through the church in the centuries that have followed, and finally the promise of grace without end. That's the story of God's redemptive grace put in a very concise format.

The Story of God's Redemptive Grace--Genesis through Revelation



Those are only seven statements. You see, as human beings, retention limits out at about seven items on a list. And so I've deliberately kept the points of the outline limited to seven things so it's concise. Count 'em...one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. 'Yeah, Larry's right, seven.' Ok. Interesting thing is every story we've looked at this past year from Scripture, every event we have examined, every book of the Bible that we've taken and analyzed, everything we've done in the pulpit this year teaching-wise, can be linked to this outline. Every part of your Bible links to this. In fact, you cannot understand it apart from linking to this story. It's concise, and yet it's comprehensive. My desire is that you will retain it. That's why I've repeated it so often.

You say, 'Larry, why didn't you just put it on a piece of paper and hand it to us?' It would be put in some place and forgotten. I want it embedded in your memory, and that's why I've repeated it over and over.

For one reason, I want it to be there for you. When your story suddenly doesn't make sense, when the story you're living becomes confused and you're not sure where it's gonna go, and you're wondering where exactly did it start, and you're worried about how it's gonna turn out, and you're in those moments of life when everything seems upside down and your story is a fog and you're desperate—I want you to simply remember this. That's not the time to sit down and try to read Cruden's Systematic Theology start to end. It's not the opportunity you have to sit there and read the Bible start to end. Just remember the story, and that your story links to this and there's hope and there's a future, and you can move forward with a heart engaged.

Even more, not only that you'll find encouragement, because you have this basic outline, this filter to sift things through as you try to make sense of what's happening in your life. It's also...I want you to be prepared to tell the story. See, I'm convinced that you will have opportunities in the weeks and the months ahead to tell this story. That's why we finish every week as a congregation praying, 'God, every circumstance, as Your Spirit leads, enable us to give witness to the reality of Jesus.' We pray for that. It's part of God's call upon us to be salt and witness, His stirring within us that began almost two years ago that has brought us to the point where that is the prayer, that is the drumbeat, of our congregation. And I am convinced that God is answering that, He will continue to answer it, and there will be times and places and opportunities in the future for you...I can't describe all the varied circumstances and conditions that'll arise, but you will have the opportunity to speak of Jesus. And I want you able to do that, to put His story in the context of God's grace, beginning to end. I'm not worried about you being great theologians. I'm not worried about you being able to argue minutia of situations. I just want you to be able to tell the story. And I think we're getting there.

But it's not enough just to know the story. We need to see the grace...we need to see it. 'Cause we'll never tell the story if we don't see the grace that is the core of this story. Interesting thing...we've spent nine months in this project. Do you realize I've never defined 'grace'? I've never given you a definition of it. I never said 'this is what grace is'. I've never even given an extended explanation of it. My goal has been, as we went through the varied stories and circumstances and situations, you would begin to get a feel for it before I even began to define it. But now we need to. I mean, we only got two weeks left, so maybe we need a definition. Alright?

Number one—if you want the most concise definition of grace that you'll find, and this is repeated in a lot of different sources and places, it's to simply speak of God's grace as His unmerited favor. And that's a very functional, workable definition. It is His favor towards us that we have not earned and we do not deserve. He just extends it. Ok? His unmerited favor towards us. I'd like to expand on that with a little more explanation with a sentence that goes on; and [when] we speak of His unmerited favor we're speaking of His undeserved goodwill towards us that works good in us in spite of our sins. Now I know that adds a little bit more to the definition, but it's important that we do it because we take the idea of God's unmerited favor and oftentimes we leave it as this kind of general concept that 'He likes us'. It's a more active than that. It's His goodwill towards us that actually works good in us and through us. It does things. If God has grace towards you there will be impact. It will touch your lives. And it'll do so in spite of your failures. That's grace.

It's distinct from mercy. If you want to draw a fine line here, mercy relates to withholding punishment that is due. And grace will do that, but it does more than that. Not only does it withhold punishment that is due, it will go on and actually work good that has not been deserved, that is not deserved. So there's a distinction there. It is actually working what is good.

And we need to see that grace. We've seen it over the months that've happened in specific examples. For example, when Israel went into the wilderness, and at Mount Sinai they actually rejected God's rule. He'd given them ten commandments, and in a matter of a short matter of days they actually broke the number one commandment and they began to honor an idol, and that is sin. God's response was to patiently sustain that generation in the wilderness, and as they passed away pick up the next generation and take them into the Promised Land. That's grace. Then we have the nation of Israel going into the Promised Land and there resisting God's rule; in fact, not only resisting it, turning away from it and beginning to worship the idols and the gods of the people that had been there before them. And God responds by raising up deliverers and rescuing them every time they fall down. That's grace. That's God's unmerited favor, that's God's goodwill working good when it's not deserved. In fact, working good in spite of sin.

And then they get to the point where they decide 'We don't want God's deliverers. We want a king, God, like all the other people have.' And in doing that they were saying, 'God, we don't want Your arrangement. We want ours.'

That was sin. God responds by raising up one of the greatest kings in all time, David, and giving him to that nation. That's grace. They did not deserve David. They did not earn David. God gave them David. And when the kings that followed him rejected the call of God upon the nation, and the people joined in on [with] them, turning away from the Lord God and worshiping idols, and turning away from them, and finally turning the nation into the ground until it was overrun by the Assyrians and the Babylonians, and they were sent into exile, God brought them back and restored the nation. They didn't deserve that, but God gave them renewal.

And the most amazing of all is when they finally rejected that descendant of Abraham that had long been promised, Jesus, and on the cross they turned their back on Him. They called out and said, "Crucify Him! We have no king but Caesar." And the Romans laughed and mocked as they took Him and said, 'What a joke!', and pounded the nails into His hands. And everybody said, 'This king is foolish.' And they crucified Him. God raised Jesus from the grave, has exalted Him to the highest at His right hand, from whence He will return to renew all things. We do not deserve Jesus. There is nothing mankind has done to deserve His rule over us. In spite of rejecting it, God is giving it to us. That is grace. That's grace.

The thing to understand is even our little cul-de-sacs in the story, these aren't little wandering digressions, these aren't little moments that go by as we stick with the main story that is really not about grace. The main story *is* grace, start to finish. Go back to Revelation chapter 5 with me, that moment of finish when the final chapter is ready to unfold. And we're coming to the point where God is saying, 'It's done, let's close it down.' I want you to see and note a particular statement He makes in there, and I believe it's verse 9, not 10. But He comes down there and He says this. This is a statement as the audience in heaven chants when Jesus, this One who appears as a Lamb who has been slain, the One who died on the cross, is given the scroll of the future with the seven seals, and human history is put in His hands. It is His time to bring things to closure. This statement is made. It says

*"Worthy are You..." (speaking of Jesus) "...to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain," (and here's the important part) "and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation."*

'You have redeemed people from every tongue, every tribe, every nation, every people.' And it's been done. He goes on in the next verse to say *"And You have..."*, not 'and You will', but 'And You have made 'em a kingdom of priests, and they're gonna rule.' It was done. It was accomplished. And that's why God can say, 'Let's close the book. Let's finish it out.' 'Cause at this moment, at this time, the promise God had made to Abraham is fulfilled.

The very first part of Genesis we've got that good creation gone bad, and we have God coming to that man named Abram. And He says to him, *"Go forth from your country."* He calls him away from the gods he was worshiping, the people he lived among, the land that he would till. And He brought him away and He says, 'Listen, I want you to go to a land I'm showing you.' And the promise goes on. 'You'll be given the land, you'll have a people, you'll be blessed, and I will bless you; and those who bless you I will bless.' And there's this whole series of promises. And He comes to the last part of the promise in verse 3 [chapter 12], and He says this to Abram so many generations before; He says, *"And in you all the nations, all the families of the earth will be blessed."* That is the promise. That is ground zero in the story of God's grace. You cannot make sense of the Bible if you don't grasp that promise. God said, 'I am gonna bless every people through a descendant of yours.' And Revelation 5, that grand and glorious moment is when God says, 'Finally someone from every tribe, every tongue, every people, and every nation has entered into the kingdom, a representative from each one. All peoples have been blessed in Jesus. We can bring it to a close.'

The important thing to see here, the important thing to grasp as to why this isn't just a story about a promise made and a promise kept...it's a story about a promise kept because of grace...is to understand what it was like when God first made that promise to Abraham. We did not have a world...humanity was not saying, 'We love You, God.' It was not a humanity of faith. It was not a humanity of obedience to God. It was not a humanity that said, 'God, You matter above all things.' In fact, the description of humanity at the time this promise was given reads like this. And this is found in Genesis 6, where we're told that

*The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.*

Genesis 6:5

That's the first part of Genesis, a good creation gone bad. And how bad was it? It was really bad, so bad that God looks at it and we're told in the next phrase of this verse that

*The LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.*

That is one of the most astounding statements in Scripture. God looked at humanity and said, 'What a rebellious, wicked mess.' Humanity had completely rejected the rule of God. And it's at that time that God says, 'In you, Abraham, I'm gonna bless every nation. They don't deserve it; they haven't earned it; they do not merit it. But by time I'm done, through one of your descendants there'll be those from every tongue, every tribe, every nation, every people who stand in my grace forever.' It's the main story...God answering man's sin with a greater grace.

We're going to be going with that applicationally. We're gonna use two phrases; we use them a lot. You're gonna sit there and say, 'oh, that's kinda repetitive.' Yes, they are. I want 'em as a drum beat for us. OK? When I look at the story of grace beginning to end and I realize that that is what the Scriptures are about I have two main things I respond to and I say when I see that. Number one is 'Enjoy that grace.' Enjoy it! And I've really wrestled with the right word here. If God is a God of grace, and the challenge is to enjoy it, is there a stronger way to put it? I've wrestled with words like maybe we oughta say 'engage it'. Maybe we oughta say 'embrace it'. Maybe we oughta say 'receive it'. Maybe we oughta say simply 'believe it'. But I'm back always to this word, just 'enjoy it'. But I wanna be careful how I use it, 'cause 'enjoy' something, to me, is not a light endeavor. In fact, a book that...it's the power of...a line in a book has just had a powerful impact on my life. It just goes like this, a statement that when I read it it stopped me cold. It just said, "The pursuit of joy is a serious endeavor." The pursuit of joy is a very serious endeavor. You can't cut corners with it. We can't be careless with it. The pursuit of joy is a very serious endeavor. And that's the case here. So when I say, "Enjoy God's grace" I'm sayin' it's a serious thing to pursue, to enjoy.

There's a verse in Acts, when the church is first starting to give the message of God's grace and inviting people to enter into it, to enjoy it. There's a statement where Peter is talking to a group, an audience in Jerusalem where Jesus had been crucified, some of the very people who had demanded His death. And Peter's preaching to 'em, and he says,

*"Therefore repent and return,"*

...turn away from whatever direction you're headed and turn towards God in Jesus. "Repent and return," he says,

*"...so that your sins may be wiped away,"*

...and here comes the promise...

*"...in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord."*  
Acts 3:19

Oh, you want to enjoy that, God's grace just flowing into your life. And it even goes beyond that. And he says

*"...and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you..."*

...that looks forward to that day when Jesus will return, when He will finally come and all will be raised, and justice will be done, and there will be an eternity in His presence. We want to enjoy that! But it's a very serious endeavor because it begins with "repent and return". It begins by saying 'I'm gonna turn direction from whatever I'm chasing, whatever I'm following, to Jesus.' That is a very serious endeavor. But that's how you enjoy grace.

The second phrase I put to it, and you've heard this repetition a lot, and I'll put it there right there again, once again. Not only do we enjoy God's grace, we extend God's grace. That's our calling; that's our purpose as God's people, as we enjoy God's grace to make sure it flows through us and touches, and others enjoy it. And that's what I would press us to do when we read this story, is be caught up in it, and wanna see that story extended through you. See, I see there's two kinds of Christians. We started this whole series back last September with this statement. I see two kinds of Christians as a pastor. Over 30-some years, I can break almost every Christian I've met into one of these two categories, and it is so obvious when you spend time with somebody. It becomes so evident. There are Christians who are trying to fit God into their story. They've got dreams and hopes and goals and desires and ambitions. And they've got challenges and struggles, and they're trying to fit God into their story. Sometimes it's because they're desperate; things have reeled so much out of control and they just say, 'God, I need You!' Other times it's because they just feel it's a duty. I mean, people should have God in their life. And others, it's simply a desire. They like to experience something beyond them, and so they try to fit God into their lives. They try, but it

doesn't work. What they find, even though they couldn't articulate it and they couldn't state it, what they find is their story is too small for God. Their story is too small for God to be God in their life. You see, if you want to have the lead and write the script, your story is gonna be too small for God to be God. And so I find among these Christians that oftentimes things may have gone well for them, and they feel blessed. Other times I find just as many, if not more, that feel like 'this hasn't worked out the way I thought it would,' and you will find them bitter. The largest group I find in between. They simply say, 'This God thing hasn't made much of a difference. It's kind of boring.' My response? If you're the lead and you're writing the script, your story will be boring. Don't try to fit God into your story.

There's another kind of Christian. It's a whole different thing. And those are the Christians who are finding their place in God's story. Unexpectedly, surprisingly, they find a story big enough for them; and they enter into it and they're amazed at it. You'll find that these are the Christians that live with a confident faith, even when things are confused. They're the Christians that'll have a resilient hope even when there's disappointment and things come crashing down around 'em. And these are the Christians that you'll find that have an engaged heart. They are willing to run the risk of caring for people around them 'cause they found a place in God's story.

How do you do that? You just start extending His grace...right where you're at. How do you do that? I'm breaking it down to the basics here. You begin to extend His grace one conversation at a time. You don't need to have a lead part; you don't need a massive script that you write. You just simply, in each and every situation, do not speak an unwholesome word. The only words that are good for the moment, according to the need of the moment, give edification to those who hear, that they may receive grace. That's all it is. It may be with a parent, it may be with a child, it may be with siblings, it may be with coworkers, it may be with people in government situations, it may be people you bump into at the grocery store, in the community, at the school...whatever. It's just one conversation at a time...you speak grace. And you wait for, and you pray for, and you watch for those moments when you will be able, by God's grace and opportunity, to speak and tell the story. And they can see the grace. That's it.

We use a prayer to emphasize that. I put it up here right now. It's a prayer we close our song services with because we wanna be a people who extend grace, and extend it one conversation at a time, with the hope and the desire that we will be able to tell that story to someone at a certain time where they can see God's grace and respond to it. That's how you enter into God's story.

I have a young man who wrote us an email this past...about two weeks ago. He's a college student of ours. And he was in a hospital. They couldn't come up with a diagnosis. He couldn't even really walk. A lot of confusion, a lot of chaos in his life, and he's struggling. His plans for school, his plans for his future, his dreams, everything else is in a fog. We get an email back from him. He writes to Joel, and he says to Joel, "I wanna thank you for this prayer so much. I wanna thank you for this prayer. Every morning when I wake up in the hospital I pray this prayer, and it sets my course for the day." That's how you find your place in God's story.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Enjoy that grace, extend that grace in the name of Jesus. Amen.