

The Cross—Hinge Point of Grace
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We're gonna begin this morning, or resume this morning, a study project we began the year with, which was a review of the story of God's redemptive grace...from beginning to end, beginning in Genesis and eventually getting to the book of Revelation. It's our target, the goal being that when we're done with this year, this study year, we will be a people who can give witness to the grace of God, and we can speak of the story of God's grace both concisely and comprehensively. That's our target through the year, and we're working towards that. We're making progress towards it, and we just finished going through the Old Testament. And then we took a study break, as it were, and we did some review of Old Testament literature just because it's so unfamiliar to people. We said let's pause for a moment and look at these Old Testament books, and look at how best to use them. And now we're gonna go back and pick up the story.

And we're gonna pick it up in the New Testament, and we're jump in at a very particular place...and we're going to go right to the very center of God's grace. I'm gonna start off with a reading, and it's found in Matthew 26, and I'll ask you to turn there with me. Matthew 26...actually chapter 27, excuse me...Matthew 27. And I'm just gonna read through a section here. This is after years of ministry, after Jesus has performed His miracles, He's taught the amazing teachings He's had, and yet people have turned against Him. And we're told that, as we pick up the story in Matthew 27:15...I'll just read through this paragraph. It says

Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. And they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered Him up. Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of Him today in a dream." Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" And they all said, "Let Him be crucified!" And he said, "What evil has He done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let Him be crucified!"

The story of God's redemptive grace begins with a good creation gone bad. In the early chapters of the book of Genesis God creates a wondrous creation; and He gives mankind—Adam and Eve—a privileged place in that creation. But they turn. In rebellion against His rule, his resistance at a point, they act in disobedience. And with that act of disobedience sin enters into humanity, into the world. It enters into the human race like a chronic, genetic disease that will infect every person from then on. How bad things were when sin came in and entered into the human race is summarized for us a little later in the book of Genesis, in chapter 6 where we have God speaking of the situation at that time. And He says...we're told that

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

Genesis 6:5

I mean, even when mankind would do what looked to be good they were doing it on their own terms, in their own way, and in their own time. They were not doing it in submission and recognition to the rule of God. And we're told...and this is one of the most dramatic statements in all of Scripture, we're told

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

Genesis 6:6

I don't understand the full mystery of that statement, but it gives us a sense of how bad things were once sin entered the world through that one act of disobedience. Judgment didn't clean it out; instruction didn't get rid of it. But God chose something else to address the problem, and it's amazing...He answered to it with an astounding promise of grace. We find the promise in Genesis 12, where God comes to an idol worshiper by the name of

Abram. And He calls him with a promise. The call is, to Abram, that...He calls to him and says, 'Go forth from your country, from your people, from your land, to the land which I will show you.' That was the call. And with the call came a promise. And the promise goes on in that chapter. He says, God says, 'I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you. You will have the land, you'll become a great people, and I will bless you.' The astounding part of the promise is not just the promised element to Abram, that he would be blessed and he would have a great nation come from him and he would have the land. The amazing part was how he was also to be a blessing...not just to his generation, but it says "...in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." 'Ultimately,' God says, 'all the families, all the peoples of the world will be blessed through you.'

The final time he gives that promise to Abram is much later in Abram's life, and by then he's called Abraham. And the final promise, the final statement by way of promise to Abraham is that in his seed, his descendant—speaking of one person who will be a descendant of Abraham, God says, 'In your seed, your descendant, all the nations on earth will be blessed because you obeyed Me, because you answered My call.' That promise becomes the central thread, the theme, the focus, of the Old Testament. And it becomes more and more refined, and you understand more and more what God has in mind with that promise. And eventually, in its fully-developed form, what we have is a promise that out of a chosen people, that people that were descendants of Abraham, in a holy land where God had given to Abraham the land of Canaan, God was going to raise up a future king, a descendant of Abraham. And that king would set all things right. And not only will He set all things right...one of the most astounding parts of that...He would set the hearts of men right. It isn't just that He would establish justice and peace forever. He would set all men's hearts right. That promise had as its focal point, by the end of the Old Testament, the Messiah—the Anointed One, the future and coming king.

Well, you track that promise through the Old Testament, there's times it seems impossible that it will ever be fulfilled, because that chosen people turned out to be a very wayward people. And it seems like every time God takes 'em forward they slip back; ever time they go one step forward it isn't that they come one step back—they go two steps back. God brings 'em out of Egypt and takes 'em towards the Promised Land. And after they've watched God defeat the great army of Pharaoh they balk and they won't go into the Promised Land because they're afraid God can't handle the Canaanite tribes. And then once they are in the land they decide that everyone is gonna do simply what he wants to do, and they turn the land into a land of chaos. And then when they demand a king and God gives 'em a king, and they begin to have king after king after king, the kings go bad. And the people follow them, and they follow them right to destruction, and right into exile. And then, one of the greatest miracles, God brings 'em back out of exile. He gives 'em their land back, he gives 'em a whole, fresh, new start...and they rebel again. And so by the time you come to the New Testament the people of Israel are living under the rule of the Roman government like tenant farmers in the land that was supposed to be theirs.

And you wonder how could the promise ever be fulfilled? And it seems even more impossible, even more impossible when the Messiah shows up, when Jesus, descendant of Abraham, descendant of David, is born of a virgin in that Promised Land among that chosen people. And He does what nobody else has ever done...He heals the sick with a word; He enables the lame to walk, the blind to see, the deaf to hear. He casts out demons. He teaches with such amazing authority that people are just drawn to Him by...huge crowds, thousands and thousands of people gathering around to hear Him, so much so that he couldn't even have room to move. He'd have to get into a boat and row away from the shore just to get space between Him and the crowds. And He would teach, and they would wait, and they would listen. And they would ask for more. And there's things they wouldn't understand, but they wouldn't go away; they would hang on. And they would say, 'What sort of teaching is this? We've never heard anything like it before.' And then He would feed the multitudes. He would calm the raging sea with a simple command... "Be still." He would walk on the water. And He would stand in front of a grave, and He would call out to a man who had been dead for three days... "Lazarus, arise!" And the dead man would arise. It's the Messiah. Your hopes are there. And then they reject Him. The people who had waited for centuries rejected Him. Given a choice between Him and a violent terrorist, they chose the terrorist and said, 'Crucify Jesus.' See, instead of leading them in a battle for liberation, He had called them to repentance toward God. And they said, 'That isn't what a Messiah's for.' And they shouted, "*Crucify Him!*" And you're convinced at that point that this promise will never be. You're convinced that things have gone awry, that whatever the plan was it sure didn't come about. And then you're astounded, in the time that follows, to find out that this wasn't a plan gone awry. This wasn't something coming up against the impossible. This is exactly the way God wanted things to go.

There's a verse in the book of Acts...it's the first sermon Peter preaches after the crucifixion and the resurrection. And he's talking to the people there in Jerusalem, the very place where Jesus had been crucified. And he's talking to individuals who had shouted 'Crucify Him! Give us Barabbas! But crucify Jesus!' And he's talking to these people, and as he talks to 'em Peter reminds 'em. He says, 'You know, there was a man named Jesus who has

walked among us, and He was attested to by God. God verified that He was everything that He claimed to be with miracles, and powers, and signs, and wonders.' And then he goes on and says, '...but He was delivered over...' This is the amazing part of the verse, verse 23 of Acts chapter 2. He says,

"He was delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God."

'God predetermined and, according to how He knew things would be, He put Jesus in your hands knowing you would crucify Him, which is what you did.' God knew that at that time if He sent His Son to that chosen people in that holy land, with the message that He brought, God knew His Son would be crucified. That's the way God planned to keep his promise.

Jesus knew that plan. Before He ever got to Jerusalem, we're told, He set His face to get there. Most His ministry was done, and He set His face to go to Jerusalem. And His disciples are with Him. They're saying, 'You shouldn't do this. It's not gonna work out.' And He comes back, and one of the statements He makes on His way to the road to Jerusalem, He says, "*The son of man...*", a reference to Himself, "*...did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many.*" He's saying, 'That's what I'm here for. I'm here to die, to give up My life for others, in payment for them. That's the plan.' And He's committed to it. That's what the garden of Gethsemane was all about. When Jesus, in agony, cries out three times "Not My will but Yours", what He's sayin' is 'God, I will go forward with this plan. I will give My life a ransom. I will go to the cross.'

Historians talk about and look for hinge-points...pivotal moments where what happens at a certain instance redetermines everything that follows. They love to look at events or sessions and sequences of time and say, 'Ok, where's the hinge-point, where's the moment, the pivot moment where something happened that determined how everything would go from there?' Example...the story of David and Goliath. The battle between Israel and the Philistines at that time. The hinge-point, the pivotal moment, that point in time where...that determined how everything was gonna go after that was the moment when the stone hit Goliath and knocked him dead. After that everything's resolution. Up to that point you're wondering, 'How's this gonna go?' But once that stone hit and Goliath fell like a great tree the battle was all but over.

Sometimes they're obscure little events. 1914 in east Africa...a British coalition is fighting a German coalition, and they're locked in battle, and it's gone on for days and no one can seem to get the upper hand. And then, in the middle of the battle, suddenly there's hoards of angry bees. And they descend upon the battle field, and for some reason they only attack the English coalition. Nobody knows to this day exactly why, but it drove them out of the battle field to the shore, begging for the navy to pick 'em up.

Sometimes the pivot point, the moment that determines the flow of things, becomes almost legendary in importance. When Julius Caesar came to the small British border stream called the Rubicon and he, with his army, stepped across the Rubicon, the history of the west was changed forever because he brought down the Roman republic.

In the story of God's grace the cross, by God's design and plan, is the hinge-point. It's the pivotal moment when all else is set in place, and the final end is determined. Everything in the Bible leads up to this point. Everything that follows is a resolution.

One of the writers I really enjoy, a man who's done a neat job of looking at the overall Scripture story from beginning to end...he talks about the cross as a hinge-point, that moment when the future was determined. And he describes the things that were accomplished at the cross, that were determined. For example, the fact that sin was punished and sinners would be forgiven—that was something that the pivotal moment was at the cross. The defeat of evil, and the liberation of mankind from the vise-grip of Satan...the pivotal moment in that was at the cross. There may be more to the battle, but we're already past the crux, the critical moment. Death destroyed, and eternal life made possible...the hinge-point in that was the cross. Enemies reconciled to one another...that eventual promise of peace...pivotal point was the cross. You don't taste it fully yet, but the cross has determined that it will be. Creation restored, reconciled...it was the cross. It was the cross that ensures that will happen. The cross is the hinge-point, the pivot moment, the point in time where the outcomes were determined.

Because it's so important, because it's so central, we're gonna be spending the next number of weeks 1) with the goal that when we're done, this next series of weeks, you will be able to explain it with clarity. My goal is, after the next three weeks, you will be able to speak of the cross with clarity as a central event in the story of God's grace.

That's a challenge, because we're talking about some pretty mysterious things when we talk about the cross. We're talking about one person dieing and being able to cover all the sins of all of us, and we wonder how could that be. We wonder how can events so far away in the past really have impact on me in the present. I want you to be able to explain that with clarity.

Secondly, the second goal educationally, is that you'll be able to defend it with confidence. Paul, early on in his ministry, identifies the fact that when he talked about Christianity the place that really brought things to a screaming halt when he spoke to people was when he talked about the cross. He found that for Jews it was a stumbling block. That was a phrase he used; because for the Jews anyone who was hung on a tree, and that's in essence what happened on the cross—you were hung on a tree...anybody who was hung on a tree obviously had been cursed by God. That was the Jewish perception of things. And you could say, 'Oh no, He was really innocent.' 'No, He was on a cross; that means God abandoned Him, and He was cursed.' So when Paul would say, 'The Messiah was hung on a cross,' they would say, 'No way!' For the Romans it was pure...pure foolishness. I mean, they were absolutely convinced that they had the best, most effective, legal system imaginable, and that their legal system knew how to ferret out the worst of criminals. And when they had ferreted out and they had discovered the worst of criminals, they would reserve for those worst of criminals the worst of punishments...and it was the cross. And so when you said to a Roman that the Messiah was crucified, they'd say, 'Ridiculous! We Romans don't make a mistake like that. If He was crucified it means a good, Roman judge in a Roman province figured out that that man was the worst.' In our day most book you pick up that take issue with Christianity I guarantee at some point will call us fools for believing that somebody dieing on a cross is the solution to all men's problems. I want you to be able to defend that.

But even more importantly, when we're done with these weeks I want you to have experienced the cross with power. The cross is not something we just explain, and it's not something we just defend. The cross is reality we experience.

Interesting statement by the Apostle Paul. Actually, it's more than interesting. To me it's startling. At the end of one of his letters, the book of Galatians, he's wrapping up his letter and he makes a statement. He's talking about what other people may brag about and be excited about and point to in their ministries. And he comes back and says, 'You know what? May it never be that I would boast except for the cross of the LORD Jesus Christ. That's the only thing I wanna talk about. That's the only thing I wanna lift up in front of people and say "Look at that!" That's the only thing that I look to and say, "This is special", is the cross.' And then he makes this statement, and this is what astounds me. He goes on and he says this... *"through which,"* speaking of the cross,

"...through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."

What he's sayin' here is, 'through the cross, through my understanding of it, my experience of it, my grip on that cross, what has happened is the world no longer has a hold on me, and I no longer hold onto it. It's priorities, it's pleasures, it's purposes no longer grip me. Its agenda and its activities are not mine any more. Its values and its concerns are not mine any more. The world no longer has a hold on me, and I no longer hold onto it.'

I once was a runner. Try to picture that...you know, sleek, anorexic-looking. I could tell you how to train for long-distance running. Actually ran long-distance; I ran a marathon and ten-kilometer road races and that sort of stuff. I knew the shoes you should wear, I knew the training you should wear, I knew the types of clothes you should wear. I read books, I subscribed to Runner's World, I could sit with people, we'd talk about 'What do you eat? What are you not eating? What are you doin' to train?' And we would have training partners I ran with. I mean, I logged tons of miles. And you know, I knew how you do basic training, you do tempo work, you do hills... I knew all about that. I was into it and I loved it! I kinda could imagine my self, you know, this really good runner. I felt pretty good, I felt healthy, I felt good, everything else. And then there was my last race. It was towards the end of my running career, I'll admit, already. I was tapering. But I was running...it was about this time of year, in Anchorage at the Fur Rendezvous Frostbite 5 Kilometer, ok? I'm runnin' it, man; I'm there! And I've trained, and I'm ready, and I'm goin'. And I still remember...I can remember this just as vivid as can be. I am coming down the last lap on 5th Avenue headed for the finish, and woman dressed as a clown passed me. You know what? Running no longer has a hold on me. And I no longer hold onto it. I'm done. I've moved onto donuts at Donut King.

Think of a more serious example. Imagine two friends, best of friends. Their families are the same age. Their kids get along. Their wives get along. And they love to snow machine. They're always talking about snow machines. They know the equipment, and every year they're buying new equipment. And they're analyzing it, and they're

doing everything to make these machines high performance. And they love goin' out in the back country. And one Saturday they're out in the back country and they're just flyin' through and they're doin' some high marking. And one of 'em triggers this avalanche, and the other is just absolutely destroyed. The one that survives is sittin' there on his snow machine, and suddenly snow machining no longer has a hold on him. And he won't hold onto it. He walks from his machine, never to get on it again.

That's the type of thing Paul is saying here. He's saying, 'When I finally understood the cross the world no longer had a hold on me, and I no longer wanted to hold onto it.' You see, that's a startling statement to me. It's startling because there's no other person I know of who's had a more dramatic conversion experience than the Apostle Paul. Damascus road, Jesus appears before him in a blinding light with a visible expression of Himself, and a verbal statement. I mean, he had an astounding experience of the living Jesus! He doesn't say it was that vision that crucified the world to him, and him to the world. It was coming to understand how that One in that vision died for him. My goal in the next number of weeks is that you will come to understand the cross that way.

Next action steps...give you a couple. Couple action steps. Number one: you'll notice in your bulletin there's a passage to read for next week...Romans 3:21-30. I'm gonna encourage you...mark your Bible there. And spend some time this week reading in it. You can just read it quickly a couple times. Take time...some of you may even want to memorize it. But I want you to spend time in that passage of Scripture. Come here next week having that passage in your mind already.

Secondly is to pray. And here I'm gonna ask you to stand, and we're gonna close with a prayer that we close every Sunday with. And we're gonna close it with a very special focus as we do today. Our prayer is that over these next three-four weeks we'll become a people who speak of Jesus with confidence, and when we do we speak of the Jesus who was crucified...with confidence. And that should be our prayer as we go through this study time.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Go in that truth, and extend that grace. Amen.