

*Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.* Hebrews 4:14-16

As I began my study for this sermon I was reminded of when Nancy and Micah and I spent some time one summer in the western part of the United States. And since we love to hike and climb in the mountains, we had plenty of chances to do so, as we spent most of our time in three different mountain ranges, the most rugged of the three being the Sangre de Cristo's Mountains in southern Colorado. The mountain range boasts 22 peaks that are over 13,500 feet and it is difficult to hike and climb because of the steep slopes and the sharp, jagged, rocky terrain - which I painfully felt in my limbs and lungs every morning in my personal pursuit of the view from on top of the mountain. Yet the reality is, if the ground had been smooth and not so sharp, jagged and rocky, I would not have had any steps to use get where I was trying to climb. Though the stones, slopes, altitude and crevices caused me a great deal of pain they were also the only means I had in order to get to the glorious top of the mountain.

This is also the reality of our walk with God through Jesus Christ. Our most sovereign God, in His faithfulness, allows and intentionally places obstacles of pain and affliction in our path on our journey through life - and so often living life feels like we are trying to climb up a steep slope of sharp, jagged, rocks. And while we may consider such things as painful stumbling blocks or unnecessary barriers to our progress, God sees such things as steppingstones to the higher ground of the victory and blessing we might know in Jesus Christ. As we continue in our Seeking Him series which is focused on how we can know a deeper intimacy in our relationship with God - today we will be looking at another *means* in God's Word, by which by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can seek God and grow in our walk with God. In the past weeks we've already seen the need, and have taken the steps of humility, honesty and repentance - and today we are looking at both the need and the means by which we can seek God through *His grace*. You would think that grace would be a much easier step to take than the others we've looked at - but in truth is grace is a much more difficult step than we would imagine. While we love the idea of receiving grace, we are not so very often good at giving grace - and while we all want grace in our lives, grace is hard to embrace in the midst of pain and affliction and suffering,

The context of our verses for this morning from Hebrews 4 is one of pain and affliction and suffering. The Jewish Christians who had received this letter were going through a pretty hard time of persecution and prosecution; some were even being tortured and put to death for their faith in Jesus Christ. At the very least, they were ostracized in the community and were not allowed to make a living in the towns they lived in. Living out their faith in Jesus was a daily struggle and many felt like giving up. Some were even tempted to reject their public profession of their faith so they could enjoy an easier life. This temptation is familiar to us in that we in the western world tend to default towards staying comfortable and secure *rather than* putting ourselves in circumstances and situations that would cause us to suffer for Jesus. The difficult climbing of mountains of suffering for our faith in Jesus Christ is not readily embraced - yet we miss out on so much of God's grace when we don't.

When I was kid growing up I was kind of chubby and got picked on a lot. That, along with the deep pain that I endured at home, was just more weight to carry around. One of the more painful experiences I remember was the times when I played baseball with other kids; because of my weight, I was usually picked pretty close to last. You know the process: captains pick sides until they get down to their last choices. The remaining kids—the scrubs, the excess, kids like me— they saw as handicaps. And so the last two choices were usually made by saying: "If I take him, then you gotta take him."

Ultimately things changed for me; as I grew older my height caught up with my weight and God blessed me with both strength and skill I hadn't known before. At some point, I don't remember exactly when, I found myself being chosen first, and then eventually being chosen to be the captain. And when given that choice position, I rarely used that calling to choose the biggest or the fastest or the strongest because I remembered from where I came from – and so I chose people like me - the scrubs, the excess, the handicaps - for my teams. And you know, by God's grace those teams of misfits quite often won. And on this side of the fence I can tell you why. There is something *empowering* about being chosen rather than rejected. And that truth is most true and most empowering when it comes to being chosen by God. To be chosen by God is an empowerment of God's "grace" that is a blessing beyond compare. In Ephesians 1:3-6 the apostle Paul writes: "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.*"

One of the great mysteries of God is in the *who* and the *why* He chooses, which is so contrary to our human way of understanding. 1 Corinthians 1:27 says: "*God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.*" God doesn't choose us according to our ability or our purity or our achievement; God calls and chooses us according to "*the purpose of His will.*" Before the foundation of the world our most sovereign God freely chose the "*foolish*" and the "*weak*" – the broken, the abused, the lonely, the hurting, the rejected - "*through Jesus Christ*" and adopted us as sons and daughters - and blesses us "*with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places*" so that we might "*be holy and blameless before Him . . . to the praise of his glorious grace.*"

If you've ever read the comic strip Peanuts, you'd know that Linus is always walking around with his blanket. There's one strip where Linus is pictured sitting on the ground holding his blanket and sucking his thumb. He is sound asleep. In the next frame is a picture of Snoopy crouching ready to attack. The next few panels show Snoopy running to Linus and grabbing his blanket and trying to steal it away from him. Much to Snoopy's dismay, Linus holds on for dear life. Snoopy runs all over the yard trying to shake Linus loose from his blanket. And in the last frame Snoopy is clutching one end of the blanket and Linus is clinging to the other end, with the blanket stretched across the top of Snoopy's dog house. No one, not even Snoopy, could take Linus' blanket away from him.

This is a picture of us all as everyone of us clings to someone or something in life. We cling to someone or something because of the God shaped void that lies within our soul. In being created in the image of God we are now missing the *Someone* who created us as because of our rebellion against God in the Garden of Eden. In being created by God for the purpose of living for His glory, we now crave the *Somethings of God* because sin has perverted our hearts and passions and desires. Though we were created to *cling to God*, our sin now causes us to *cling to someone or something else* for meaning, for purpose, for security. And we do this to our demise: "*For the wages of sin is death*" (Romans 6:23). Yet despite our inherent and continuous sin and rebellion, we have been "*chosen by GRACE*" (Romans 11:5) to know forgiveness, to receive eternal life, when we humbly receive Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. In Romans 5:20-21 we read: "*Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, GRACE abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, GRACE also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*" The apostle Paul writes we "*are justified by his GRACE as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*" (Romans 3:24) "*so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his GRACE in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus*" (Ephesians 2:7). This is what the writer of Hebrews was telling those who were experiencing great struggles for their faith. In the midst of the struggles of faith and of life – cling to Jesus! It is only in him that we can find the grace of God to get through the trials of life. Our text for today tells us how Jesus is the source of God's grace and how Jesus gives us God's grace in our times of need.

1) Jesus is the source of God's grace and Jesus gives us God's grace because *Jesus is the Son of God: "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession"* (Hebrews 4:14). Jesus is superior to all creation because he created it. Jesus is not just a good man who excelled in his spirituality. He is Son of God, Lord of Lords, the glorious and majestic and triumphant King of Kings. Jesus said: *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me"* (Matthew 28:18). There once was a husband and wife who were devastated when both of them lost their jobs and they were left with a staggering mountain of debt. Just as they were coming to terms with that, their septic tank collapsed and their entire back yard caved in. Not having the money to fix it, the husband jumped into the task and started shoveling away. As he was digging one day, he noticed something glistening in the dirt. He picked it up and found it to be a gold coin. Excited, he continued to dig and unearthed several more of the valuable coins. He ultimately discovered the value of the coins to be over a million dollars. What he and his wife considered to be a tragedy, God used for His glory *because* Jesus is the supreme and sovereign God who has complete authority over and above all things on earth and in heaven. We can know God's grace because Jesus is the Son of God.

2) Jesus is the source of God's grace and Jesus gives us God's grace because *Jesus understands our weaknesses: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses."* (Hebrews 4:15). Even though Jesus is the supreme and preeminent Son of God, he became a human being and lived amongst us not only restore us back to God through his death and resurrection - but also in order to communicate God's heart to us and to experience life in all its weaknesses as we experience life. Jesus got tired and frustrated, he laughed and he cried, he loved people and he was hurt by people, he was both embraced and abandoned by those who were closest to him. Jesus understands our weaknesses because he has been there - and because Jesus understands our weaknesses, he doesn't allow us to use our weaknesses as an excuse. Learning that we have weaknesses and what they are liberating because it helps us understand *what we do* and *why we do it* - which opens the door of our hearts for God's grace to come in and do a work of grace to confess, correct, heal and strengthen in times of need. We know God's grace because Jesus understands our weaknesses.

3) Jesus is the source of God's grace and Jesus gives us God's grace because *Jesus was tempted just as we are tempted: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are"* (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus not only understands our weaknesses; he understands our temptations. Jesus was tempted just as we are. In Matthew 4:1-11 we read of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness by the devil. As the evil one challenged Jesus in the three temptations, he began by saying: *"IF YOU ARE the Son of God."* Like Jesus, every time we are tempted, our identity is being challenged. When we asked God to forgive us of our sins, we became one of His children. When we surrendered our hearts to Christ we gave everything we are to him. When we asked Jesus to be the Lord of our lives, we submitted ourselves to be under his control. And so when we give in to temptation we are denying our identity in Christ, we are denying His power to deliver us from temptation, we are denying His authority over our lives, and we are denying the truth of God that we have declared with our hearts and mouths. On the night he was arrested, before he was crucified, Jesus prayed: *"Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done"* (Luke 22:42). Though tempted, Jesus did not reject God's will for his life. We know God's grace when we are tempted because Jesus understands the temptations we face.

4) Jesus is the source of God's grace and Jesus gives us God's grace because *Jesus did not sin: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin"* (Hebrews 4:15). Even though Jesus was tempted, he did not give in to sin. In fact, the temptation Jesus faced was much more difficult than ours *because he didn't give in to it*. He remained true to his identity as the Son of God and was faithful to His Father's will. When temptation comes we have to make a choice regarding to whom we will look for strength.

Will we depend on our strength, our wisdom, and our will - or will we depend on the strength and wisdom and will of the One who is superior and supreme and preeminent over and above our weaknesses, temptations, and sins? We can look Jesus for the strength of God's grace when we are tempted to give in to sin because Jesus *"is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross"* (Colossians 1:17-20). We can know God's grace when we are tempted to sin because by God's grace Jesus did not sin.

5) Jesus is the source of God's grace and Jesus gives us God's grace because *Jesus is fullness of God's grace: "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of GRACE, that we may receive mercy and find GRACE to help in time of need"* (Hebrews 4:16). Because Jesus sits on the throne of grace, we can cling to Jesus and go with confidence to him and receive his mercy and grace and help in times of weakness, temptation, and sin. The apostle John wrote that Jesus is, *"the Word"* who *"became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of GRACE and truth. . . And from his fullness we have all received, GRACE upon GRACE. For the law was given through Moses; GRACE and truth came through Jesus Christ"* (John 1:14, 16-17).

*Mercy* is God's undeserved favor towards those whom He has chosen in Jesus Christ to *not give them* what they *do deserve* in their rebellion and sin – which is death (*"For the wages of sin is death"* Romans 6:23). *Grace* is God's undeserved favor towards those whom He has chosen in Jesus Christ to *give them* what they *do not deserve* in their rebellion and sin – which is life (*" . . . but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"* Romans 6:23). Over the last three weeks we have looked at the means of seeking God through humility and honesty and repentance - it would be easy to feel overwhelmed with a sense of conviction, failure, guilt, and discouragement. Yet the good news of the gospel is that God knows we cannot live humble, honest and repentant lives without His GRACE in our lives. This is the reason Christ went to the cross on our behalf. It was there that Jesus did something for us that we could never do: by God's grace Jesus took on all of our sins so that we might be restored back to God.

*"From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace upon grace."* The fullness of God's grace in Christ begins with God's *saving grace* that was accomplished at the cross. Jesus took our place on the cross; he took our death for our sins upon himself so that we might know the grace of forgiveness and redemption and restoration back with God. The fullness of God's grace in Christ then continues with God's *sanctifying grace*, which convicts and corrects and builds up and empowers *because* while we are saved we are not yet perfected, as our desperate need for God will continue until the day we go home to glory. The fullness of God's grace in Christ also continues with God's *suffering grace*, which God uses to turn us from treasuring anything on earth above Him, sharing in His holiness as He glorifies Himself by making us more like Jesus, *"who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God"* (Hebrews 12:2). This is the grace the writer of Hebrews is speaking about in our text, affirming the words of Paul in Romans 8:18-19: *"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God."*

Throughout the history of humanity, from the creation until this very moment, from yesterday until tomorrow, from life to death, the grace of God is one common divine thread that weaves its way from the beginning to the end of every person's life who has ever taken a breath upon this earth. Reflecting on my own experiences in life - considering the long road traveled, far from the glorious light of life we were created for by God - I know of no other reason outside of the grace of God that I stand justified and clean before God. Grace is God's unending, absolute, unqualified, free gift of love given to those like us who are totally depraved and undeserving of such affection. Without grace all men, all women, and all children would be condemned to eternal punishment and the world would cease to exist.

God's grace is a character of His heart and a result of His creative work, seen in every attribute He possesses. God sees and understands our needs, then supplies what is needed by His grace. It is purely by His will that He does so, without any merit or warrant on our part. Grace is God-created, God-initiated, God-imparted. The standard for receiving His grace is unattainable by any human means. God displays His favor of grace purely out of love, even when our behavior is at its worst. Without grace, we have no love, we cannot love. Grace is imparted to us vertically, through our relationship with God, and its fruit is seen horizontally, in our relationships with one another. Our response to the grace of God in our own lives should be lived in the grace that we give to others – and when it is not, we stand in judgment before God. In Matthew 6:14-15 Jesus said: *“If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”* This hard truth reveals how God views the preciousness and power of His grace. The only condition God gives us to receiving God’s grace is that we give it to one another. The apostle Paul affirms this Colossians 3:12-13: *“Put on, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.”*

The heart of the meaning of God's grace culminates in the cross of Jesus Christ. In one single act of *violent grace*, Jesus sacrificed his life so that we might keep ours forever. The picture of a dying Savior pleading for mercy and forgiveness for his murderers reveals to us the true depth of God's grace. In the midst of our deepest struggles, when all seems lost in despair, Jesus is there pleading our case. The power of the cross has no equal; the grace of God *IS* Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior. The apostle Paul opens the second chapter of Ephesians by reminding us of where we’ve come from in our desperate need for God: *“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind”* (Ephesians 2:1-3). And its at this point, I would imagine Paul closed his eyes and took a breath; surrounded and filled in his heart and mind with the dark shadows of his past, remembering where he came from - and then he opens his heart and his mind and his eyes to what God had done deep down in his soul, and he writes: *“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by GRACE you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his GRACE in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus”* (Ephesians 2:4-7). And its here where Paul then reminds himself of the power of God’s *saving grace* - which has now become the power of God’s *sanctifying grace* and God’s *suffering grace*, as his heart and his mind speak to him of what God was currently doing deep down in his soul because of his continued desperate need for God: *“For by GRACE you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them”* (Ephesians 2:8-10).

There is a place in Northern Chile, a region between the great Andes mountain range and the Pacific Ocean where rain never falls. This so foreign to those of us who live in Port Alberni. Morning after morning the sun rises brilliantly over the tall mountains to the east; each noon it shines brightly down from overhead; evening brings a picturesque sunset. Although storms are often seen raging high in the mountains, and heavy fog banks can be seen far out over the sea, the sun continues to shine on this favored and protected strip of land. One would imagine this area to be an earthly paradise - *but it is not*. Instead, it is a sterile and desolate desert. There are no streams of water, and nothing grows there. Too often we long for the total sunshine of joy in life without the weight of the stormy struggles of the downpour of suffering in life as it really is. But like the sunny, unfertile part of Chile, life without its burdens and trials would not be creative, productive, or transforming. We need not only the sunshine of God’s mercy but also the stormy showers of God’s grace to find our way home to God.

*“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”* The great missionary J. Hudson Taylor once wrote: “It does not matter where God places me or how. That is rather for Him to consider than for me. For the easiest positions, He must give grace; and in the most difficult, His grace is sufficient. So, if God places me in great perplexity, must He not give me much guidance? In positions of great difficulty, much grace? In circumstances of great pressure and trial, much strength? As to work, mine was never so plentiful, so responsible, or so difficult; but the weight and strain are all gone. His resources are mine, for He is mine!” Brothers and sisters, our greatest error when it comes to the grace of God is defining grace on our terms or by our expectations rather than that of God’s. It is more than significant that while we are exhorted to “draw near” to God “with confidence” – we must never forget that we are approaching a “throne.” We must never take lightly the “mercy” and “grace” of our most sovereign and supreme and holy God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who gave up his life for the cause of his faith, once wrote: “Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. Costly grace...is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble, it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.”

During the late 1800s English evangelist Henry Moorhouse made several trips to America to preach. On one of these occasions, he was taking a walk through a poor section of a city when he noticed a small boy coming out of a store with a pitcher of milk. Just then, the boy slipped and fell, breaking the pitcher and spilling the milk all over the sidewalk. Moorhouse rushed to the youngster’s side and found him unhurt but terrified. “My mamma’ll whip me!” he cried. The preacher suggested that they try to put the pitcher back together, but the glass was just shattered. Moorhouse picked up the crying youngster and carried him to a nearby store where the preacher purchased a new pitcher. Then he returned to the dairy store and had the pitcher washed and filled with milk. With that done, he carried both the boy and the pitcher home. Putting the youngster down on his front porch, Moorhouse handed him the pitcher and asked, “Now will your mama whip you?” A wide smile spread upon his tear-stained face, “Aw, no sir, ‘cause its lot better pitcher than we had before.” By God’s grace, the cross of Jesus Christ has restored our sin-shattered souls into better vessel than we’ve ever had before. It is by our brokenness, weaknesses, temptations and sin that we come to know the fullness of God’s grace.

Marvelous grace of our loving Lord, grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt!  
Yonder on Calvary’s mount outpoured, there where the blood of the Lamb was spilt.  
Grace, grace, God’s grace, grace that will pardon and cleanse within;  
grace, grace, God’s grace, grace that is greater than all our sin!

*Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.* Romans 5:1-5

*Humble yourselves, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.*

1 Peter 5:6-11

31 January 2016

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