

GRACE 150

DEVOTIONS FOR THE
JOURNEY OF
UNLIMITED GRACE

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THIS DEVOTIONAL is dedicated to the Lord
and to the people of Grace Presbyterian Church—
past, present, and future. For in it, we celebrate
150 years of God's unlimited grace toward us,
bringing us to repentance and saving faith in His son Jesus.

We celebrate His love poured out on us resulting
in a desire to reach others with His saving grace and Word,
making disciples for His glory. May we too be
found faithful, and continue to carry the mission
of Grace Presbyterian Church into the future.

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FOREWORD BY PASTOR BRYAN CHAPPELL

From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. John 1:16

WHEN THE APOSTLE John wrote that we have received “grace upon grace,” he was recounting the history of Israel that had culminated in the coming of Jesus and would result in the security of our eternity. Every provision had been of grace, every prophecy had been fulfilled by grace, the Savior came to provide us grace, and our Lord Jesus Christ will return to usher in the eternal promises of grace.

John looked backward and forward to communicate such “grace upon grace,” and we have the same privilege. We celebrate the grace of God’s provision by remembering 150 years of His faithfulness in establishing and flourishing the ministry of Grace Presbyterian Church.

Begun as a mission school for children in a railway car while the Civil War was raging, this fledgling work shared the grace of Christ with those needing the hope of the gospel in desperate times. The church formally organized in 1868, moving from a small frame building on Green Street to a new church building at Madison and Wayne Streets in 1873.

The church has gone through a succession of three more buildings (a rebuild at Madison and Wayne, then at Forrest Hill and Knoxville, and finally at North State Route 91), enduring fires, tragedies, World Wars, a Great Depression and a Great Recession, congregational ups and downs, doctrinal challenges, and pastoral transitions that have regularly reminded God’s people of the beauty and necessity of God’s grace—His willingness to provide for those who look to Him in faith despite their weakness, frailty, and sin.

From 1883 to 1982 the church affiliated with the Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA). No evidence of this people’s faithfulness was more apparent or tested than the 1982 decision to leave the PCUSA, following the leadership of long-term pastor Dr. Bruce Dunn. He desired to affiliate with the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), so that this church’s commitment to the full truth and authority of the Bible would be maintained. The church has continued to resolutely hold firm to all the Bible teaches about the virgin birth of Christ, His sinless life, atoning death, physical resurrection, and eternal provision for all who will confess their need of His grace.

Confession of our need of Christ is not a one-time commitment. Every day we declare the reality and necessity of Christ's grace when we pray to Him for daily needs, spiritual strengthening, pardoning mercy, and biblical wisdom to bring Him glory in homes, work, recreations, relationships, and afflictions.

Since "the earth is the Lord's and everything in it" (Psalm 24:1), we recognize there is no corner of our lives where we should not honor Him, or do not need Him. So in gratitude for God's enduring and expansive grace, "in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving [we] let requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:6).

This book is a compilation of such prayers from God's people, who delight to share how God has provided His grace to them through the ministry of Grace Presbyterian Church. The goal is not to glorify their prayers or to extol the reputation of the church. Rather, these devotions are a reminder that "thus far the Lord has helped us" (1 Samuel 7:12), so that such affirmations of His grace will encourage all of our hearts to seek Him in prayer with daily eagerness and renewed devotion.

God's grace is not only the basis of our faith in what He has done, nor merely the reason for our freedom from penalty for wrongs we have done, but it is the fuel for all God calls us to do. As love for Him, in response to His grace toward us, supersedes all other desires, "the love of Christ controls us" (2 Corinthians 5:14), and seeking His guidance and care in prayer becomes the delight and strength of our lives. May God enable everyone who reads these words to experience such delight and receive such strength, as they offer fresh prayers to Him in the light of His glory and grace.

And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. Hebrews 11:6

WE CALLED IT “FUTURE GRACE” IN 2006. This was the title we gave to the campaign to relocate and rebuild the Grace Presbyterian Church campus. It required the sale of the Dunn Center and the church on Knoxville Avenue. It would eventually require three separate multimillion-dollar capital campaigns fondly known as Future Grace, Closing the Gap, and Growing Grace.

The faith lessons for us were many:

Faith that glorifies God is always God-centered. The reality is that it was never about a new building or relocation; rather, it was about trusting God for the future. From the beginning it was promoted as “a journey of faith.” Our faith was not that God wanted us to have a new building, but that God would glorify Himself in the journey.

Faith in God unites God’s people. My greatest joy in this project was not to see the building completed (that was more a feeling of relief!), but to see everyone contributing to the success of the project.

Faith that glorifies God always leads to thanksgiving. Sheri and I now live on the other side of the world. Perth, Australia is really far away from Peoria, Illinois, but we still rejoice to hear about the work God is doing at Grace Presbyterian Church. We continue to thank God for Grace.

Father, we know that You exist and that You faithfully reward those who seek You. May we draw near to You, as we look in faith to a grace-filled future.

– Ben Johnston

Ben served as senior pastor at Grace from 2000-2012. He and his wife, Sheri, reside in Perth, Australia where Ben is lead pastor of Subiaco Church.

UNLIMITED GRACE VALUE – GLOBAL DISCIPLESHIP

When he [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” Matthew 9:36–38

DID YOU EVER HEAR God speak directly to you? I did. I often travel and on my last trip, I had occasion to spend some extended time with the same man for the third trip in a row. I heard God distinctly say: “Do you think that’s a coincidence?”

When we are saved, why don’t we just go straight to heaven? Maybe like Monopoly—don’t pass Go, don’t collect \$200—just go straight to heaven. Seems like it would be a lot easier that way!

The reason is that God has a different plan for our lives. He desires two things from us.

First, He desires that our lives would grow deep roots in the grace and power of His Spirit. We should become His disciples, learning to follow His Son in every way. Giving Him glory, learning to depend on the gospel, and being humble and gracious are all steps on this journey.

And second, He wants His disciples to be laborers in His harvest. He loved the world so much that He sacrificed His only Son—even when we were still sinners! He wants the world to know and...wait for it...He wants us to tell them!

God’s perfect plan—His disciples making more disciples!

O Father, give us the desire to follow Your Son so closely that we start to become just like Him! Please put into our hearts the love and compassion that You have for the lost. Please overflow our hearts with Your Spirit such that the love that You have shown us flows into the lives of others. Help us to see the harvest as our family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, our communities, and the whole world. We pray that You would raise laborers for Your harvest, and we could be found faithful.

– Joel Feucht

UNLIMITED GRACE VALUE – GRACIOUS HUMILITY

Submit yourselves therefore to God. James 4:7

HOW CAN WE BETTER live a life that embodies Gracious Humility? What is humility? If we focus first on our relationship and behavior towards other people instead of first and foremost to God, are we following the biblical primary tenets of humility?

Over the last two years, all the adult Sunday school classes wrestled with these questions in a three-week short course. Studying humility from four divergent schools of thought yielded interesting insights (practically, academically, biblically and theologically). What did we learn?

Practically, most people simply see humility as submissive interpersonal behavior. If you submit to another person's desire, that's humility. Really, that's it? No wonder so many are skeptical; submissive behavior goes against our human nature. Academics, even after decades of study, don't agree on a common definition of humility, how to measure it, or if it can be taught through interventions, and precious few include any spiritual component.

Biblical characters from Noah, Abraham, Joseph, and Moses, to Ruth, Samuel, David, Esther, Hosea, Stephen, Paul, and the greatest example—Jesus—all embraced God's will as their own, regardless of their circumstances.

Setting our own will aside and submitting to our LORD's will, for His eternal purposes and for His glory, that's Gracious Humility. Easy to say...but...easy to live? Not yet!

Lord, by the power of Your Holy Spirit, enable us to be a reflection of Your Gracious Humility as we live our lives for Your eternal purposes, all for Your great glory!

– Steve Klisares

UNLIMITED GRACE VALUE – GOSPEL DEPENDENCE

Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act. Psalm 37:4–5

IT IS COUNTERCULTURAL TO LIVE a gospel-dependent life, one that seeks to live for Christ in every moment and sphere of life, submitting to the authority of God's Word in the decisions of life, and praying without ceasing. Most people have an "I'll do it myself" and "I want it now" mentality. Relinquishing control and waiting are unusual concepts in today's society.

We learned the meaning of gospel dependence early in our marriage. My wife's "heart desire" was a baby grand piano. We began looking for used ones, finding one in the town in which she taught. It was perfect, but too expensive for our small budget. We continued to pray and search, but began to give up on finding one. Months later a lady at my wife's school asked if she was still interested in the very piano we looked at months earlier. She said the party who owned it was remodeling and just wanted it hauled away. That piano has remained in the center of our home nearly 45 years as a constant reminder of God's provision and care for those who are willing to live for, depend on, and pray to Him for their every need.

Lord, help us to depend more upon You and less upon ourselves.

– Thom Simpson

UNLIMITED GRACE VALUE – GLORIFYING WORSHIP

Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness. Psalm 29:2

IT IS EASY TO GET LOST on what corporate worship should be like. Is it about the music, or what's happening on the platform, or even the people around me? Those are part of our corporate worship, but there is also something much more intimate too. First, worship is about an audience of one: God. Second, my heart and affection are required. Here are some thoughtful quotes I find helpful regarding worship.

1. Worship is about an audience of one: God.

“Of all the things Christ wants for us, loving Him and focusing our attention on Him are the most important.” Charles Stanley

“The climax of God’s happiness is the delight He takes in the echoes of His excellence in the praises of His people.” John Piper

Dear Lord, I pray that You are the focus of my worship; that my interest is in praising You and not the world around me.

2. My heart and affection are required.

“Without the heart it’s not worship, it’s a stage play.” Stephen Charnock

“When I worship, I would rather my heart be without words than my words be without heart.” Lamar Boschman

“Worship is no longer worship when it reflects the culture around us more than the Christ within us.” A.W. Tozer

God help me be affectionate in my worship, praising You with my deepest love.

Lord, help our church glorify You. Let our corporate worship lead us to focus our thoughts on You alone. Teach us to worship with our whole heart and display our affection to You.

– Woody Hartwell

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2:10

HISTORY IS HIS STORY. God uses His people as He unfolds the story of His redemption to the world. God can use any of His creations, as He used a donkey to talk to Balaam (Numbers 22) and a raven to bring food for Elijah (1 Kings 17). However, most importantly, He chooses His people to continue His work and bless others.

Our church is full of people who serve sacrificially. One such family comes to our mind. They love the international community God has brought to Peoria. Their love for Christ is evident in their unconditional service. They teach driving so that the newbies can be independent. They give rides, they babysit our children, and cook our food. Above all, they are always there to support, care, and give of themselves. Their genuine and unconditional love causes people to ask the motivation behind such service.

Each person is God's masterpiece, His unique artwork that displays His glory. God divinely orchestrates and inspires His people, so their passions for service are aligned with His purposes. Only in eternity will we know the impact of our willingness to serve and be used by God. Meanwhile, He continues to join our stories with His story, and in doing so, He delights to work through us.

Dear Lord, thank You for this church and the people who reflect Your love through their service. Provide us all with Your strength, and help us seek ways to serve and bless others in the community.

– Amit & Glory Christian

For from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. John 1:16

“I FEEL LIKE NEEDING GRACE IS A BAD THING.” I watched myself write those words across the pages of my journal. Jesus was searching my heart, and there in my handwriting glared the lie I had been nurturing. My head knew better, but my heart still resisted the need for grace. Why would I resist God’s freely given favor? Because I saw grace as compartmentalized moments in time. When I messed up, grace was needed. When I didn’t mess up, it wasn’t. My goal was to need grace as little as possible.

But God began to show me that grace is not compartmentalized. Grace is pervasive in all of life. Grace greets us in the morning and ushers us to sleep at night. It meets us when we fall short and when we feel small. Grace is heard in laughter, and holds the grieving heart. And grace transforms us, not as compensation for what is lacking, but by completely redefining us. By grace you are forgiven. You are a new creation. You are dearly loved. You are God’s child. You are a chosen bride.

Grace adorns every aspect of our day and every inch of who we are. It is grace’s presence—not absence—that makes us whole.

**Father, Your grace touches every part of who we are and is not given in vain.
Teach us how to receive Your love and live in Your grace.**

– Hannah Branson

The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you. Deuteronomy 7:7–8 NIV

AS A KID GROWING UP on the south side of Peoria and in a family of limited means, I felt I would not be a “chosen” person. When I was seven years old, my folks discovered the South Side Mission and I started attending Sunday school.

We were taught from the Bible every Sunday that God loved us and gave His only Son to die for our sins. After being convinced by the Holy Spirit and God’s Word that He loved even me, I asked for His forgiveness and for Him to come into my heart.

On Sunday evenings, a group from Grace Presbyterian Church often came and ministered to us. I was so grateful for that ministry then and now. Years later as a member of Grace, I am still grateful for the ministry that has continued these 150 years.

Help us to remember, Lord, we were chosen not because of who we are or what we may have accomplished, but because You loved us.

– Betty Leach

The Lord will command His lovingkindness in the daytime; and His song will be with me in the night, a prayer to the God of my life. Psalm 42:8 NASB

I GREW UP IN VIETNAM going to Catholic Church with my Ba Ngoai (maternal grandma), and going to Buddhist temple with Ba Noi (paternal grandma). Although raised in a loving family with wonderful parents, I was haunted by fear and confusion.

I feared I was going to hell, and no one could save me. This awful fear stemmed from the day I saw images of hell torture at the Buddhist temple. I felt doomed as I contemplated in my ten-year-old mind, what was I on earth for if my destiny was hell? At the Catholic Church I was more comfortable. I heard of Jesus who came to Earth as a baby. My understanding of Jesus stopped there, as I don't recall anything else amidst the endless chanting and long preaching.

I arrived in America as a refugee with my family when I was 11 years old. Here in the land of freedom, by God's grace, I learned Jesus is the Savior who came to save the lost sheep, such as me. My life now flows like a river of living water, as I praise my God for clearing up my confusion and dissolving my fear. He replaced fear with fervent expectation for my heavenly feast with the lover of my soul. He replaced confusion with clear confidence in His care and guidance.

Lord, help us shine Your light into the darkness of those who live in fear and confusion.

– Phi Hang Nguyen

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. Ephesians 4:29

NEVER IN HISTORY HAVE WE HAD access to so many ways to communicate the love of Christ. Technology literally can connect us with others around the world. Yet sometimes instead of embracing this gift, I find myself frustrated by it.

But then we have Jesus. Jesus was the master communicator. He used every tool available to reach those around Him. Scripture shows us many examples of Jesus communicating in various ways to meet the needs of people. Sometimes He spoke in parables to make spiritual principles come alive with word pictures. Sometimes He gave sermons to large crowds as they followed Him around. Sometimes He spoke tenderly and directly right to a person who needed love and compassion like the woman at the well.

I'm thankful Jesus left us a timeless example of how to communicate with others. On days when I feel I can't clearly express the words of my heart, I have an example to follow.

Lord, thank You for sending Jesus who gave us so many examples of how to communicate effectively with others. Fill us with Your love and grace. And give us words that encourage and draw others to You.

– Leah Nieman

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. Joshua 1:9

ANNUALLY IN PEORIA THERE IS a three-mile run called Big Hill Big Chill Fun Run. It's a bargain of a race where for 10 dollars finishers get a headband, a bowl of chili, two drinks, and corn fritters. This run is a challenge because it takes place in the middle of January, and there is a gargantuan hill at the finish. No matter the weather, that hill is always a challenge. In the middle of the run, I am always struck with the assurance and sense of joy knowing that God is with me, and He is the One who gives me the strength and courage to forge on. Each year I will get older and run less quickly, but I love knowing that no matter my circumstance, He is with me.

On April 15, 2013, I ran the race of my lifetime when I ran the Boston Marathon—and finished before terrorists bombed the race. Whether I am running a marathon of 26.2 miles, competing in a half Ironman triathlon of 70.3 miles, or running the Big Hill Big Chill, I feel these events equally give me a reminder that the Lord is who I lean upon. He is the One who gives me the strength and the courage to press on.

God, thank You for being there in the thick of things; when we are weak You are strong, and You sustain us.

– Juliet Lin Wu

You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book? Psalm 56:8

A KEEPSAKE GIVEN TO ME by a friend reminds me of this psalm of lament. It is a small glass container called a “tear bottle”.

In Psalm 56 the beautiful imagery of David speaks to us about the tenderness of God. Distress and fear overwhelmed him, and he begins by pleading for God’s mercy.

He then rests his faith in God’s promises by declaring, “this I know, that God is for me”(verse 9).

Believing that his God observed with tender concern, David could boldly say in verse 10, “In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord, whose word I praise.” His plea for mercy ends in thankful praise.

Throughout 150 years, for our family of Grace there have been tossings and tears...tears of joy and tears of sorrow.

We follow in their train as we continue to trust in God’s loving and tender heart.

Father, thank You that You have a “bottle and a book” for Your children. And this we know, “that God is for us.”

– Sonja Rassi

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. Psalm 23:1

THE WELL-KNOWN, WELL-LOVED twenty-third Psalm is the only complete chapter included in the Well-Versed Kids Scripture memory program. I could quote it long before we developed Well-Versed Kids for Grace Presbyterian, our home church from 1981-1988.

Recently those words I knew by heart, were leading me to a deeper understanding of God's shepherd care.

The New Living Bible changes "I shall not want" to "I have everything I need." I like the positive; it gives a new understanding of what God is saying. It leads me to pray, *What are my needs today? How, my Shepherd, are You going to meet those needs? What does it look like to trust You with my needs? And therein lies my answer, trust.*

Sometimes it's trusting God with a conversation I know is coming.

Sometimes it's trusting God that I can finish a project on time.

Sometimes it's trusting God for safety as our kids are traveling.

Sometimes it's trusting God when I don't understand.

But I know He wants my trust. A paraphrase might be, *God, You are my Good Shepherd; I am going to trust You to provide what I need whether I understand or not.*

Dear Jesus, I want to trust You with my needs. Would You help me to experience You and be aware of You meeting those needs? Amen.

– Sue Tell

Sue was the lead developer and author of the Well-Versed Kids program used since 1987 at Grace Presbyterian to teach children to memorize Scripture. She and her husband Bill are based in Colorado Springs and serve with The Navigators on college campuses across the U.S. Look for Bill and Sue at our Global Impact Celebrations and learn more about Sue on her blog at suetell.com.

But God said to Jonah, “Do you do well to be angry for the plant?” And he said, “Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.” And the Lord said, “You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night.” Jonah 4:9–10

JONAH IS ANGRY ABOUT A VINE that provided him shade and physical comfort one day and was gone the next. He didn't plant the vine; he didn't water or care for it in any way. It was a gift from God. Instead of recognizing the giver, Jonah became upset about the loss of the gift.

How often do we find our comfort in the gift rather than the giver? When we are upset, do we reach for the phone or kneel in prayer? If someone loses a job, do we brush up on our resume and then ask for God's provision? There is nothing wrong with having good friends, a high paying job, a nice home or a car. After all, these are gifts given to us by God.

However, when we become more dependent on the gift than the One who gave it, we may need to reevaluate our priorities.

Dear God, please give us grateful hearts and keep our eyes pointed toward You and not on our blessings, because You are the provider of all things.

– Adara & Becky LeBron

But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect. 1 Peter 3:15

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN IN a spiritual conversation and not known how to respond? Do you feel like if you don't have the perfect answer you can't say anything?

In a world that doesn't acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Savior, it's hard to have an opinion that's unpopular. When we're having a spiritual conversation with a neighbor or coworker, there are times we may try to "win" the conversation with spiritual truth. God's Word does not need to be compensated by our clever or forceful argument.

God's way is different. It's not to shut down or fight back, but to faithfully and respectfully share who Jesus is and why He is the hope of eternal life. The way we live our lives and the way we speak to others is a reflection of Christ in us.

We are not called to win the debate, but we are called to be faithful to share with gentleness and respect.

Father, help us be a church who is faithful to share by Your power and not our ability.

– Kevin & Rachel Misura

Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!
1 Chronicles 16:34

THIS VERSE IS ONE OF MY FAVORITES. Perhaps this verse is best appreciated by looking at its phrases in reverse order:

“For his steadfast love endures forever.” Our Creator loves us—what a precious, awesome thought! In fact, the Creator loves us so much that He died for our sake so we could escape hell, inherit heaven, and have a personal relationship with Him. And what’s more, this astounding love is forever, so we can rejoice that it is an unconditional love. What conclusion can we make? “He is good!”

What should be our response? “Oh give thanks to the Lord!”

Life can be tough sometimes, and we may even question God’s goodness. If that happens to any of us, we should remember the display of God’s love for us at the cross and the fact that “His love endures forever.”

The words of this wonderful verse are found in the Bible 10 additional times. This exclamation of God’s goodness was a common refrain of the Israelites when they thanked God for His acts of goodness on their behalf. Like the Israelites, our church has reason to voice that same spirit of thanksgiving. This verse applies well to both the individual and the church as a whole. May it bless you as it has blessed me.

Lord, as we meditate upon Your love for us, may we see more clearly that You are good, and then give You the thanks that You so richly deserve.

– Eric Branch

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:7

Mommy: "Okay let's do 'Jesus Book' (what my kids call the Bible), prayers, and bed."

Simera: "Mommy! I got the demotion for us!"

Mommy: "The what?"

Simera: "The DE-MO-SHUN!" (Holds up the kids' devotional).

OUT OF THE MOUTH OF BABES! While she was not aware of it, this cute little slip of my daughter's tongue in pronouncing the word devotion is rather profound. How often do we find ourselves truly demoting our desires to be less than what the Lord is calling us to do? Are my "rights" as a wife, mother, employee, and friend more important than showing the grace I have been given? Are the words I speak "truth in love," or products of self-preservation, bitterness, and fear? In a culture that tells us to fight for what we deserve, demoting yourself before anyone is a challenge!

There is great purpose in our devotion to God involving the demotion of our desires. It's not just for His glory, it's for our protection. If I am truly honest with myself, my trials and anxieties are usually products of me elevating my thoughts and plans above the Lord's. In the end, it's not our devotion that is going to reach our children, revive our marriages, rejuvenate our faith, and restore our nation... It's our "DE-MO-SHUN!"

Heavenly Father, allow us to fully accept our DE-MO-SHUN before Your holy, righteous ways and lift Your plans for us above our own. Amen!

– Kristin & Simera Rickey

But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Corinthians 12:9–10

THE APOSTLE PAUL WAS GIVEN a “thorn in the flesh,” a weakness of some sort (2 Corinthians 12:7). He was glad to rejoice in this, knowing that God’s power could thereby “rest” on him!

We all have endured moments, days, even years, when we were overwhelmed with a sense of weakness. We have physical weakness, emotional weakness, financial weakness, a weak sense of direction, or lack of knowledge. We are overwhelmed with a troubled relationship or a bewildering dilemma at work or home, which leaves us feeling weak and helpless.

As a mother of six, these feelings are familiar territory. But we all can relate to Paul’s experience in some way, regardless of our profession or station in life! There are very many Bible verses about strength from God. (Seriously—Google it!) The essence of His strength in our lives is so beautiful. He is strong; we rest. He fights for us; we trust and obey. He uses the weak to “shame the strong.” We “boast in our weakness” and let His power rest upon us.

It is all to His glory. He is all-powerful. Let us rest in Him! Let us rejoice! Let us endure our weaknesses and troubles with His strength! The joy of the Lord is our strength!

Father, help us return to You and rest, in quietness and in trust, so that You will then let Your power rest upon us in all our weakness (Isaiah 30:15).

– Alane Wiegman

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 1 Timothy 2:1-4

WHAT IS GOOD AND PLEASES GOD? Paul tells Timothy our supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving please Him. God is merciful and wants all men to be saved and know the truth about the good news He offers to all. We can be sure when we pray and plead that our friends, family, and those in public office would know the truth and accept God's mercy shown to us all, we are praying exactly what He wills, and He is pleased by it.

I have seen God work in amazing ways in answering prayer for the salvation of others. One of my uncles thought attending church was enough for him to win God's approval. Many people prayed for him for over 50 years. In his nineties he had a stroke and was unable to speak. I thought he would never see his need for Christ's mercy and sacrifice. Amazingly, he was able to communicate and ask someone to read the Bible to him, and finally accepted Christ as his Savior.

I have learned there is nothing more pleasing to God than to hear His children praying for those He wants to save. Let's continue to pray that our friends, family, and those in high positions would come to know the truth and love God, who loves them so much.

Lord, thank You for being "God our Savior." Thank You for the confidence that we can be sure such prayers for the salvation of others please You, and that You want to redeem them.

- Dale Dalton

And Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord counted him as righteous because of his faith. Genesis 15:6 NLT

SOUNDS SIMPLE. Like a Nike commercial, “Just believe.” Yet when the challenges of life become overwhelming, like waves of an angry sea that want to crush the breath out of you, it’s not so easy. That’s where faith comes in. When relationships are destroyed, finances are in ruin, deepest-held dreams disappointed; will you believe that God is good? That He creates beauty out of ashes? That *all things* really do work together for good for those who love Him?

Abram did. Years of months of barrenness for his wife, crippling old age, dirty, inconvenient wilderness wandering...Abram believed the Lord. Like a drowning, gasping man clinging to a life preserver, like a fearful, small child clinging to his daddy’s hand in a crowd, Abram clung to faith in God. Abram clung to God. We can follow his example and just believe the Lord when life seems unbearable. We don’t have to do anything great for His kingdom, nor earn our position as His child. We just have to believe that God really loves us. Believe that God will never leave us nor forsake us. That He is our sure Foundation. That in our flesh we will see God.

Father, God, thank You that You are faithful and good. Help us to believe You no matter what our circumstances.

– Ruth Duffer

Older women...are to teach what is good, and so train the young women.

Titus 2:3-4

“DO IT, JESUS! YES, LORD. DO IT!” the elderly woman next to me whispered, as other women took turns praying aloud. I had never heard such fervent prayer. I was stunned by the beauty of these godly women praying. Quiet tears streamed down my face. I was determined to learn to pray like they did. I was sure this was a place my faith could grow. That was a long time ago, when I was attending a Bible study at Grace. Not long after, we began coming to church here on Sundays as well.

Interacting with older women, and making friends outside my own age group, was refreshing. The wisdom and perspective the years gave my older friends was soothing and calming. My hectic life was surely a temporary stage. My children would surely grow up.

I treasure the memories of time spent with several older women, some who are now with God. They mentored me, modeled leadership, and befriended me. I learned that church could be like a big family. You interact, serve, and grow together with people across all ages and stages. And you find life richer for it.

Lord, thank You for a church family that spans generations, and for our rich heritage of prayer and faith.

– Amy Stoller

For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. Hebrews 13:14

THE LORD BROUGHT JUDY and me and our young family to Illinois in 1977 to join the staff of Grace Church as the first full-time Minister of Music. Early in my ministry here, I was asked to speak at a College and Career class gathering. I had been mulling over the verses in Hebrews 11 that mention the patriarchs considering themselves to be “strangers and exiles” on this earth, desiring “a better country...a heavenly one.”

Though I was barely 30 years old, I felt led to impress on these young adults (and myself!) the importance of beginning to think about mortality, the brevity of life, living each day in the light of eternity. We tend to ignore these things until much later in life, and, often, have to live with the regret of not taking them seriously earlier.

I have had the opportunity to share that devotional in a few other settings both at Grace and otherwise in subsequent years. Eventually, it was expanded and developed into a full sermon that has become my “go-to” sermon when asked to fill a pulpit.

The apostle Paul reminds us that the many and varied struggles of life are best viewed and dealt with from an eternal perspective (2 Corinthians 4:17–18). The author of Hebrews heartily concurs!

Deliver us, Lord, from a nearsightedness that hinders us from seeing beyond this very temporal life.

– Gary Roseboom

Gary served as Grace’s minister of music (worship director) from 1977 to 1993. Gary and his wife Judy have been ministering with Rural Home Missionary Association for the past 25 years.

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Psalm 127:1

AS WE REFLECT ON OUR 35 years of marriage, we recognize and appreciate the importance of this verse. Having the Lord at the center of our relationship has provided the foundation we need every day to grow closer as a couple. When we allow the Lord to “build the house,” we are able to change focus from our differences as individuals to the unity we share with the Lord through Jesus Christ. We learn to embrace those differences in order to complement each other and glorify God through a unified relationship.

Our church home is no different. Sometimes we can be tempted to focus on our differences, but in Romans 15:5–7, the apostle Paul encourages us to live in harmony and welcome one another so that we can glorify God together with one voice. Grace Presbyterian Church’s 150-year legacy of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ is a testament to an unwavering focus on the Lord. Our former longtime pastor Dr. Bruce Dunn once said, “A great church must be a united church knit together in love for Christ and each other.”

We pray that Grace Presbyterian Church maintains this focus of unity and love for Christ for the next 150 years, or until Jesus returns and takes us to our eternal home!

– John & Judy Blahnik

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. 1 Peter 5:7 NIV

THESE COMFORTING WORDS FROM God are so true. As a believer early on, from a Pioneer Girl at Grace on Madison Avenue, and through the years, I have claimed His precious promises and learned that answers to prayer often come in unexpected ways.

Looking back, one special God moment comes to mind. My husband and I moved to the country with our three small children, and shortly after we had our fourth. Feeling homebound, overwhelmed, and lonely, I sat at the kitchen table reflecting on the situation. Well, really I was having a pity party, and the tears started streaming down. Within minutes the phone rang and I gathered my composure and answered. On the other end was the voice of a mother who introduced herself and asked, “Since we have daughters the same age, how about we get together for a playtime?” God showed His compassion and care in such an awesome way by sending this dear Christian mom.

There is nothing unique in our lives, no matter how small or trivial, that He does not know and care about. In faith, talk to your Heavenly Father and give Him your sorrows, and if the Holy Spirit prompts the shedding of tears, let it go, for He *truly* cares for you.

Gracious Lord and Heavenly Father, thank You for sending Your Son to pay our sin debt so that we can come boldly before Your throne, through Your son, and cast our cares.

– Bev Pullen

Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers. Luke 22:31–32

AS I READ THAT PHRASE in the account predicting Peter's denial, I thought of many in our congregation whose faith is being—or has been—tested through natural disaster, illness, injury, chronic pain, broken relationships, job losses, etc. Many times, the question is asked, "Why?" Child Evangelism Fellowship has a booklet called, "Do You Wonder Why?" It is a tool that addresses that question, knowing that suffering people do ask it.

In regards to trials, Peter writes: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you" (1 Peter 4:12). James also refers to "the testing of your faith" in James 1:3.

Those of us in the Monday morning prayer group often wonder how we should pray for those who are suffering, especially when it is long term. Sometimes the answer doesn't come in this life.

Father, in the name of Jesus, we pray that the faith of those who are suffering now would not fail.

– Judy Forseth

Then the King will say to those on His right, "Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me."

Matthew 25:34–36 NASB

IN ENGLAND, AUSTRALIA, and some other countries cars drive on the left side of the road. On a recent trip to London, I almost became a hood ornament on one of those famous black taxis because I stepped into a cross walk without looking the right way. This can happen to us spiritually...we can get tripped up or miss God's blessings by looking in the wrong direction.

In Matthew 25, Jesus commended His followers for ministering to those who were hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, or in prison. He called them "the least of these".

If we're honest, most of us seldom if ever come in contact with "the least of these." We surround ourselves with friends, family, neighbors, and co-workers. It's easy getting into a spiritual rut thinking of our own needs, family needs or congregational needs. This is natural and the needs of those around us are important. But if we focus our spiritual energy on ourselves and those around us who we are most comfortable with, we can miss God's blessings.

Jesus is encouraging His followers to get out of their comfort zone and minister to "the least of these." The opportunities are all around us; just look in the right direction.

Lord, help us look in the right direction to see those You called "the least of these." Help us so we don't miss the blessings You have for us in serving others.

– Duane Weeks

In Exodus 33:12–23 Moses prays and boldly asks the Lord for three things.

In verse 13 he says, “Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you...”

In verse 15 Moses says, “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here.”

In verse 18 Moses asks, “Please show me your glory.”

WHEN WE CONSIDER MOSES’ INTERCESSION on behalf of the Israelites, a beautiful model unfolds that both foreshadows the goodness of Christ’s coming to satisfy our deepest needs—direction, presence, and redemptive glory—but also a simultaneous cry of our hearts here and now. Moses makes three key requests of God: show me Your ways, come with Your people, and show Your glory. We must confess we often consider much lesser prayers from our own selfish hearts. The beautiful prayer offered in Exodus 33 redirects our individual thoughts to God’s grander purpose for His people. As Grace celebrates 150 years, what higher thoughts could be considered than to be His church praying for His direction, practicing His presence of Christ in us, and pleading for His glory to be revealed through us.

The Bible tells us from the foundations of the world the redemptive glory of Christ pursues His people across time and history, and a future glory awaits that our imaginations can scarcely dream. Hallelujah, what a Savior!

Lord Jesus, we long for Your coming and for the glorification You promised. While we wait, give us eyes to see Your faithfulness, and give us hearts that plead continually for Your glory to be revealed in us.

– Ryan Hendricker

You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good... Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. Genesis 50:20–21

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED how Joseph in the Old Testament was able to forgive his brothers for the evil they had done to him? Granted, in his youth he was a bit arrogant, seemingly unaware of being his father's favorite, and naively telling his brothers about his dreams of someday ruling over them. Their jealousy and hatred toward him were so great that it caused them to throw him into a pit, sell him into slavery, and lead their father, Jacob, to believe a wild animal had killed him. If anyone had just cause to be bitter, hold a grudge, and seek revenge, surely it was Joseph.

How was he able to endure their jealous, hateful behavior and sit in prison for years without letting hate fester into rage against his brothers, without questioning why God allowed it to happen, and without allowing thoughts of revenge to consume his life? Simply, it was God's grace poured into Joseph's life; grace that he, in turn, chose to show others. Joseph understood what his brothers meant for evil, God meant for good. He let God, not his circumstances, control his life. God's amazing grace can enable us to do likewise!

Lord, help us extend grace and forgiveness to others, the grace You so freely lavish on each of us daily.

– Thom & Linda Simpson

Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; His love endures forever...The LORD is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation. Shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous: "The LORD's right hand has done mighty things!" Psalm 118:1, 14-15 NIV

MARKER MOMENTS—WE ALL HAVE THEM. Memories so deeply imprinted in our mind's eye, we'll never forget them or their impact on life's journey so far.

Remember the first time you learned to ride a bike?

(I crashed into a neighbor's mailbox, landing in a corn field!)

Or write your own name?

(It was exciting to try cursive!)

Moments like learning to play an instrument,

(Poor parents—that saxophone sounded like a dying cow!)

The first time you drove a car all by yourself?

(Hands gripping the steering wheel, not 1mph over the limit!)

Your first day at your first job?

(So scared to do or say the wrong thing.)

I remember vividly as a young child when first learning about Jesus. Drawn to the stories, I wanted to know more. Although I didn't even begin to understand everything (and I still do not), the LORD gave me the grace to understand enough – that He really is the One, True, Living God and there is none like Him! Marker moment after marker moment, He is faithful...

to love us without conditions

to forgive us when we ask

to guide us as we follow

to bring joy in the midst of trials

to comfort and strengthen along life's way.

Lord God, we praise You for every remembrance of Your faithfulness. We praise You for 150 years of faithfulness to Grace Presbyterian. May this anniversary season be a marker moment in the life of our church.

– Rachel Kramer

Rachel and Scott Kramer served for 12 years leading praise and worship at Grace. Currently they tour the nation ministering at 200 events per year as gospel music family group, The Kramers, along with son Weston, daughter Maria Kramer Wolfe, and her husband Ben. Learn more at thekramersmusic.com.

Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God, without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life.
Philippians 2:14–16 NIV

WE FIND TWO CHALLENGES HERE: the reminder that a critical spirit is so unbecoming and easily contradicts the faith we proclaim, and the closing challenge to live out our faith.

How often at the end of a busy day, I have looked up at the night sky, taken a deep breath, and been reassured of God's deep and abiding presence. In the gentleness of a starry night there is comfort, and hope, and promise. In the quiet orderliness there is a deep sense of God's strength.

Over the years there have been some lean and difficult months. My biological family, though always supportive, lived several hours away. So it was my church family who walked with me, and Christian men who mentored my son. These folks were bright and shining stars in my "universe."

I have been at Grace about 12 years. I have learned so much in the teaching from the pulpit, in Bible study, and in Sunday school. I have found the gifts of friendship and fellowship and prayer and laughter. Here we can interact with the tiniest and the eldest, and every age and season in between. I am so glad in my heart that God brought me to worship here.

Thank You, Lord, for all the "stars" that walk in this place. Holy Spirit, guide us to see those places where we can shine Your light on those whose road is hard. Help us to hold out the Word of life in our daily walk, and in everything to give You the praise and glory.

– Bobbe Pickell

In your goodness, O God, you provided for the needy. Psalm 68:10

WHEN I WAS A KID and lived on the south side of Peoria, my mother was ill and bedridden. On Sunday mornings if we couldn't get to church, mom would have us listen to The Grace Worship Hour on the radio.

Years later, in 1971 when I returned from the army, my mother was better and my parents were attending Grace. My wife and I followed my parents to Grace not knowing what a blessing was in store for us.

In 1982 I was working at Caterpillar. That October the union called us out on strike against Caterpillar. The strike lasted seven months. That's when God showed me His love, compassion, and grace through the people of Grace Presbyterian Church.

With a wife and three children ages 5, 6, and 10, the strike pay wasn't enough. One of the pastor's messages was on pride and to not let pride keep you from accepting help that God sends you. God not only supplied our needs through financial gifts, meals, groceries, and odd jobs for pay, He gave us a peace that passes all understanding that only He can give.

Lord, thank You for a church that teaches Your Word, and a church family who believes what they are taught.

– Russ Saathoff

Therefore God has highly exalted him...so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow. Philippians 2:9-10

PHILIPPIANS 2 HAS FREQUENTLY been a theme in our years of missionary service. Christ humbled Himself and came as a man, temporarily setting aside His full glory, so that you and I could receive His grace and bow before Him now. Everyone will eventually bow and recognize His lordship, but we have received His grace—truly unmerited favor—to believe and follow Him willingly now.

God's grace continues to pursue us, sometimes through deeper brokenness. His grace teaches us to put away self and pride, and develop a deeper love for His true self, His Word, and the lost and struggling souls around us who need to hear of His grace and message of redemption.

Each step of our journey—salvation, redemption, sanctification, service and worship—is a result of Christ's glorious person and unmerited favor toward us through the cross and His resurrection.

Lord, help us to fully grasp the depths of Your grace toward us, so that we might live fully in You each day of our lives.

– Brian & Karen Cordes

Give praise to the Lord, proclaim his name; make known among the nations what he has done. I Chronicles 16:8 NIV

CATHEDRALS ARE LIKE MONUMENTS of Christianity built to represent a legacy of faith and devotion. In the small town of Victoria, Kansas tourists flock to see the “Cathedral of the Plains.” The church’s twin bell towers rise majestically 141 feet toward the heavens. Built by devoted, hard-working immigrants beginning in 1908, every man in the parish over age 12 was assessed \$45 and his family required to haul six loads of native limestone blocks each year with a horse or mule. With sweat and sacrifice, the church was completed in 1911. In 1972 the replacement value of this beautiful church was estimated at two-and-a-half billion dollars.

An eternal legacy stands at Grace Presbyterian, not with stones and mortar, but with a more durable monument: a message for eternity. This legacy began in 1862 with 19 students and the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ that all who would believe would be saved. Meeting in a railroad train car, imagine prayer after prayer ascending to heaven, asking God to spread the gospel through them. Imagine if they could see over time the answers to their prayers: growth and buildings and always a focus on spreading the good news of salvation, and that vision eventually encompassing the world with Grace-sent missionaries.

Lord Jesus, we pray You would continue the legacy of Grace Presbyterian. Make us a monument to Your glory; not merely a beautiful building, but devoted and faithful servants carrying on the legacy of faith and the message of salvation in Jesus Christ.

– Dorothy Bartel

“Blessed...” Psalm 1

LAST FALL WE VISITED New Glarus, WI to learn of our heritage. Our great grandparents left Glarus, Switzerland in the middle 1800s to journey to the new world! They left their home and livelihood on a promise to own land in America. It was a faith journey for them. When they settled, they soon built their little church building. We visited that building and sat where they would have sat.

I felt so blessed when we were given a copy of our great grandfather's will, in which he wrote a prayer of blessing on his children, and their children's children in the generations to come. He had written it 15 years before he died. We celebrated that fact; that we had been prayed for before we were born. I passed that blessing on to my children and grandchildren this past Christmas.

It causes me to believe that the members of this congregation were prayed for 150 and more years ago. Let us celebrate that idea. May we continue to be blessed, and stand as a lighthouse of the truth of the gospel in this city.

The first word of Psalm 1, “Blessed,” means that all of God's blessings are poured into our lives when we use our lives to complete His will.

Lord, we need Your help to abide in a spirit of unity as we go forth to serve You in the years ahead. We ask You to bless this congregation and the one that will be here 50 or 150 years in the future, if the Lord tarries.

– Mary Jane Crowell

Your faithfulness continues through all generations. Psalm 119:90 NIV

OUR FAMILY'S FOUR GENERATIONS at Grace have found God to be faithful. Many times, prayer has had a huge place in our family.

Coughing! Coughing! Her little seven-year-old body wracking with a deep, throaty, cough. She couldn't sleep, nor could I. "Lord," I prayed, "What should I do? Call her mom in the middle of the night?" I had no medicine, and we were in a camper at a campground.

The voice of the Spirit whispered, "Go lie with her, prop up her head, sing hymns, pray over her, and rub her back." So, I did exactly that! For twenty minutes or so, I rubbed our little granddaughter's back, sang, and prayed over her until she slept...soundly...all night...not coughing once!

What a testimony and praise of answered prayer to me, to her, and to her parents the next day. We all rejoiced in what God had done in totally stopping the coughing.

A small answer but it fulfills my regular prayer for our 14 grandchildren from Deuteronomy 4:9 which says, "Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them."

Lord, may each of us watch, not forget, teach, and tell what God does in our lives—big or small. The next generation is watching!

– Normi Howard

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Hebrews 13:8

I RECENTLY ATTENDED HIGH SCHOOL orientation for our oldest child. How can this be? Only yesterday it seems he was an adorable two-year-old, building towers with his blocks. The days may go by slowly, but the years go by so fast. Change can be difficult, especially for this momma's heart.

We are creatures of habit. Many of us prefer to maintain the same schedule, the same hairstyle, the same routine. We like things to stay the way they have always been because it is comfortable and familiar. But we live in a world that is always changing. How awesome that in a world of uncertainty, God is the One who remains true!

God is faithful. God is unchanging. He never fails or gives up. He doesn't quit or change His mind based on feelings or circumstances. He is always with us. He is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Dear Jesus, I praise You for You are always faithful, unchanging, and true. Thank You for remaining steadfast in the midst of a changing world. Help me to cling to You in the midst of the uncertainties of life for You are my strength.

– Sarah Alkire

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. John 1:12

I MET MY FORMER SUNDAY SCHOOL student in the narthex at church and asked how her family's adoption process was coming along, as she previously had asked for prayer. With excitement she told me she was cleaning her neighbor's bathrooms, and her earnings were going toward the adoption. I thought of this nine-year-old washing sinks, scrubbing toilets, and cleaning tubs, helping to bring a special child into their family.

My thoughts went to God and how He brought us into His family with the ultimate sacrifice of love. His plan for us to be adopted into His family cost our Heavenly Father the death of His one and only Son. He sacrificed Jesus because of His great love for us. Even when we were dead in our sin, He made us alive by saving us and setting us apart as His adopted children.

As a result of our adoption, we have a glorious inheritance in Christ! We get to know and experience God's unconditional and eternal love, His forgiveness of sins, the immeasurable greatness of His power, a living hope, and the riches of His grace (see Ephesians 1:3–14). Our adoption is final, and we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit. Nothing can ever separate us from the love of God!

Heavenly Father, thank You that we have been chosen with love. As Your children, we pray You would help us to demonstrate Your love and grace and we would increasingly bear resemblance to You, our Father.

– Cindy Giese

And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you. 1 Thessalonians 3:12

I REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME I saw the girl sitting on the floor during Pioneer Girls where I was a leader. We became great friends. She grew up and I lost track of her, until I ran into her 10 or 15 years later. We hugged and pledged to keep in touch.

We did keep in touch. “I do not have money for gas.” “I got cheated on my paycheck this week and can’t make it.” “There is no food in the house.” I knew she wasn’t lazy and was working while trying to go to school. I had compassion. But the weeks turned into months, the months into years, and I wondered if it would ever end. I didn’t feel the joy I once felt.

The Lord mercifully spoke to my heart. “If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned but have not love, I gain nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:3). I knew my problem. “Oh God,” I prayed, “help me love her.” The Lord who is excellent in working and wonderful in power has been helping me ever since.

Lord, may we increase and abound in love for others, in Christ’s name, amen.

– Cindy Harford

And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly...Behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream...When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. Matthew 1:19-25

AT CHRISTMAS, I love to reflect upon Mary and Joseph's story. I try to imagine what Joseph thought when he discovered that Mary was expecting a child, but not by him. His thoughts might have been about anger, betrayal, or revenge? I see Joseph's response: God spoke to him in a dream, and Joseph listened. Going against society, and taking a huge personal risk, he was obedient to God, and honored his betrothal to Mary.

How often does the world tell me to follow the crowd, to cave to pressure, to conform, to be like everyone else? Tuning my ears to God's voice, focusing my eyes on my Savior's life, soaking in the words written centuries ago by faithful men who were witnesses to Jesus' life and teaching—all this allows me to turn my heart towards Christ. It is the attitude of my heart that controls my recognition of His grace. To all sinners. But if I harden my heart, I am preventing my recognition of His grace.

Joseph's faithfulness and obedience to God's command inspire me to be faithful to my Heavenly Father, to examine my heart and motives, so that I may more clearly see His marvelous grace in my life.

Father, may Your Spirit soften and open my heart to You daily, allowing me the deep joy of knowing You and Your boundless grace, that I might love to live for You.

– Richard P. Driessnack

One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts. Psalm 145:4

IT ALL BEGAN WITH A SWEET NEIGHBOR named Emily, given to hospitality and chauffeuring. My young mother did not drive, and my dad worked second shift. Emily took my mother, my sister, and me to Grace many times.

And the legacy of Grace began.

My parents joined Grace and became very involved, especially with children's ministries. Youth activities were my favorites, including Pioneer Girls, Sunday school, Christian Endeavor, memorization, Bible drills, Vacation Bible School, and individual classes where I learned about living the Bible.

And the legacy of Grace continued.

I cannot recall any of the circumstances regarding accepting Jesus, but I just know it happened. Counselors during high school helped with reassuring verses, but I don't remember anything regarding a specific date. During my younger years, I discovered Galatians 2:20, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (KJV). I made that verse a part of my life.

It has been many years, and the legacy of Grace goes on and on and on.

Lord Jesus, we give You praise, honor, and thanks, for the legacy of grace which thrives at Grace Presbyterian. Thank You for a church that teaches about the grace and mercy of God available to all.

– Mary Peterson

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.
Proverbs 3:5*

TRUST IN THE LORD. TRUST? What was that was supposed to look like? I heard of having a “life verse” about a year after I started attending Grace Presbyterian. I embraced the idea and started searching for mine. I chose this verse, then started to live it out.

Trust in the Lord with all of my heart. There was a divine exchange when I really started believing this. I don't know how He does it, but He does. It is there I understood He personalized His nails, wounds, thorns, and blood just for me because He loved me that much. It is there He healed my heart from the inside out. When I truly started trusting in Him with all of my heart, His purpose for my life started to make sense.

Trust in the Lord. His promises are forever true. He will make our paths straight. I find no greater joy than to trust and lean on Him, and desire to serve Him all my days.

When I made the decision to put my trust in Him as the Greatest Healer, it is there I found precious victory. I feel so eternally blessed that God led me to this church home where we learn to trust Him more, and do life together as family.

Thank You, Father God for Your constant peace, strength, presence, and protection. May we all look up and seek You God, our Heavenly Father, every day when we rise. Mighty Is Your name.

– Crystal Y. Gregory

And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Genesis 32:24-25

JACOB WAS FACING A CRISIS. On his journey back to Canaan he would have to face his brother Esau whom he had deceived by taking his birthright and his father's blessing. He feared that Esau might destroy everything he had, including Jacob himself. The night before he was to meet Esau, God wrestled with Jacob until He left him limping and changed his name from Jacob (deceiver) to Israel (blessing).

Jacob had made plans to escape from Esau if the camp was attacked, but now he couldn't run from Esau even if he tried! He was totally dependent on the Lord! Ironically, the next day, Esau ran to meet Jacob instead of Jacob running away from Esau.

We all face crises in our lives. They can make us feel small, weak, low, and weary. God can use these calamities to draw us to Himself. Sometimes God has to leave us limping to break us. He does this in order to get us to completely depend upon Him because He desires to bless us and pour out His grace through our weaknesses. Our crises can turn into victories if, when God breaks us, we cling to Him.

Lord, we ask that You break us of our self-dependence as we cling to You in our brokenness, and that You would bless us and show us Your grace.

– Dale Raeuber

“This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days,” declares the Lord: “I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds.” Hebrews 10:16

THE PENCIL IS A WONDERFUL LITTLE TOOL. AS I recently searched my house for a pencil, I thought of the many ways it relates to our lives.

Pencils often get lost. People also seem to get lost at times. God never loses you! And He is always there to love and forgive. Think of some folks that are missing from our fellowship of believers, then give them a call and tell them you would like to get together.

The heart of a pencil is the lead in the center. The lead is numbered by its hardness. Our souls, until we give our lives to Christ, are also hard. Lives softened to God are easy to use, and He can write His love to the world with them.

Pencils often need to be sharpened. To sharpen the pencil, a little of it is consumed. Some things may have to be trimmed off as God sharpens us.

Are we a red pencil? Do we criticize, find errors, and cross out other's thoughts? We need to repent of judgmental attitudes and let the Holy Spirit correct others.

Finally, there's the eraser. Christ's death on the cross is the great eraser of sin. Because of Jesus, God hands you a clean sheet of paper to write your life on.

Lord, thank You for erasing our sins so completely. Help us be like pencils with soft lead, small because we are consumed in Your service, sharpened each day by prayer and the study of Your Word.

– Stephen Hoffman

*For great is his love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.
Psalm 117:2 NIV*

LONGITUDE + ALTITUDE = ATTITUDE

The Lord has prepared me throughout my life spiritually and emotionally. Longitude is the length from one point to another point. The length of my life through dealing with the emotional ups and downs of a demanding parent since I was small was very difficult. I thought I was supposed to meet needs and expectations without it affecting me emotionally. When I tried to do this on my own, I would become depleted, and felt unworthy as a daughter. The accusations and attacks would leave me in emotional turmoil.

Altitude is “altus” in Latin. It means to nourish and cause to grow. As I accepted that I was the Lord’s daughter and He is faithful to me, I began to grow and be nourished through His Word and others that He put in my life. Psalm 112:7 NIV says, “They will have no fear of bad news; their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the Lord.” He has changed my attitude to rely on His love for me. He is taking me through the tough times and will sustain me in the future.

Lord, thank You that You are always with us. You hold us by our right hand and guide us with Your counsel.

– Connie Ennis

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. Galatians 6:2

WE HAD BEEN AT GRACE only a few months when we got the shocking news that Chris, age 24 and our youngest, had a malignant tumor on his spine. Our previous little church had closed, and we knew only a handful of people at Grace. Now we were in a congregation with Sunday school classes larger than our previous church! It was such a big place, and we hadn't yet made close friends.

Chris however, made friends with Art Moser early on, and despite their age difference of over 50 years, they soon developed a deep, abiding male bonding. It wasn't long before many in the church knew of our situation. As the cancer spread and finally took Chris, Art and Millie Moser's love, and that of a few key others, along with the support of the pastoral staff, were great comforts to us.

However, it was the kind words and sympathetic glances from many people, most of whom we hardly knew, that were not only unexpected, but very meaningful. You could tell people were often unsure of what to say, and were even uncomfortable approaching us to share their concern...but they did it. It was an uncoordinated, and no doubt unrecognized, but collective ministry that Grace provided in the early days of our life here. And it endeared this church to us in a way nothing else could.

Lord, we thank You for Your ministry through the people of Grace for these 150 years, and pray that it will continue until Jesus returns.

– Ron Crowell

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. Hebrews 12:14 NIV

IN A FIT OF RAGE, Cain killed Abel. This is the first recorded murder in the Bible. In the books of 1 and 2 Kings, there are numerous stories of deceit, murder, and other atrocities. In our society today, we daily hear of all kinds of evil done to man-- school shootings, spousal abuse, cruelty to children and the list goes on. How did we get to this place?

Someone says or does something to which another takes offense. That person decides to retaliate based on what he interprets as the other person's motive. Anger leads to rage, rage leads to violence, and violence leads to murder. Not every incident goes this far, but left unchecked, these hurts can lead to lifelong distrust and animosity between people.

Is there a better way? Jesus tells us to "turn the other cheek," and the apostle Paul says to "make every effort to live in peace and be holy." This can only be done with God's grace and the Holy Spirit. This verse has become a great help to me in "letting things go" and not escalating things to the next level. I have come to see what the Lord suffered for me is far greater than any injustice I may experience. Praise God for His unlimited grace!

Father, grant us the wisdom and grace to live in peace with all our brothers and sisters.

– Fred Nelson

Jesus called them to Him and said, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God." Luke 18:16 NKJV

ONE OF GRACE'S GOALS is to be a church for all generations. The very roots of Grace's legacy of spreading the gospel, in central Illinois and even globally, started in a railroad car...with a Sunday school class...to children! Ever since, Grace has been noted for its quality children's and youth ministries, and has produced many youth workers, missionaries, pastors, and disciples.

I encourage everyone to take part in this great legacy. I often hear, "I don't really relate well to kids nowadays." See it this way: kids are little sponges with big thirsty holes waiting for you to wring out on them all the years of absorbing all that God has wrung out on you!

Some fear they can't keep up with the youth. A friend of mine who serves with me at Boys Brigade summer camp every year is 67 years old! If you can't teach, you could give of your (God's) resources. That's a big part of evangelizing youth! And if you can't give, you can pray and encourage...diligently and often.

May it never be said there remains a need for service in some children's department at Grace! You will receive no greater blessing than by serving children and youth; I will promise you. I've known that for a very long time, now!

Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for blessing Grace with rich and thriving children and youth ministries for a century and a half now! Show us, in a tangible way, what our involvement should be concerning this very important part of the family of Grace. Equip us in every way to "wring out" what You have given us onto the youth of this church, whatever You determine that to look like for each of us. In Jesus' precious name we pray, amen.

– Darin Ballard

I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love,...know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Ephesians 3:14–19

MY PRAYER FOR ALL GOD’S PEOPLE and myself: that as we walk through this world we are strengthened by His Spirit. That our “inner beings” are strong because of the work of His Spirit in us and through our faith in the work already accomplished in Christ. This spurs us on to labor hard on earth to make His name great. Our physical bodies will fail us, but our inner beings will be strengthened each day.

Through the people in this church loving my family during sickness, God poured strength into my inner being and grew my faith. He has shown me His love through His people. Thank you, church!

Let us gaze our eyes upon Christ today and meditate on His love for us. How He died so that all our sins could be paid and we are fully forgiven. How He rose again and conquered death so we have no fear of death. How He has called us His ambassadors to reconcile others to Himself. How He...(think of ways He has poured His love on you).

Let our hearts be filled with the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that we may be filled with all the fullness of God.

– Laura Hayes

But God chose what is foolish...weak...low and despised in the world, even things that are not...And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the LORD." 1 Corinthians 1:27-31

BACK IN MY LATE TEENS and early twenties, as I began sensing that God may be calling me into Bible translation, I gave Him many arguments, feeling unworthy, unfit, untrained, unable and unqualified for such a task. There seemed too much that I am "not"!

He answered every "not" with the passage above, added Romans 4:17, and reminded me that He called everything into being from nothing (Genesis 1) and answered the doubts of Moses, Job and many prophets who felt they couldn't handle what He was asking them to be and do. Of course, they couldn't. Neither could Paul. Why should I think I could? "But God..."

Down through the years, right up to now, over 60 years later, He has proved His sufficiency over and over again, in innumerable "impossible" situations, and provided ongoing joy and satisfaction that fills me with awe and wonder. One of those great joys is the depth of loving care and prayer, vision and concern, for outreach both local and worldwide in this, my own home congregation.

Thank You, dear Lord, that You are indeed the great I AM, meeting every need, sufficient for everything You call us to be, to do, and to face, individually and collectively, and redeeming even problems of our own sinful making. Hallelujah!

– Dorothy James

'For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate. Luke 15:24

ONE SUNDAY DURING THE SERMON, Pastor Bryan said that there are two words that we will never hear from God. Those two words are: “Go away.” I began thinking about how many times I may have consciously or even unconsciously said these two words to God, and the parable of the prodigal son (or should I say daughter) came to mind. In my 20s, I went through several years where I turned my back on God, thinking I wanted to go my own way and I would be just fine. But I wasn't, and when I turned back in the direction I should be going, an amazing thing happened! My Father was there with open arms and said, “Welcome home!” His love, patience, forgiveness, and grace are forever there for us all, no matter what.

While we may not consciously say “go away” to God, there may be situations or periods of time when we try to handle things on our own and turn to Him only when our “handling” doesn't work. If only we would go to our Father first; He will always provide what is best for us according to His perfect plan.

Dear Heavenly Father, please help us to always ask for Your guidance before trying to handle situations on our own! In Jesus' precious name, amen.

– Debbie Chavez

God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. 1 Corinthians 1:9

IN THE HEART OF THE Great Depression, a young couple stood hand-in-hand in front of the pastor of a small church on Madison Avenue in Peoria. This church had just completed a communion service to ring in the year 1934. It was already her birthday and soon would be their wedding anniversary too.

Eighty-four years later, five successive generations of our family have made Grace Presbyterian Church their home. The church family has been there through those years, praying through the darkest moments of loss, and praising God for all the opportunities to serve Him.

History gives us a great perspective—because with the benefit of time, it is easier for us to see the relentless faithfulness of God. He has proved faithful even when our prayers seemed impossibly large. He was faithful even when there seemed to be no earthly explanation for our heartache and pain. He was faithful to us even when we were unfaithful to Him.

This perspective gives us the courage to face our fears and future with great faith. God has as much control of the future as the past. He has always been faithful, and He always will be!

O Father, give us the faith to believe that You are faithful to us beyond all of our failures and circumstances. Help us to believe that we can face the future without fear because You are with us. Imprint on our hearts the confidence that You will never leave us nor forsake us and nothing can separate us from Your love.

– Dan & Shirley Bergstrom

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. Genesis 50:20

“WHY DOES GOD ALLOW EVIL IN THE WORLD if He is truly loving?” My college philosophy teacher asked that question in class. I shared with him Genesis 50:20. Even though he was a college professor and a minister, he had not considered this Bible verse. Just because we think something is evil, does not mean God meant evil against us. We need to see the big picture of what God is doing.

If God can use the struggles in Joseph’s life, which really were evil, to bring about the salvation of the Jewish people, God can use the difficult things in our lives to bring about the salvation of our family, friends, coworkers, classmates, and neighbors.

I had many lively discussions in class with that professor. My classmates thanked me for speaking up in class. My professor asked where I received my biblical teaching. I told him I attended Grace Presbyterian Church.

Don’t be afraid to share what you have learned from church and Sunday school.

Heavenly Father, never let us forget that You are working all things together for good, even when we cannot see it. Give us courage to share our testimony of how You used the evil things, difficult times, stressful situations, and unbearable struggles to show Your grace, comfort, strength, and purpose so that others may turn to You and be saved.

– Todd Frey

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. Galatians 2:20

WHO ARE YOU?

I am a husband, father, engineer, friend, teacher, mentor, and craftsman. Every one of these roles has its own responsibilities. Some days I come home from a productive day at work, spend quality time with my wife, help out around house, and have fun with my son, and I feel on top of the world! But then there are those days when I feel the exact opposite, and I feel like a failure in most or all of my roles. Ups and downs like this are natural, but it's all too easy for me to equate my performance with my worth. After all, the world we live in rewards performers and penalizes shortcomings.

This is not the case with God. When he looks at me, I have one identity: Jesus Christ. The merits and failures of daily life have no effect on my standing and status before God. This beautiful gospel truth affords me a constant, infinite self-worth that enables me to pursue my roles to further His kingdom, rather than for gaining personal approval. Identity in Christ is an amazing freedom!

Father, thank You for the freedom and security we have through Jesus Christ. Amen.

– Derek Tanis

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. Lamentations 3:21–23

SOMETIMES I FORGET THAT this familiar passage was penned in the midst of great difficulties and deep struggles. The writer of Lamentations honestly records his struggles, but records them in the context of trust in God's steadfast, unending love.

Remembering His love and grace puts the difficulties in our lives in perspective. His love does not change. It is not based on our circumstances, performance, or strength. I'm so thankful for God's great faithfulness. He loves me and never gives up on me.

I looked up synonyms for "steadfast" and "unending" and was in awe that these are just a few of the facets of God's steadfast, unending love. His love is:

abiding	determined	fail-safe	incessant
everlasting	steadfast	resolute	sustained
unbroken	dedicated	untiring	purposeful
boundless	committed	undying	perpetual
ceaseless	tireless	permanent	unshakable
unswerving	stable	solid	faithful
sure	unwearied	tenacious	unfading
dependable	devoted	relentless	settled
constant	certain	unyielding	fixed
never-ending	immovable	uninterrupted	unwavering
unremitting	unsinkable	unfaltering	zealous
continual	secure	non-stopping	lasting
reliable	endless	persistent	
unceasing	trustworthy	unfailing	
unending	steady	persevering	

A recent worship service at Grace reminded me again of the very same truths about God's steadfast love as we sang, "Oh, the deep, deep love of Jesus! Vast, unmeasured, boundless, free..."

Lord, when we call to mind the many facets of Your love and grace poured out to us through Christ, we are filled with hope and with love for You.

– Diane McIntyre

I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. Revelation 7:9 NIV

ONE HUNDRED FIFTY YEARS might seem a long time for people who are new to Grace. People from different cultures and backgrounds, who are welcomed and loved here, will share in this historical event. God's sovereign grace orchestrates the blending of peoples from all generations, cultures, and nations.

The theme of bringing people of all nations together is a traditional ending to the Grace Family Christmas concert. Last year, in the final moments, the scene of Revelation 7:9 unfolded. Mary and Joseph raised the Christ child while the choir sang in the background. At that very moment, the three wise men and a huge group of people from different cultures with their ethnic dresses, fell to their knees and worshiped Him.

I serve in English as a Second Language class at our church, and I have invited many friends from different backgrounds. They may not believe in Jesus as their Savior (yet), but gladly accepted the offer to participate in that concert. As we knelt down together, I felt the Holy Spirit assuring that one day all hearts will bow to Him. It was an electrifying moment for the church. When I opened my eyes I saw a friend, a seeker turned believer, his eyes filled with love and gratitude.

A glimpse of eternity was etched in our minds while celebrating our history.

Dear Lord, let the people from every nation, tribe, and language experience Your love and grace, and help us to be Your hands and feet in our community and beyond.

– Glory Christian

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. Joshua 1:9

AT MY SON'S REQUEST, I recently read the book *The Insanity of God*, which is a true story of one man's travels throughout the world interviewing persecuted Christians. Their sufferings, hardships, and sacrifices are both heartbreaking and enormously uplifting. My faith has never been challenged the way theirs has and I feel like a spiritual infant compared to them.

Several years ago, I was faced with a difficult decision that could have cost me my job—not my freedom, life, or family. Nonetheless, the Lord made it clear what I needed to do even if it did cost me my job. I was troubled and fearful as I made this decision, and the verse that carried me through the two-year process and beyond was Joshua 1:9. As it turned out, I did not lose my job.

This promise is also fulfilled in Matthew 28:20, “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” We are also encouraged by 1 John 4:4 which reminds us that “he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”

Heavenly Father, as we are challenged, discouraged, and frightened, help us to remember that You are always with us.

– Dick Frederick

And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:19

DURING MY TIME AS a Vacation Bible School (VBS) coordinator here at Grace, I learned to trust God to provide what I couldn't see and didn't know how to find. When I hit a roadblock in the planning process, I'd hit the neighborhood sidewalk for prayer time with God, earnestly asking Him to meet the need of the moment.

Not unlike the pattern in the Psalms, I would typically start out overwhelmed and discouraged, even complaining. The longer I prayed, I noticed my lack of trust in His provision, which led to confession of my sin. And the longer I prayed, I remembered that He is God, and He knows how to work things out.

Although it may sound cliché, I learned God does make a way where there seems to be no way. He knows the solutions to problems that baffle me, and He supplies needs from storehouses unknown to me. In fact, He knows the answer to the need before I know I have a need.

For the record, every one of those sidewalk prayers was answered. After experiencing His faithful provision for VBS, I am emboldened to trust His care in other areas of my life. I know He can and will bring His treasure trove of resources to my bankrupt plans and abilities.

Lord, teach us to entrust our needs to You. When we see our own inadequacy, help us learn that You will supply our needs according to Your glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

– Dixie S. Zietlow

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. John 15:7-8

WHAT ARE SOME STRONG DESIRES currently in your heart? Answering this question would reveal the deepest part of our heart, as it would identify what we do truly love and where our focus has been set. Jesus uncovers God's desire in John 3:16. He tells us that our God so loved us, that He gave His only Son to redeem us from our eternal death, showing His deepest desire.

The famous theologian R.C. Sproul once said, "What could make us more humble than to be a recipient of such grace?" Yes indeed, knowing His grace creates in our heart true joy and a desire to be attached to Jesus, as a vine branch is attached to its tree (John 15:1).

Living daily life in grace attached to Jesus transforms our desires and prayers, empowers us to be a faithful disciple of Jesus, and ultimately glorifies our God. Let's start (and finish) our day with abiding in Jesus. Remember to: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

Lord, help us to set our eyes upon Jesus and be a good steward of the gospel to extend Your unlimited grace to all nations, tribes, peoples, and languages.

- YC Shin

The steps of a man are established by the Lord, when he delights in his way.

Psalm 37:23

GOD HAS SHOWN US His grace many times in projects He has led us to in many parts of the world. Once it was when Bill was outside his comfort zone due to cultural and language barriers visiting Cluj, Romania. Bill was there to install an x-ray machine in a prison clinic. He met Pastor Nicu there, who served with Romanian Prison Fellowship, and asked Bill to give a message at a rural church. Early Sunday morning, Pastor Nicu walked toward the road announcing they would “walk by face.” Feeling confused, Bill followed his lead.

Twenty minutes later they were still walking, with no cars in sight, and Bill’s mind whirled with questions about this adventure. Finally, one car appeared and Pastor Nicu flagged him down. The driver kindly agreed to take them. They arrived at the church and hurried inside because the service was already starting. Bill learned that what had sounded to him like “walk by face” was “walk by faith” with a strong Romanian accent.

In his message, Bill shared examples of several individuals in the Bible whose lives were changed by Jesus’ touch. With his “walk by faith” that morning, Bill himself felt changed. We rejoice remembering that day we witnessed anew God’s sovereignty and His gracious provision.

Thank You, Father, for the ways You lovingly give us opportunities to see Your hand working around us. May those times be reminders to us of the amazing gift of the new life that You gave us through Jesus’ finished work on the cross. Help us to go out and be instruments of Your grace in others’ lives.

– Bill & Jackie Wright

Bill and Jackie have been missionaries since 1982. Bill grew up at Grace. Bill and Bev Wright are his parents. Bill and Jackie are based in Boone, North Carolina. Bill uses engineering solutions to help mission hospitals and clinics throughout the world. Learn more at PowerQuestWorldWide.org.

If we are faithless, he remains faithful. 2 Timothy 2:13

GOD'S PROMISE TO ABRAM to make him Abraham (father of many nations) was fulfilled in spite of Abraham's failures, because the promise depended on the One who could keep the covenant. He kept the promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:2-3). God demonstrated great patience, grace, and forgiveness towards His people throughout the Old Testament, drawing them back to Himself. King David, and finally Jesus were fulfillments of God's promise to Abraham.

The names ascribed to Jesus are "Faithful and True" (Revelation 19:11). From Genesis to Revelation we have a God who keeps His promises. He cannot lie (Numbers 23:19, Hebrews 6:18). But what happens to covenants when they are dependent on sinful man?

God is there too, residing in believers and promises to continue to do the work He began in us (Philippians 1:6), which is another promise dependent on God's faithfulness, not ours. That is grace.

We are to imitate the Teacher's example and extend grace, even when one-sided, more and more, as His work is evidenced in our lives.

Lord, thank You for Your covenant of love. Please help us be faithful to You and each other, extending the grace You have shown us.

– Julie Wieland

*Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way.
2 Thessalonians 3:16*

“GOD MUST LOVE YOU a lot to allow you to go through such a heavy trial,” said a friend in February of 1982. As Dr. Dunn preached through the book of Job, our faith was also tested. Unexpectedly, the Lord allowed our cherished 16-month-old daughter Sarah to go to Heaven. We were devastated! But we knew beyond a shadow of doubt that God was still in control and that He loved us. We did not understand why He allowed this to happen, but we trusted the One who did. And because our souls were anchored to Him, we did not grieve as those who have no hope. As we trusted the God of all comfort to carry us through this heavy trial, we were given the peace of God that truly surpasses all understanding.

As newlyweds, we had set out to find a good Bible-believing church. After our first visit to Grace Presbyterian Church, where we heard Dr. Bruce Dunn preach the truth, we knew Grace would be our church home. We were young believers and soaked in every sermon which helped to form a sound and firm foundation for our faith.

We thank God for the solid foundation that was formed under Dr. Dunn’s preaching, and we praise Him for continuing the legacy of gospel-rich sermons every Sunday with Pastor Bryan Chapell!

Lord, help us to trust You fully in all things.

– Sue Allen

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Jeremiah 29:11 NIV

LOOKING BACK WE CAN SEE God’s hand directing our son’s path, even with our mistakes. We encouraged him to be involved in activities, when at times he just wanted to stay home and work on a project he enjoyed: amateur radio. Also called ham radio, it was wireless communication before internet or cell phones, and still is a hobby for many today. Our son quit high school football for more time to learn to operate a ham radio and get his FCC radio operator license. Little did we know that this “alone time” was God’s preparation.

Our son eventually went to Ecuador for twelve years, helping provide power to operate missionary radio (HCJB) and reach many countries with God’s Word. It was very hard at first to see him and his wife go overseas, where we had little contact with them. There was no email, rare phone calls with poor connections, and weeks between letters. But God provided one reliable way to connect: we found two men in Peoria with ham radio. Proof of God’s leading in earlier years.

Today they’re based in the States but continue their ministry overseas. God had a plan for them, and it was a blessing for us to be able to watch Him lead, love, protect, and care for them in order to further His work through their hands.

We pray for safety for travel, communication, planning, and gracious fellowship for all who share God’s love with those of other countries. We thank God for all of those at Grace who have followed and uplifted missions in prayer.

– Bill & Beverly Wright

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

PRODIGAL MEANS OUTRAGEOUS BEHAVIOR. The story of the prodigal son is more about the outrageous love of the Father, as opposed to the outrageous sins of the son. As I look at my life, even as a Christian, I have walked the road of the prodigal son.

No, I didn't end up broke and eating slop with pigs in a distant land. But my focus at times has been for my own desires and not my Father's desires, just like the prodigal son. When we come to our senses, remember we do not have a Father or High Priest who is waiting to lay into us, tell us that we are now unworthy, and reject us.

On the contrary, we have a Father and a High Priest who understands and sympathizes with our weaknesses, our failure, and our brokenness, and still loves us and holds us close. Because of Hebrews 4:15, we can live out Hebrews 4:16: "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."

Thank You God for loving us when we are unlovable. Thank You for understanding life is hard. Thank You for holding us close.

– John Wieland

For He who has mercy on them will lead them, even by the springs of water He will guide them. Isaiah 49:10 NKJV

“STAY WITH YOUR BUDDY, and be mindful of those in front and behind you.” This was good advice as our group of Grace young adults climbed down a small hole following our guide into the cave to go spelunking. This reminds me how God, in His mercy, uses the church as a means for leading us in our spiritual journey. God places us with “buddies” in a community to deepen our communion, commitment, and consecration to Himself. Many times we pray for His guidance and desire refreshing streams in our lives, but we fail to see God using the daily ministry and community of the church to help accomplish it.

I have been blessed here at Grace Presbyterian Church to see and experience God using this church to mercifully lead and guide me and others into a deeper grasp of the gospel and its transforming power. It is sweet to have godly saints as examples and coaches in front of us, peers with an equal heart for God at our sides, and the next generation of Christians behind us watching, as we live for Christ today.

Father, thank You for mercifully leading us in the church community, and may we continue to pass Your grace on to the next generation.

– Douglas Hausam

Hear the voice of my pleas for mercy, when I cry to you for help, when I lift up my hands toward your most holy sanctuary. Psalm 28:2

MY YOUNGEST SON JOSH and I had been hiking in the hills above Lake Tahoe for hours. Mindlessly enjoying the sights and each other, we were slow to realize that our wisp of a trail had disappeared. Pushing onward, we encountered more and larger patches of snow which lingered from the early spring thaw. We were lost. “Lord, show us a way out of here,” we prayed. Which way should we go?

At times, as we walk through life, we find ourselves in places and circumstances that are difficult, uncomfortable, and out of our control. We can find peace and direction in our troubles as we humbly seek the Lord of mercy. “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1).

Our hearts were lifted when we encountered tracks in the snow. They were bicycle tracks. How could anyone ride a bicycle on these high, steep, snow-covered slopes? God had graciously shown us a way out.

Do you need help? “The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him, in those who hope in His mercy” (Psalm 147:11, NKJV).

Lord, thank You that Your mercies are new every morning. Help us today.

– Doug Harford

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. Revelation 19:11-12

JESUS IS OUR ULTIMATE SUPERHERO. Don't we enjoy a romance story or an action movie and the hero in that story? It must be in our DNA as human beings. The theme is always the same and we know the outcome before it has completely unfolded. It is destroy the bad guy, save the world, and rescue the bride.

In the garden after the fall of man, God promised a redeemer when He told the serpent that One is coming who will crush his head; and in the fullness of time, the Redeemer was born. His name was Jesus, because He would save His people from their sins.

This is the greatest story. It is the story of human history. It is His story; God preparing a people to be with Him for all eternity! It is the story of God creating people that know Him as He is, and worship Him in a manner that He is worthy to be worshiped; the bride of Christ.

Lord help us, by Your grace, to live our lives in a manner worthy of our calling and in light of the great future we have before us as Your precious, blood-bought, bride.

– Rick & Lynn Norton

A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity. Proverbs 17:17
Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another. Proverbs 27:17

WE WERE NOT MEANT TO LIVE in isolation but rather to live in community. We crave friends who love us and accept us both in good times and when it's tough. When adversity strikes, there is nothing so comforting as a brother or sister to help bear the load. And true friends form a symbiotic relationship that results in both benefiting from their association.

It was 1982. We were new to Peoria and we were experiencing a very cold and dreary winter. Our three young children were suffering back to back to back chicken pox, which meant I was housebound for six weeks. It was my new friends from the Growing in Grace Sunday school class that provided the encouragement for that season. And our friendships continued to deepen over the next 11 years as we lived life together in the Peoria area.

Those relationships formed during the 1980s continue to sustain and encourage us now, 36 years later. We have gone from raising children together, to caring for and saying goodbye to parents. In every season we have found comfort in and with our Grace Presbyterian Church friends.

Heavenly Father, as we walk in community with those You have brought into our lives, we ask that You will guide us to be true friends who look not only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others.

– Kathy Lorimor

Larry and Kathy attended Grace from 1982 to 1993. They currently live in Georgetown, Texas. Kathy was a member of the committee that developed the Well-Versed kids program.

Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. Isaiah 41:10

AS I PULL MY GRANDMA'S BIBLE from the shelf, the pages fall open to reveal the stately words... "Fear not; for I am with thee." The text is underlined with a shaky line of ink, signaling to me the treasure these words were to her. Long before her passing two years ago, my grandma and grandpa once called Grace Presbyterian home. And now today, I'm thankful to be the third generation of my family to call Grace "home."

Just like the words found in Isaiah spoke to my grandma years ago, they were monumental to the people of Israel hearing them first. And generations later, the same words read like a grace-filled love letter to us now. The almighty, powerful God is proclaiming His commitment to us. He is not just reminding us—but commanding us—not to be afraid, because He is by our side.

The story of the past 150 years at Grace is filled with both highs and lows, but the main theme has remained unwavering—God's faithfulness. Those lines of ink underlining the words in my grandma's Bible may be shaky, but the promise of the underlined words is unshakeable. He is with us.

Lord, we praise You for being our faithful, constant help and companion. Thank You for the freedom from fear we can claim because You are continually with us.

– Angela Kauffman

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Genesis 12:1–3

WHEN MY FAMILY MOVED from Tennessee to Illinois and joined Grace Presbyterian 10 years ago, we often felt like Abram: sojourners (or southerners). Just as Abram’s blessings would bubble over into the world around him, our prayer has been that God’s grace would send us out to preach the gospel year after year. And yet, many times life seemed to weigh us down—caring for newborns, losing loved ones, etc. At times, it felt as though we would not make it.

One such time, my wife suddenly ended up at OSF hospital for eight days. We thought we had lost her. It was one of our pastor’s prayers that turned me from fear and despair to hope and trust.

We are forever grateful for God’s many blessings such as these, during hard times, that come through our friends at Grace. Yet also, during the calmer times, we’ve seen the immense value of dragging the kids out of bed each Sunday to take in a steady flow of grace through powerful worship and preaching.

Though we are weak, God strengthens us not to be safe and comfortable, but to answer that same call He gave Abram to go out into the hard places and be a blessing to others.

Oh God, raise up Your children, despite brokenness and weakness, to go out with the message of life and draw in more of Your people. Amen.

– Kenny Hayes

Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, "Who is the LORD?" or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God. Proverbs 30: 8-9

NURSERY STORIES PROVIDE the right touch for children. The tale of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" has porridge from three different bowls—one too hot, one too cold, and one just right. The prized bowl is between the two extremes. Many Christians place pressure on themselves to live at extremes of beauty, wealth, and fame. Today's verse brings out the importance of living right in the middle—neither rich nor poor.

God knows the danger in both extremes. First, dependence on God goes out the window as we seek the life riches provide. Could it be God is gracious to have us live with modest means where we depend upon the Lord for our daily bread, singing and truly meaning, "I need thee every hour"?

On the other extreme is poverty which can lead to desperation. The writer of Proverbs 30 ponders the possibility of stealing to survive, but it would destroy our profession that Christ is our king. The writer feels temptation lurks at both extremes.

What does this striking caution tell us about the human heart? Divine grace has a way of filling our heart with only the thing that satisfies. We need less stuff and more contentment in the provisions of Christ. Let's praise the Savior who feeds us daily provisions of grace, hope, and joy.

Lord, give us what is truly needful for us so that we can completely trust You for tomorrow. Satisfy us with Your goodness as we live in the middle of extremes. Forgive us for believing that the world's goods will fill us when we know You are truly enough.

– Pastor Kerry Frantz

Now Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word." 1 Kings 17:1 (NASB)

HAVE YOU EVER ASKED the question, "How could God use a person like me?" Or "What qualities does it take to be used by God?"

Elijah, the prophet, found himself with a seemingly impossible task: to challenge Ahab, one of the most wicked kings of Israel, to repent and humble himself before the Lord.

In 1 Kings 17:1, we find three characteristics of the kind of believer that God uses to have an impact for Him.

First, Elijah was convinced of the reality of God—that God was alive and actively engaged in the world. Second, Elijah believed that he was a personal representative of God. He pictured himself standing before his King as a servant and ambassador. Third, Elijah was convinced that God could do what He promised. He could confidently claim that it would not rain until he said so because he believed God's promise in Deuteronomy 11:13–17; that if Israel would be obedient to His commandments, love the Lord their God and serve Him with all their heart and soul, that He would give rain to the land. Elijah knew and acted on God's promises.

Father, help us to recognize daily that You are alive and working in our lives and in the world, that we are indeed Your ambassadors and that we can be confident that You will be true to all Your promises for Your glory.

– Mike Uno

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.” Lamentations 3:22–24

WHEN THINKING OF Grace Presbyterian Church, the hymn “Great is Thy Faithfulness” written by Thomas Chisholm and inspired by the Scripture above comes to mind.

Praise the Lord for what He has done. He has indeed had compassion on each of us and His church at Grace. “Thy compassions, they fail not.”

Grace has been blessed over 150 years with a cloud of faithful saints, who have demonstrated commitment to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ through love, compassion, sacrifice, and generosity. “Morning by morning new mercies I see.”

The church has experienced God’s faithful hand at work over and over again when facing doubt, challenges and questioning what we should do. In prayer, humility and unity we have seen Him at work and experienced awesome wonders. “All I have needed thy hand hath provided; great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!”

Christ Jesus, help us continue the legacy of Grace by loving You, our God, with all our hearts, and with all of our souls, and with all of our minds, and with all of our strength, and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

– Greg Tiemeier

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 1:6–7

I WANT THE LORD'S BLESSING in my life—comfort, joy, and peace—without the refining fire. I want the mountaintop experience without training and sacrificing for it.

Without discomfort, do I truly know His comforting Spirit? Without sadness, do I appreciate the joy of the Lord? Without conflict, do I accept the peace that only Christ gives?

In these “withouts” of my life God draws me closer and I recognize my greater need for Him. In these trials I see God's mercy and grace more clearly: not receiving the punishment I deserve but receiving the blessings I don't deserve.

Lord, help us recognize Your glorious blessings in our “withouts.”

– Elizabeth Parker

Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand. Proverbs 19:21

“THIS CAN’T BE RIGHT,” thought my 21-year-old self. This was not the school I requested for my student teaching assignment. Anxiously, I picked up the phone and called the teacher to set up our first meeting. Little did I know, the person on the other end of the line had not requested a student teacher. He agreed to a placement only because another person had backed out of accepting any student teacher that semester.

Often times God has “other plans” for us, plans that we find disagreeable but that He arranges to serve a better purpose. I now see how God had other plans for me. He placed me in a classroom with a teacher who would not only shape me professionally, but he and his wife would shape me, and my future family, spiritually.

After declining years of invitations to join them for a service at Grace, one day I accepted. From that point on, my family and I have been building relationships with Christ. We continually work to build a Christ-centered home. Looking back, I stand in awe at the realization God has plans for me beyond my wildest expectations, and that I only need to be patient for Him to reveal them to me.

Lord, thank You for overriding the plans that we make, even when we don’t understand, so that we may live according to Your purpose.

– Jamie Kocher

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:23

NOT LONG AFTER I GAVE my life to Christ, this verse became a theme for me. Sin leading to death; not an option a Christian wants to think about. Yet all those without Christ are dead, and hell is the only option. By God's grace, I was saved from this death and given eternal life through Christ. God paid dearly for me through the death of His own Son. And Christ—He paid dearly for me with His own life.

Grace, love—all for a broken sinner like me. So when I look at the lost, I see the old me. I want everyone to have what God so graciously gave to me through Christ. What a wonderful gift we as Grace Church are giving as we open our doors to all peoples, as Christ has asked us to do. As fellow sinners we are reaching out to the lost, showing God's grace and eternal life to them.

Lord, help us see our lost brothers and sisters with God's eyes, giving grace and love to each and every one, as Christ has told us to. Please open our hearts to all peoples in Your name. In Christ Jesus, amen.

– Dennis Yeske

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 5:3-5

IN APRIL 2005, I was the college director at Grace. We had two children under three, and my wife Abbie was 20 weeks pregnant. Excited to learn the gender of our baby, we piled into the car bound for the obstetrician's office. What we expected to be a happy family outing turned tragic. The nurse used her cursor to point to where our baby's upper brain and skull should be and there was nothing. A specialist later confirmed that our daughter had anencephaly, a terminal birth defect.

Over the following two months, God used the people of Grace to teach us about hope and the love of Christ through the church. Your emphasis on the Word gave us the faith to hope that God *could* heal our little girl and the assurance that He *would* bring good out of this horrible situation. You gathered around us like a family. You enveloped us in care which was as sweet as the pain was bitter. And when our precious little Hope (from the verses above) passed late that June, you gave us space to grieve and took care of details that we just didn't have it in us to do. In a dark season, you were God's instrument to pour His love into our broken hearts.

Lord, let Grace Church continue to be Your tool to heal the brokenhearted, showing Your love to the world by our love for each other.

– Jason Keel

Jason Keel, married to Abbie and father of Hannah, Owen, and Bennett, is a native of Alabama who has lived all over the world carrying out various roles in making disciples of Jesus. He was the Director of College and Young Adult Ministries at Grace Presbyterian from 2001 to 2007. Currently he is on staff with Cru-City in the Atlanta area helping churches learn how to make multiplying disciples; especially among immigrants and international students

But his disciples took him (Paul) by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. Acts 9:25

YEARS AGO AT GRACE, I heard a sermon centered on this verse. What could stand out from this side note on Paul's life? His disciples and friends aided him in a perilous situation by "holding the ropes" and lowering him to a place of safety outside the city wall. Paul needed assistance, support, and protection which his friends provided at this critical time. The pastor encouraged us to be rope holders and asked, "Who are your rope holders?" Last year I found myself revisiting this question.

June 2017, our family walked through dark days as our premature granddaughter died after only six days. The same week, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Later we faced loss of income from my job resignation due to my health. We were essentially helpless, yet we experienced the love of God in a very real way. God used "rope holders" in our lives to show His love, His grace, and His provision over and over.

Each Sunday, we were stopped by people telling us of their prayers and speaking words of comfort. Cards, meals, and gifts were showered upon us. When we are weak, He is strong...He sends "rope holders" to encourage us in our faith.

Jesus, thank You for the men and women of Grace that You use to "hold the ropes." Thank You for the body of Christ that stands behind us, supporting us in word, deed, and prayer.

– Jean Ringenberg

Moses said to the Lord, "Please, Lord, I'm not a good speaker. I've never been a good speaker, and I'm not now, even though you've spoken to me. I speak slowly, and I become tongue-tied easily." Exodus 4:10 God's Word Translation

FOR OVER 35 YEARS Grace Presbyterian Church has had an Adult Special Education program: a ministry serving over 40 adults every week. My brother, others, and I have ministered to these individuals. Many of them feel they are less able to share the gospel with others. Like Moses, they feel they aren't the right person for God to use. Some have trouble speaking clearly, some are intellectually challenged, and some feel people will make fun of them. Moses feared what people might think of him, feared that he would say the wrong thing, or feared he would say something inaccurately.

We, too, can use excuses. We might think we can't do something, but would God ask us to do something if He knew we couldn't? He wouldn't. Moses knew, and we also know the Lord will help us to do whatever He needs us to do. When God wants to do something through us, He will find a way. Just like with our Special Education adults, God encourages, God prepares, and God uses us to share His promises.

Our blessed Lord, please help us to be open to accepting whatever it is You have us to do; speaking confidently in sharing Your Word and gospel.

– Jeff Heintzman

The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him. Nahum 1:7

WE ALREADY KNOW the world is broken. The effects of sin are everywhere. The perfect garden God created was forever changed by the entrance of sin. We continue in its imperfection, daily battling our selfish desires. It can seem hopeless and can rob us of our God-given peace.

Ever had a “day of trouble?” These can range from toddler fits, hurried hours, coffee spills, red lights, and other inconveniences, all the way to shocking tragedy forever changing your life.

The reality of trouble in our daily life is real. We like to be trite and tell each other that things will be “okay.” However, there is so much in this life that is definitely not “okay.” We don’t know what to expect in life...or do we? John 16:33 says, “I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

Jesus wants to show Himself in our lives, broken as they are. He desires to be our source of hope and strength that helps us stand with Him in the day of trouble. It shouldn’t surprise us when life gets difficult. Run for refuge to the only one who is good and let Him be your stronghold. He cares.

Lord, thank You for being our refuge, our ever-present help in times of need. Thank You that You are good and that Your love endures forever. Thank You, Lord, that You are greater than our bad days and that You have overcome the world! Oh, what hope and peace we have in You.

– Jennifer Longstreth

Wait for the LORD; be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!
Psalm 27:14

WAITING IS HARD, but it's hardest when we don't know the reason. We had planned to be on the mission field by December—we had the funding, housing, and an exciting ministry—but three months later we're still waiting for our visas with no end in sight, nor any clear reason why God would allow this delay.

As Christians, sometimes we hear dramatic stories about how a frustrating setback turned out to be the perfect timing in God's providence. But as exciting as those stories are, they are not the norm, and we do ourselves a disservice when we always expect a clear reason. God's eternal plan for us is, and has always been, our sanctification—to make us holy and blameless in Christ (Ephesians 1:4). Sometimes God wants us to wait for no other reason than to teach us patience, or how to be gracious and forgiving towards those who cause us to wait, or how to accept the painful reality that we are not in control of our lives or our timelines.

Yet there is joy in this knowledge, for no waiting is wasted. Every setback, every inconvenience, every unanswered prayer is another opportunity for God's gracious work of sanctification in our lives as he carries out his eternal plan of making us wholly like Christ.

Oh Lord, grant us the grace and courage to wait on You in all things, and to know that Your timing is always perfect, and to trust that even if we never know the reason why, You use waiting to accomplish Your purpose of sanctification in our lives.

– Jeremy Otten

Jeremy grew up at Grace, and is the son of Jim and Diane Otten. Jeremy and his wife Christy, along with their boys Malachi and Caleb, will be serving as missionaries in Belgium with WorldVenture. Jeremy completed his doctoral studies at Wheaton, and will be teaching at a seminary in Leuven.

And behold, two men were talking with him (Jesus), Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.
Luke 9:30–31

THE ORIGINAL GREEK WORD used in this verse for departure was “exodus.” So picture it. There was Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah about the exodus He (Jesus) was about to accomplish.

What happened during the first exodus? The people put their trust in the blood of a spotless lamb that had been slain, and those who had been slaves were set free. Did these slaves have to keep the law prior to being set free? No, the law had not yet been given. Then on what basis were these people set free? It was God’s grace.

So what happened during the second exodus? A spotless lamb was slain. We, who have put our trust in the blood of this spotless lamb—Jesus—have been set free from slavery to sin. Did we have to live up to a certain standard before we were set free? No, we were set free when we trusted in what He has done. Then on what basis were we set free? It was God’s grace.

Thank You, Lord, that because of Your grace shown to us, we can be part of Your exodus.

– Dave Anderson

But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. 2 Peter 3:18

MY FAMILY BEGAN ATTENDING Grace Presbyterian Church 25 years ago after moving to Peoria. What we found helpful were the Sunday school classes for different ages. This enabled us to be accepted and encouraged, as we settled into our new church home.

My wife and I have attended Growing in Grace Sunday school class the majority of the time. As I think of the name of the class, Growing in Grace, I can't help but think how fitting that name is as we live out our salvation.

The verses leading up to 2 Peter 3:18, speak of how the heavens will pass away with a roar and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Peter goes on to say that according to His promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. While we are waiting, we are to be diligent to be found by Him without spot or blemish and at peace. Lastly, he says, "take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose our own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord..."

Heavenly Father, knowing that You will someday bring judgement to the ungodly, please help remind us that You are the creator, You are patient toward us, and that because of Your grace, You love us, and You are coming again.

– Mike Proehl

And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. Luke 2:16-18

HAVE YOU EVER LOOKED AT a well-known passage of Scripture like this and doubted that you could learn anything new from it? I must confess that I have, as recently as last Christmas. I've been a Christian for over 60 years, so what new truth about Jesus's birth could I possibly learn?

On a December morning during my quiet time, I was reading a book on the advent. The author, Francis Schaeffer, asked a question I had never really considered. He said that if we had been with the shepherds when they received the announcement that Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem, and we had run to see Him, how would our lives be different? Wow!

I've never seen Jesus, but He has made His home in my heart! So every aspect of my life should reflect Him: my prayer life, my eagerness to tell others about Him, my obedience to my Lord, my relationship to my wife and everyone else. And most of all, my joyful worship of Him who is Lord of Lords and King of Kings, and who loves me and showers me daily with His love, mercy, and grace!

Dear Lord Jesus, we thank You for living in us, and we ask that Your presence in us would permeate everything we do, say, and think. Amen.

– Jim Carmean

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well. For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control....I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me. Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you. 2 Timothy 1:5-7, 12-14

“Oh may all who come behind us find us faithful.
May the fire of our devotion light their way.
May the footprints that we leave lead them to believe.
And the lives we live inspire them to obey.
Oh may all who come behind us find us faithful.”

WHEN WE FIRST HEARD THIS SONG, “Find Us Faithful” by Steve Green, we were struck with the privilege and responsibility that we have to be faithful to the Lord in our service at Grace. Our parents and grandparents worshipped here. Now, our children and grandchildren are part of this church family. The footprints that have been left for us have given us the opportunity to see the faithfulness of others, firmly rooted in and resting in the faithfulness of God, our Father. We have seen the witness of people, who by God’s grace have walked faithfully with the Lord, serving Him even when they were weak or struggling.

Lord, we thank You for this great heritage of 150 years, passed on to us. May we guard the good deposit entrusted to us. Help us to be faithful to You as we honor Your faithfulness to all generations.

– Mark Maston

Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable. One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts. Psalm 145:3–4

WHO WOULD HAVE KNOWN when I attended the high school Christian Endeavor youth group here at Grace in the 1960s, that an intriguing “domino effect” would take place? I felt so blessed to have the opportunity to be taught about God and how to grow in my faith in Christ. What I didn’t know at the time was how God would use one particular couple to minister to me, and then allow me the privilege of experiencing Him working through several generations in our families.

As newlyweds, my husband, Terry, and I taught this couple’s children the truths in God’s Word in children’s church. Several years later, when those children became adults, they in turn reached out to our children by mentoring and leading a small group Bible study. This cycle continued when one of our daughters “commended God’s works and His abundant goodness” to their children in the children’s ministry. Then just recently, one of those grown children ministered to our preschool grandchildren, now to the sixth generation, during the Tuesday morning Bible studies.

Father, we are so grateful for the gospel, for Your faithfulness throughout the years, and for Your transforming grace in our lives. May we all continue to let You use us to pass on this glorious message to the next generations!

– Diane Spuler

I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another... I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written, "Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand." Romans 15:14, 20-24

IN ROMANS 15, the apostle Paul discusses an important quality in a healthy church: believers are intentionally helping each other grow. It is a quality I have noticed at Grace Presbyterian Church. We have seen church members regularly teach, encourage, and strengthen each other. As the church passes 150 years, members who care for and lead each other will continue to be as important in the future as they have been in the past. Who are you being called to help grow?

Paul also wants to pursue his ambition to share the gospel where there were no churches at the time. Sometimes ambition feels like a bad word to Christians. Unless their ambition is to worship or to serve, it can sound like a term that only belongs in the secular world. But Paul is unashamed of his ambition to plant a church in a territory without any churches. This passage shows us that ambition is actually a description of God's heart.

Grace Presbyterian Church has also shared Paul's missionary ambition. Continuing to develop and send out missionaries with prayer and financial support, is a strength of Grace that I hope and trust will continue for years to come. What role will you play in missions? What is your ambition in reaching the lost?

Lord, we pray for Your help as we intentionally seek to grow and strengthen each other. And we pray that You would continue to use Grace Presbyterian for Your ambition of spreading the gospel.

– Martin Smith

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

Proverbs 3:5-6

ALTHOUGH I HAVE ALWAYS liked these verses, it wasn't until my college years that I discovered the joy of fully embracing and obeying them.

While I was growing in my relationship with Christ at a higher rate than ever before during college, I was also in a major that I wasn't interested in, which was draining me of life and joy. I held onto it for the first three semesters because I wanted a secure future and income, and I was trusting in that major, and eventual job, to provide them for me. Through a very humbling (yet sanctifying) process, God loosened my grip on that idol, and graciously reminded me that I had not been trusting in Him for my future. It was a somewhat scary, yet liberating experience, to open my hands to God and say, "I want to fully trust You for my future!"

In His divine providence and working through His Word, other believers, and the Spirit's prompting, I changed majors and was later drawn into youth ministry here at Grace. God is good and so worthy of our trust! I am incredibly thankful for these verses which ring true of God's faithfulness, grace, and provision.

Father, let us continually keep our hands open to You, leaning on You alone for our present and future!

– John Vanne

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. Psalm 119:105

“GOD LIES,” my friend said to me on the bus one day. “How can you believe a god that lies?” I was nine years old, and I responded with a memory verse from Sunday school’s Well-Versed Kids program. Numbers 23:19 (NIV) says, “God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?”

Then came the toughest question of all. “Do you believe that, or is that what your parents told you?”

Questions like that forced me to make my faith my own, and challenge my own beliefs. I’ve researched what atheists believe. I dug deeper into Bible study. I learned to fight unbelief, even my own, with spiritual truths.

I’ve realized no other religion, including atheism, gives a satisfying answer to the crucial question of why we were placed on this earth. Grace Presbyterian’s mission statement summarizes it brilliantly: we were placed on this earth to love God, love others, and make disciples. We have a purpose.

Lord, we praise You for this comforting truth, and for the trials and challenges that force us to make our faith our own.

– Emma Kate Stoller

And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

Acts 20:22-24

CAN YOU PICTURE this heartfelt goodbye between Paul and his friends? As he stops by city after city to tie up loose ends and say farewell, he knows, as hard as it may be, the Spirit is leading him to Jerusalem to share the message about Christ.

Paul knows that jail, suffering, and most likely death are waiting for him there. Paul is clear in his writings about what motivates him to face it all: “My life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned to me...the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God” (Acts 20:24 NLT). Acts 21:12 says Christian leaders and friends wept and urged him not to follow through on his plan. Paul’s response: “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the...Lord Jesus.”

There is no life more rewarding or more freeing than one that rests in the same God and the same eternal hope Paul had. We have nothing to lose and everything to gain. As we are now slaves to righteousness, let us be bound as if by chains to this great hope given by Jesus Himself: as we lose our life for His sake we will find it.

Lord, send us and use us however You choose, that You might be glorified in us. Remind us, Your church, that our true kingdom is in Heaven and that You are worthy of our entire lives...all that we have. You are worthy. Take us and use us for Your glory.

– Matt & Rachel Escher

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Hebrews 13:7

A SCHOLARLY THEOLOGIAN once said, “God, in His sovereignty, has assigned man responsibility.” God alone gives spiritual growth, but He assigned His adopted sons and daughters the responsibility of “planting” and “watering”: evangelism and discipleship, sharing the gospel, and nurturing the faith of spiritually younger people.

When I was in college, someone, who recognized this responsibility, came into my life. He believed the verse that says “how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching?” Because of God sovereignly ordaining this man’s planting and watering, I am saved. I am removed from a lifestyle of slavery to passions, pleasures, hatred, and envy, and called into the peace, joy, and righteousness of the family of God my Father. And I want that for others. I want to imitate the faith of that man, and experience the outcome of that man’s way of life. Its result is eternal life. It was for me.

One awesome portion of God’s grace to us is our spiritual family—in this case our older brothers and sisters in Christ. Let’s recognize and follow them.

My Father, please show Your glory to all people through sanctifying godly, older men and women among us, making them able to lead others. Sanctify those younger in faith among us, teaching them to submit to the example of these older brothers and sisters in Christ.

– Vince Caliendo

But Daniel purposed in his heart. Daniel 1:8 KJV

YEARS AGO, I was impressed with the significance of Daniel 1:8. Daniel knew what he should and should not eat or drink, and so he asked the court official to be excused from eating and drinking the food supplied by the king. He purposed in his heart to be obedient to God's law.

When God clearly reveals His will, we should purpose, determine, and resolve to follow it. But why not consider some of life's situations before they occur and purpose in our hearts what God would have us do when they occur? We are far more likely to decide to do the "right" thing when we are not emotionally involved and unable to think rationally.

I recently had an opportunity to follow this Daniel 1:8 principle. I am a member of a book club. When the lady who selected this month's book came to me and apologized for the book's vivid content and descriptions, I knew reading the book could affect my reputation and my ministry among these people. I returned the book and said, "I have decided not to read this book." She smiled as if to say, "I was wondering if you would read it."

Lord, help us to purpose in our hearts to do Your will.

– Julie Nash

My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives...he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Hebrews 12:5-6, 10-11

NOT ALL OF THE GRACES God gives to His children are pleasant. One of them hurts. It stings. This is “the discipline of the Lord.”

The gospel calls us to turn in faith to Christ, but that necessarily involves turning *away from* other things. Repentance is the flip side of faith. A very deep part of us still loves what we should despise, craves what we shouldn't have, and clings to what is untrustworthy. Those idols lead only to misery and death, but we love them anyway.

What's a righteous Father to do when His children are in such a state? “The Lord disciplines the one he loves.”

Is the Lord spanking you right now? Is His hand heavy upon you? Rejoice! That's a sign you're *loved by Him!* You're His beloved child. He's disciplining you because He accepts you. This is the gospel at work.

Don't grow weary or depressed. Humble yourself and confess your sins. Turn from evil, and set your heart and mind to do right. Let God do His work in you. Eventually the discipline will be over, and in its stead will be “the peaceful fruit of righteousness” that God was working toward all along.

Father, You are good and Your works are good, even the ones we don't like. Help us to be wise and receive Your correction so that we may share in Your holiness.

– Scott Spuler

And He was saying to them all, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it. For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself?"
Luke 9:23–25 NASB

I HAD GROWN UP in church my whole life, attending every Sunday and Wednesday. I had been a good kid and followed the rules... "mostly." I thought I was in pretty good shape and God should be impressed with my life.

However, during my sophomore year of college, I was challenged by some new friends about what it really meant to be a Christian. Their faith was life-giving; my faith was boring and burdensome. Their time in God's Word was a relationship; my time in God's Word was a duty that puffed up my knowledge. Their Christ was Lord and Savior; my Christ was just icing on the cake of my self-righteousness.

Over the fall semester, God began to reveal how great was my sin and how desperate was my need for Christ to save me. I had been seeking to save myself by storing up good works. All the while Christ had given His perfect, righteous life on the cross for me. For the first time, I saw that my good works were filthy rags to God and would only lead to death, but if I entrusted my life to Christ, He had already done everything necessary to save me. I laid my life down in order to gain His life.

Father, thank You that our salvation does not depend on us, or we would be doomed, but in Your mercy and grace, You sent Christ, and He alone has saved us.

– Chris Sublett

We love because he first loved us. 1 John 4:19

TWO-YEAR-OLD HANDS come together to mimic an open Bible. Little voices repeat the verse above. Week after week, little ones speak biblical truth into their small hearts.

Thirty years ago, John and I were newly married and recruited to teach two-year-olds. Years later I still marvel at the soundness of the plans we were given to teach such small children. Over time, many faithful members of this congregation taught our *own* two-year-old daughters. One of those girls is now mom to our two-year-old *granddaughter*—moving us to meditate again on the opportunities in teaching generation after generation about the love of God.

One blessing in teaching is the lesson learned in the heart of the teacher. Years of reciting this verse implanted gospel truth in our own hearts. We did *nothing* to earn or deserve His love, and we do not love God or others *without* His love. We love at *His* initiation, a gift of *His* transforming, unlimited grace.

Lord, thank You for a church that plants biblical truth into the hearts of all the children who come. May those seeds of love and grace continue to bear fruit from generation to generation and from Peoria to the world for Your glory.

– Karen Winkelman

Karen and her husband John attended Grace from 1987 to 1999. They have been serving with Cru-Family Life for the past 19 years.

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

I CAME FROM A CHURCH that had a lot of tradition and rules, and believed you could lose your salvation. What a wonderful liberating transformation took place in my life when I realized it was all of grace, through faith alone in Jesus Christ.

The great love that God shows to us by giving His only Son to die for us motivates a deep desire in me to want to serve and love Him, not to try to earn my salvation or live in fear that I would lose my salvation.

An illustration was given to me about how we always fall short of the holiness of God. If a holy God were at the top of a measuring stick and the most evil person we can imagine were at the other end, where would you put yourself? No matter where we might think we are, we fall short of the glory of God. “Thanks be to God for the inexpressible gift.” He looks on Jesus Christ and not on us.

We can't do enough to be good enough to merit God's favor. It's all grace!

Lord, thank You for enabling us to be partakers of Your grace.

– Doug Leman

We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done...he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them...and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments.

Psalm 78:4-7

ON MARCH 1ST, 1862, the beginning of a future church was launched, not in a building filled with adults, but in a train car filled with children coming to Sunday school to learn the Holy Scriptures and to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. From that train car grew a mission Sunday school outreach that in God's time and providence became a growing and thriving church known as Grace Presbyterian Church. Today that church has a worldwide ministry outreach in teaching and proclaiming the same Holy Scriptures and the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Sunday school railway tracks of yesterday are still the foundational tracks Grace Presbyterian Church is built on today: Scripture alone, by faith alone, by God's grace alone, in Christ alone, and for the glory of God alone. These are the unchangeable truths we will tell the coming generation.

By God's grace, the mission of Grace Presbyterian Church is still on track—teaching and ministering to all generations—both adults and children. It is still proclaiming to all the same message taught over 150 years ago to children gathered in a train car to hear God's Word and the unchanging, grace-filled gospel message of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Lord, we thank You for the rich and beautiful heritage of our church and for the proclamation of Your grace to be carried forward to all generations, so that we, all by Your grace, may know You and set our hope in You, our eternal Lord and Savior.

– Katrina Forseth

According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love. Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will. Ephesians 1:4-5 KJV

THROUGH OUR MANY YEARS at Grace, the Holy Spirit has grown and matured me. I am humbled and filled with awe that God, my heavenly and spiritual Father by adoption, chose me and placed my name in His Son's book of life before the foundation of the earth. And this He has done for everyone who is to be saved.

Scripture teaches that in me, in my natural state, there is no good thing; all my righteousness is as filthy rags. Conversely, in my spiritual state God has extended His grace to me so that I am an adopted son of the great God of all creation, and I am secure in this position for all eternity. No one can pluck me from the hand of the Son and the Father; they are one (John 10:28-29).

I believe the Father chose me because of "the good pleasure of his will" as it says in Ephesians 1:5, not because He saw any inherent goodness in me or saw that I would respond to the gospel. Theologian J.I. Packer once said, "The truth about us is that we are like drowning folk who can't swim and left to ourselves would just go under and eventually not come up again. God takes action, as it were, to dive in, swim to us, grab hold of us and save us."

Father, thank You for Your grace provided by Jesus' sacrifice. We praise You in His name. Amen.

– Bill Miller

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ...
And without faith it is impossible to please him. Hebrews 11:1, 6*

WILL YOU JUMP?

The eleventh chapter of the book of Hebrews has been referred to as “the hall of faith.” Although the author of the book is unknown, this chapter is filled with stories of amazing men and women who followed God’s command. Able, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Joseph, Rahab, David... they did what was asked of them because they believed in God’s promises—even if they didn’t yet know the end game.

When I am feeling unsure of my next steps, when I’m too scared to take that blind leap off a cliff, I can look back at this chapter and see how God used each of these flawed human beings to fulfil His greater purpose; and I’m reminded He can use me too.

Unlike these Old Testament examples of faith, we know how this story ends. And we know that through grace, not by our works, we’ve been given the promise of eternal life. Yet God still calls us to obedience. However big or small your leap of faith may be— whether it’s traveling to a country you never thought you’d visit in order to bring home a son or daughter, or beginning a neighborhood Bible study—God can and will use you. We only need to jump.

**Heavenly Father, give us the ears to listen and the faith to follow Your leading.
Thank You for the promise of eternal life. Amen.**

– Mary Tanis

Immediately, the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!"
Mark 9:24

IT WAS GOOD FRIDAY, yet there didn't seem to be anything good about it. I was sitting in Emily's hospital room, watching my 18-year-old battle cancer. Tests showed her white cell counts were zero, and her immune system was suppressed.

There are times when you know God will see you through anything, and other times that test your faith. We'd seen His constant faithfulness, daily, after the Washington tornado completely destroyed our home. But after 16 months of recovery and rebuilding, we faced another 'storm', and we were overwhelmed and completely spent, physically and emotionally. Was God always faithful? Even in the muck that leaves you numb and hopeless?

Our small group prayed, while I cried out to God. Where are You? Why did this happen? Will You rescue us, again? God answered with an indescribable peace and a very tangible presence of the Holy Spirit in that entire room. He reminded me of His words: "I am with you," "I will hold you with my right hand."

We didn't know what lay ahead, but we did know that God would carry us through every hour, every treatment, every fear. Good outcome or bad, He promised to remain our rock. Emily is now in remission, and we give God all the glory. We've learned He is *always* faithful, especially in the muck.

Thank You, Lord, for Your faithfulness to us every moment, and help us to know this truth, even when we doubt at times.

– Amy English

Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works...For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead. James 2:18, 26

I'LL ADMIT IT: I can hear of God's grace and act like a spoiled child who received ice cream after stealing a toy. We can so frequently hear of God's forgiveness we feel almost entitled to it. We end up living not by grace, but by self-righteousness, covered in a mask of assurance.

James blows the lid off of this idea of being "numbed by grace". Grace is not meant to numb our hearts into a sort of holy coma. It is meant to animate our hearts into a life of joyful service. Jesus tells us in John 10:10 that He came to give us life to the full, and James expounds on that, saying full life is made of works.

Before any astute, reformed minds cry legalism, let me explain. James is not talking about legalistic efforts to earn salvation. Works are our faith becoming sight and faith acted out. Our works are the way God accomplishes His will on earth. Without works, we actually starve our faith, singing our soul into a lullaby of twilight complacency.

Works also complete our joy. Imagine if when I asked Megan to marry me, I proposed and then said, "Now, tell no one." It would stunt her joy. Celebrating our engagement with family and friends completed our joy. So works bring us fulfilling joy.

Father, may You satisfy Your church. Bring us to our knees frequently, so that our hands would more frequently be extended in service. May our worship produce the natural result of obedience, and may Your grace be the fuel that lights the match in our hearts. Amen.

– Kevin King

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. John 14:27

ON THE MORNING of September 11, 2001, I heard a radio host announce that a second plane had just flown into the World Trade Center. I sat at a stoplight and felt a sense of dread sink in, as I realized our two sons who were serving in the Marine Corps would likely be heading off to war.

Glancing over to my right, I saw our church shining like a beacon of light. An overwhelming sense of peace filled my downcast soul as I realized God had put me in that spot, at that moment. I felt He was letting me know He was still in control, that I should not be afraid, and that He would see us through whatever was coming our way.

The people of Grace, many who were our friends and many we didn't even know, lifted us up with prayers and encouraging notes that strengthened our hearts. It gave peace to think of the continuous prayer from those who signed up to pray for time slots on our church "prayer wall." God even gave me the courage to step out of my comfort zone, and with another mom, start a military moms prayer group outside of our church.

God's grace and peace carried us through until we welcomed our sons safely home from Iraq.

Thank You Lord for the peace that only You can give and for reminding us that there is no safer place to be in the world than in Your hands. Be with all who serve in our military. Bless them and keep them safe, and give peace to their families.

– Barb Plattner

Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!"
Mark 9:24

IT'S EASY FOR ME to subconsciously compare myself to others, becoming wishful or even discouraged when I appear less than the other person:

- Mary sings so well she's always invited to sing at the Christmas concert.
- John knows how to fix everything and saves his family from home repair bills.
- Susan is a tech whiz and can solve every computer problem.
- Joe and Stephanie are such great parents, their kids are so well-behaved and want to enter the ministry.

Several years ago I attended a missions conference where I heard about miraculous ways God had moved in the lives of missionaries. But one missionary said words I have never forgotten: "I have a super extraordinary wonderful God...and you have him too."

You see, God loves me whether or not I perform spiritually or any other way. Yes, we are called to pursue righteousness and to best use our talents. But even if I am average and mediocre by all worldly standards, God still looks upon me with warmth and affection. I matter to God because He gave what was most valuable to Him—His Son—for my behalf...even if my faith is tiny and seems more often absent than present.

Lord help us to live, not as others see us or even as we see ourselves, but as You see us, valuable and loved no matter what.

– Kevin Tom

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. Romans 10:17

I SPENT ALL OF MY CHILDHOOD going to church. It seemed as if we were always there, and the message was also clear: follow our rules and you can be saved. The pressure to comply was intense. When I went off to college, I broke my mother's heart by sharing I would be exploring the world's religions. But God never stopped pursuing me.

I met my future wife, Dawn, and she invited me to start attending Grace Presbyterian Church with her family. For the first time, I was hearing the gospel straight up. Nothing we do (or don't do) merits God's favor—His Son did it all on the cross.

I was also “hearing” it from the people I was meeting. The college group at Grace were living a freedom in Christ that I was totally unfamiliar with. They didn't need rules because they strove to serve Christ out of love and gratitude for His love and sacrifice for their sins. Between the power of the Word and the power of their “word,” one night as I traveled back to Champaign-Urbana, things finally clicked. I stopped my car, cried out to God, and He saved me.

Mile marker 155 on I-74 near Farmer City—where faith came from hearing.

Father, thank You that our faith comes from the power of Your Word. Thank You for Your relentless pursuit and that our salvation is built on Your grace relying only on Your faithfulness. Grant us the grace to make no provisions to serve our own desires, but to serve Christ out of love and gratitude for our salvation. We pray for the courage to daily put on Jesus Christ so that Your love spills out of our hearts into the lives of others.

– Joel Feucht

As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? Psalm 42:1-2

IT IS A PILGRIMAGE that has spanned almost 50 years. It started way back when I needed something special in my life to happen. Little did I know that the searching was not of my own accord. I needed to know there was a real, living God. And if so, I needed to know Him. But how and when was this introduction to take place? How does one get introduced to the real and living God?

The simile here is of a deer whose thirst may only be quenched by cool, flowing stream waters. How does an individual whose soul pants for the living God become satisfied? "I was thirsty and you gave me drink." That is how someone is introduced to the living God. God saw to it that someone gave me a drink and introduced me to the Word of God. That pilgrimage along the narrow road is guided by God's Word, and the more His Word is ingrained in my heart, the more I know Him. To love Him, is to know Him. God's grace has always provided me living water for the thirsty soul!

Thank You, Heavenly Father, for allowing us to know You through Your ultimate gift of love, Your Son Jesus Christ. Grace and salvation we truly do not deserve. Help us each day as we study Your Word and live accordingly, as we work out our sanctification by being a "living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to You which is our spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1).

– Gary Chiaravalle

Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, 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 12:1-3

I WAS A SOPHOMORE in undergrad when I failed my first exam in organic chemistry. I stared in disbelief at all the red ink from the professor's corrections. I was hit with panic, anxiety, and worry. I was 19, and sure I had heard God's voice that I was supposed to go to Pharmacy School. Until I received that grade.

I'm never going to become a pharmacist. How could I ever be so stupid to think this was God's plan for me?

Have you been there too? You are positive you know God's plan for you, and then something happens, and you're not so sure. I wanted to throw in the towel. I wanted to give up. I wanted a new plan.

My professor reminded me of this verse in Hebrews. When I became a Christian, I was never guaranteed an easier life. Just because life is hard does not mean we stop going. Even if God's plan is different, when we set our eyes on Him and continue to run the race, we will run and not grow weary.

Many exams and a few years later, I'm in Pharmacy School, holding fast to the promise I can put aside the weight of pressure, and run with endurance as I look to Jesus.

Lord, help us all to run the race of endurance, trusting in Your promises, knowing that we will not grow weary with You by our side.

– Stephanie Wu

And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him. 1 John 5:14–16

NEARLY 40 YEARS AGO, I began attending Grace and the College and Career Class. It was there I met my beautiful wife, Karen, and where I was exhorted to memorize and meditate on Scripture, and to pray using a format similar to the following, which continues to be a blessing to this day.

1. Pray according to God's will; pray appropriate Scripture (1 John 5:14, 15).
2. Ask God's forgiveness for not obeying Him and His Word (1 John 1:9).
3. Ask for His wisdom and grace (help) to obey (James 1:5, Hebrews 4:16).
4. Ask for His wisdom and grace to help me to help others obey (Matthew 28:18–20).

For example, below are the verses Matthew 22:36–40, and then in bold is the prayer using this format.

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Father, Your Word tells us, we should love You with all our hearts, souls and minds and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Please forgive us for not loving You with all our hearts, souls, and minds; and forgive us for not loving our neighbors. Please give us Your wisdom, grace, and help to love You with all our hearts, souls, and minds and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. We pray this in the mighty name of Jesus. Amen.

– Mark Fulford

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. Galatians 2:20

“GOD ALWAYS POURS His grace into empty hands.” This beautiful quote by St. Augustine grips my mind and portrays this image: from the hands of Jesus, a slow stream-like pouring out from a carefully crafted clay bowl into my feeble, empty cupped hands. My eyes gaze up in awe of my Father while I’m on bent knee.

When I am a vessel that’s surrendered, not one time, but repeatedly surrendered of my ways, desires, hopes and dreams, I experience greater clarity of His grace in my life. It’s this emptying of self that deflates my pride, selfishness, and sin nature.

By abiding and resting in Him, I am allowing Him to live His life through me (see Ephesians 2:10). In essence, I become a conduit of Christ. I then have eyes that see, untainted by the ways of the world, eternally focused, yielded, and worshipful. With the practice of emptying and surrender, we learn to give an offering of praise that becomes second nature after repetition.

I have learned to practice surrender from books like *Grace Walk* by Steve McVey, *The Grace Awakening* by Charles Swindoll, and David Jeremiah’s *Captured by Grace*. This process of surrender and praise gives birth to the shedding light of God’s grace in many aspects of my life.

Lord, fill us with more of You, and less of self, that we would grow in giving You honor, glory, and praise. Amen.

– Leslie Rebholz

Leslie is married to Mike Rebholz who grew up at Grace. Leslie is the mother of two sons and she and Mike serve with Cru-Athletes in Action.

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable. 2 Timothy 3:16 NASB

I BECAME A CHRISTIAN in November 1973 while a student at Bradley University and began attending Grace Presbyterian Church in 1975. I've heard well over 2,000 sermons in this church, and one underlying truth has impacted me more than any other—the Bible is indeed the inspired and authoritative Word of God. We can, with confidence, believe what it says.

The psalmist tells us in Psalm 19:7–11:

“The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;
the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.
Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.”

When we open our Bibles, God is ready to speak to both our hearts and our minds. But the greatest challenge is this: are we willing to believe what God says and trust Him? Are we willing to humbly submit to God's transforming grace?

Lord, grab hold of our hearts and minds every time we open Your Word and by Your grace, change us for Your glory, that we might be recognized as a people who genuinely love You and are zealous for good works.

– Tom Giese

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.

Ephesians 6:18 NIV

SOME CONSIDER ALL WHO are on the cancer journey “survivors.” I don’t feel like a “survivor” right now as I am just beginning my fight. However, I do consider myself a “warrior.” I am in a battle and the LORD of Heaven’s Armies is my commander in chief. He says He will never leave me and will walk before and behind me.

Priscilla Shirer in her study, *The Armor of God*, describes the warriors who take up the shield of faith. The shields were made from heavy wood, covered with leather, and about the size of a door. When the warriors would go into battle, they would dip their shields in water and gather together in a tight circle with their shields facing out. As the flaming arrows came they would raise their shields over their heads forming a tight covering, like a shell of a turtle, and be able to ward off the enemy together.

When God’s people pray for each other, they become fellow warriors, holding up the shield of faith. They can carry one another’s burdens and help encourage one another. In this way, God’s name will be glorified and His victory be made known to all generations.

Lord, as fellow warriors, help us to be on alert, praying for one another continually, and encouraging one another in the battle.

– Diane Otten

God works in different ways, but it is the same God who does the work in all of us. A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other.

1 Corinthians 12:5–7 NLT

EARLY ON AT GRACE, I learned the importance of using my spiritual gifts to serve the church. I also saw that many people were sitting on the sidelines and not using their gifts.

The apostle Paul in Romans 12 teaches that God has given each of us spiritual gifts for the building up of the church. “God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly” (Romans 12:6–8 NLT). The gifts of intercessory prayer and hospitality are found in verses 12 and 13.

Each believer has God-given abilities that can strengthen the whole body. Your special ability may seem small or large, but it is yours to use in God’s service. Ask God to use your gifts to contribute to the strength and health of our body of believers.

Lord, we pray that each person will discover his or her spiritual gifts and use them for the glory of God and the strengthening of Grace Church.

– Lindy Arnold

But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

2 Peter 3:18

GRACE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH has a long history of children's ministry. First was Sunday school, then Vacation Bible School, and later Pioneer Girls, Boys Brigade, children's choir, special education, special needs, Tuesday Bible study, and home schooling were added. Then outside our doors are Adopt-A-School, Good News Clubs, and Mission Peoria. In all these we strive to share's God's love and grace, His forgiveness, comfort, and strength to all the children.

When we grow in grace and know our Savior, we are not as likely to stray from God. As children's ministry leaders, it is easy to become discouraged and wonder if what we say and do really makes a difference.

You throw a stone in the pond, and the ripples keep going. That stone doesn't know what God is doing. You never know what your faithful obedience will do. Jesus encouraged us to continue to grow in grace and knowledge so that we may know Him better as our Lord and Savior.

A young man was walking on the beach. He picked up a starfish and threw it into the ocean. As the starfish met the water, he said, "I made a difference to that one!" So we too can make a difference to the children we teach or assist.

God, help us to grow in grace and knowledge of You daily and to keep the ripples going.

– Marjorie LaFont

But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” 2 Corinthians 12:9

AMAZING GRACE...OH, how sweet the sound! I feel blessed to have been born into a Christian family and have fond memories of Sunday school and church, Vacation Bible School, youth activities, and family devotionals. I knew “about” Jesus, but when I was 11, I accepted Him as my personal Savior. I have always felt God’s presence: He is my friend! “He walks with me and talks with me and calls me His own.”

Challenges and disappointments in my life, including my parents’ divorce when I was four, my mother’s widowhood when I was nine, and my own divorce when I was 61, have taught me we will all have personal and private suffering. However, that is when our noblest dreams are born and God’s greatest gifts are given, through grace, to compensate us for our trials.

One of the greatest gifts God has given me is my husband, Don Allen, an elder and longtime member of Grace Presbyterian Church. I believe our church is aptly named, as I feel God’s grace—freely given, unmerited favor and love of God—from everyone I meet there. We are connected by God’s grace! Because “He Lives”, “All Is Well” and happy with my soul!

Heavenly Father, we thank You for 150 years of growth and pray that our celebration will instill continued growth and souls won for Christ.

– Darlene W. Allen

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. 2 Corinthians 4:7

WE, AS GOD'S CHILDREN, are not called titanium or steel containers that would have strength of their own, or beautiful ornate vases that would detract from their contents. No, we are called *jars of clay*—ordinary, commonly used jars in Jesus' day that were fragile, flawed, and easily broken.

We, like clay jars, are ordinary, weak vessels, used for an extraordinary purpose. God uses us with all of our flaws and weaknesses, our painful pasts and current struggles, our quirky personalities and peculiar habits. He uses us, not just despite our weakness, but as part of His plan to make His name known. It is often our human nature, though, to forget that it is God—not us—who deserves the recognition and glory. Through the Holy Spirit, *our treasure*, He shows us our pride and reminds us of His grace and mercy.

Throughout the years at Grace, we have witnessed the demonstration of God's power in countless ways. We have seen the gospel boldly proclaimed and many come to Christ.

We have seen relationships mended, hearts softened, slates wiped clean, testimonies shared, people serving, fears released, confessions made, truths truly understood, and missionaries sent—all because of *God's power* in ordinary, flawed, and broken jars of clay.

Lord, help us demonstrate Your power and love, and make Your name known as we daily, moment by moment, seek Your will and trust in You.

– Jill Gipp

He is not a mere mortal like me that I might answer him, that we might confront each other in court. If only there were someone to mediate between us, someone to bring us together. Job 9:32–33 NIV

“IF ONLY...” Longing...yearning. Can you hear the pain in Job’s voice? Job knows he cannot stand before a holy God on his own. And yet he longs for an audience, for a chance to speak with Him, a chance to connect.

I love when Christ is foreshadowed in the Old Testament. It shows me the consistency of God in the Scriptures across time: that God is *always* seeking His people, even when His people are not. God not only seeks us directly, but He showed God-seeking people how much they needed a Savior, a Mediator, hundreds of years before Christ came.

As believers, we are freely given what Job only longed for. Christ is not only our Mediator, but has sent the Holy Spirit to intercede and guide us. As a comfortable, middle-class American Christian from a young age, it is all too easy to take this incredible benefit for granted. Reading about those who could only hope for it helps me to place the richness of this gift in perspective.

God, help us in this 150-day season to long for Your personal presence, and recognize the incredible gift that makes it possible.

– John Parker

A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) John 4:7–9

THIS PASSAGE IS ONE of the longest recorded conversations in the Bible. Jesus reached out to a person and broke all the social rules of His time. This woman stated that Jews did not associate with—let alone talk to—Samaritans. In addition, there were rules in Jewish culture regarding men speaking to women in public. The last broken rule was that rabbis did not speak to women with her reputation.

But Jesus was more interested in the person than the rules. Jesus focused on grace. He entered into the relationship first. He shared the living water first. His actions spoke as loud as His words. It was not until later in the conversation that Jesus pointed out her sin.

Jesus shows us how to reach out to others no matter who they are or where they have been. It is the relationships we build and the demonstration of His grace that will lead others to Christ. It has been exciting to see how God has been using our church to reach our community as we strive to become a body of all peoples and generations.

Lord, help us to see others with the same eyes and the same heart as You saw the woman at the well.

– Cam & Sue Parr

You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also. 2 Timothy 2:1-2

WE ARE THE BENEFICIARIES of generations of disciples who took these words seriously and entrusted the faith to those who came after them. Four generations of disciples are found just in verse two:

1. “me” (Paul)
2. “you” (Timothy)
3. “faithful men”
4. “others”

By God’s grace, I was privileged to have a nearly unbroken chain of disciples in my life, beginning at Grace. There was the man who took me under his wing when I was in sixth grade, the woman who taught me how to share my faith, and the pastor who gave me opportunities to explore pastoral ministry gifts. These faithful people and many others were intentional about discipling me so that I could disciple others. Who is God calling you to invite into an intentional disciple-making relationship?

Thankfully, the strength to disciple people does not come from ourselves but from “the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (verse 1). The question we all need to ask is, will it end with us? Or will the Lord find us faithful to the task of transferring the faith to following generations for the next 150 years and beyond?

Our Father, strengthen us by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and enable us by Your Spirit’s power to faithfully multiply disciples for generations to come.

– Tim Allen

Tim grew up at Grace and is the son of Tom and Sue Allen. Tim, his wife Danielle, and their daughter Izzy reside in Colorado where he is lead pastor at Cathedral Rock Church.

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. John 14:26

AS A YOUNG MOTHER, I attended the Moms and More group at Grace. The teachings were always just what I needed at that time. In my mind I thought, “This baffles me. How can the leader pick studies that are personalized just for me?” With time and more understanding of the Helper, the Holy Spirit, I stopped giving the leader credit and knew that the Holy Spirit was with me and teaching me.

Jesus said, “I will ask the Father and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth... You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you” (John 14:16–17). The Holy Spirit is alive in us. God did not leave us alone. We always have His Spirit when we are His children. The gift of the Holy Spirit is an example of God’s grace and kindness in our everyday lives.

Now, I am still in awe of the Spirit when Pastor Bryan preaches a sermon about a topic that has been on my heart, I understand new truths in a familiar Scripture passage or a friend comes to my mind and I stop to pray. The Holy Spirit is working in our lives!

Dear Heavenly Father, I thank You for the gift of the Holy Spirit to teach us and to help us remember what You have said. Help us to be sensitive and listening for Your voice so we can glorify You and be a blessing to others.

– Sheryl Zwart

“These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.” But he replied...“Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?... Or do you begrudge my generosity?” So the last will be first, and the first last. Matthew 20:12-16

IN MY EARLY ADULT LIFE, I found myself dealing with feelings of jealousy and unfairness in regard to wages at my job. It was a struggle. I felt I was being treated unfairly, and it took a while to deal with it and get past the issue.

One Sunday morning service, I settled in with what had become my too typical, aloof attitude. As Pastor Ben began, my mind was pulled hard from this aloof state. As he spoke about each worker in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard in Matthew chapter 20, my old wounds and struggles of jealousy and unfairness were stirred inside me. But as the sermon progressed, I began to see an opportunity to know and understand how God grants us grace, free and unmeasurable. In life we seek fairness in wages and accolades for our work. But if God were to grant His grace based on our worth, or on fairness, we would all fall short of salvation.

Saved by grace means we cannot earn it or make ourselves worthy. Recognizing this fact freed me to understand that the jealousy and unfair treatment I dealt with were only small struggles in this life. It gave me peace to recognize that our salvation through the grace of God is a free gift.

Lord, thank You for the gift of salvation through grace. We praise Your holy name and trust in Your providence for our earthly walk, our family, and our church.

– Dustin Blunier

*The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation. Exodus 15:2
Even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I
will bear; I will carry and will save. Isaiah 46:4*

FOR MANY YEARS we regularly visited relatives and friends in nursing homes. Often we felt the sorrow and confusion in their eyes. We learned their history and noted their challenges: some were bedfast, some had no one who checked on them, and some were in physical pain, or mental or emotional turmoil. Their circumstances made it difficult to talk with them.

But we also observed how our elderly loved ones responded to both Scripture and music. It was striking, and reassuring. Can you guess their sweet response to Psalm 23 and John 3:16? Familiar verses would bring a smile, a nod, and sometimes they recited along from memory. Hymns like “The Old Rugged Cross” and “Blessed Assurance” would often inspire these loved ones to hum or sing along.

A few years ago we read in Billy Graham’s book *Nearing Home* about his struggles with aging. He said, “It was a big surprise how difficult it is to grow older.” We know the years ahead for us may bring unwanted difficulties. But we rest assured that God will keep His promise not to pass us by, nor leave us alone in our decline. Each day may we “turn our eyes upon Jesus,” and stand firm in the belief that none of life’s struggles will be in vain.

Thank You, loving Father for the ability to sing and to give praise in our spirits as we await our heavenly reward for trusting the salvation offered to all who accept Christ’s sacrifice on the cross to redeem and to save. We have much to sing about!

– Judy & John Fisher

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.
2 Corinthians 1:3-4 NIV

I'VE HAD THE PRIVILEGE of being an elder here at Grace for over 15 years. As I stumbled my way through leadership meetings, financial meetings, people-conflict, love-for-tradition, misunderstandings, past wrongs, and other challenges, I formed opinions about what our church culture could look like, and should look like, which then led me into numerous frustrating conversations.

I loved dreaming and talking about what “could happen” at Grace Presbyterian!

I did not love sharing my “great” ideas and “helpful” proposals, when it brought conflict with my beloved church family.

As I worked to initiate changes to various elements of our services and ministry programs, and was met with resistance, I think I became cynical about our beloved church. I had sinful, wrong, and ungodly attitudes.

Then the Washington tornado destroyed our home, our neighborhood, and much of our town. We were knocked off-balance physically, emotionally, and spiritually for months. During that season, God wrapped us in His grace through the people of Grace Presbyterian. We were loved well, served well, shared with, listened to, and hugged often. We experienced God's grace in many and profound ways, all of which served to show me how my heart had gotten off-balance, and helped me to repent, heal, and return to being thankful for grace...God's grace and Grace Church.

Heavenly Father, thank You for showering Your grace on hurting people so that Your name and fame will be lifted high!

– Dan Learned

I have stored up your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.

Psalm 119:11

MY NAME IS “MR. RALPH,” and I have the best position at Grace. I get to hear first and second grade Sunday school children recite the Scripture verses they memorize in the Well-Versed Kids program. I regret that as a child I wasn’t as wise as these kids, who store God’s Word in their hearts at so young an age. Once, a student was reciting John 14:1–6 and stumbled. I handed him the verse card, told him to read it, and said we’d try again after he reviewed it. He looked up at me and said, “Mr. Ralph, I can’t read yet!” Wow!

Last year the doctors found I had a large cancerous tumor. I was told I probably had less than a year to live. I kept my Well-Versed Kids packet of verses and the children’s pictures on the hospital tray for encouragement. Thanks to excellent medical care and the prayers of many—including my Sunday school students—I survived. I feel good after surgery, and my doctor tells me that chemotherapy is doing its job.

My wife, “Miss Sandy,” plays the piano for the first and second grade class and for the three-year-old class. She thinks she has the best job at Grace. I just let her think so.

Lord, we pray for the Scripture memory of our students, and that the adults will follow their good example. Thank You for encouragement that comes from fellow believers.

– Ralph E. Bauer

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Colossians 3:17

HAVE YOU EVER HAD words play over and over in your mind? For me it was the word, *center*. At the beginning of this year, 2018, I was reminded to clear my mind and *center* it with good thoughts. Immediately I had a red flag go up. Yes, I wanted to start my day with a meditation activity, but I wanted it to be a prayer not just a meditation activity. I wanted it to be using Christ as the *center* of my thinking.

To be centered in something means “having a specified subject as the most important or focal element.” As Christians, this definition makes so much sense as we know the subject is Jesus Christ. He is the most important focal point.

Here is a challenge: start your day saying to yourself, “I am centered in Christ.” Memorize the verse Colossians 3:17. In doing this simple act each day, you can transform your mind to be centered in Christ. The best part of all, if we succeed in this endeavor, we will be giving God the glory! We were made for that very purpose!

May you be centered in Christ every day!

Lord, may we keep You as the center of our lives today, tomorrow, and forevermore.

– Marilee Proehl

Isaiah 46:9–10 NASB

“Remember the former things long past,”

Look back: Has God changed you?

“For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me,”

Look up: We serve the perfect, holy God of eternity who chose to save us knowing it would cost His Son's life.

“Declaring the end from the beginning,”

Look it up: The Bible reveals many supernatural prophecies fulfilled, and some still future.

“And from ancient times things which have not been done,”

Look around: There are jobs to be done. What are you doing? Recall C.T. Studd's famous quote, “If Jesus Christ be God, and died for me, no sacrifice too great can be.”

“Saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure’”

Look forward: God is the victor. We rejoice that one day every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9–11).

Lord, thank You that we can look back and remember Your faithfulness. We praise You for there is no one like You. We thank You for Your Word and the many opportunities You give us to serve. And we thank You that You won the victory!

– Myrna Helmick

We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3

STRATEGY AND PLANNING always seemed to come easy. An intuitive thought process served me well in my business career. Where are we today, where do we want to be, and how do we get from here to there? So, what could be different as I made a significant career transition and designed a life plan around those same types of questions?

By God's grace, the difference would come at a heart level. As I reflected on the above passage and journaled one morning, God seemed to show me the journey I was on was less about strategy and planning and more about faith. While it was okay to think and plan, I didn't have to try to come up with a perfect solution. I couldn't see around every corner, I couldn't predict in advance what might happen and what the outcome would be. But He could. Through His love and grace, He always had my best in mind.

In turn, my motivation could become a labor of love and not striving. Love for Him and love for others. No longer motivated by fear but the eternal hope I have in Christ. How transforming and freeing!

Lord, thank You for the transformative power of Your Word that can change our hearts, how we see life, and approach life each day.

– Steve Ivaska

*In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength.
Isaiah 30:15 NIV*

JUST LIKE THE ANCIENT Israelites jumped on their horses and galloped away to try to solve their problems in their own way, as recorded in the verses that follow verse 15, I too have been guilty of working in my own strength, rather than waiting on the Lord. But we need to keep reading. Just three verses later Isaiah tells us, “Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; He rises to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for Him!”

God’s character never changes. He is not dependent on our good judgment or even our obedience to work His will. He was faithful to His people 3,000 years ago just as He was since time began. He is faithful to us today, as He always will be. God is not grudgingly gracious. He longs to be gracious.

We can make mistakes, jump ahead of the Lord, or even rebel; yet He remains faithful, graciously leading us, providing for us, and healing us. We just need to be still and follow Him.

Father, thank You that You are always trustworthy. Help us to wait only on You.

– Ruth Duffer

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus...let us draw near. Hebrews 10:19, 22

I REMEMBER THE FIRST time I saw my future wife, Cecilia. I was cashing a check on the Air Force base when I looked over my shoulder and saw a pretty young lady sitting on a couch. I wanted to go over and introduce myself, but I was too shy to do so. After I left, I thought I would never see her again.

To my surprise, a friend called me several days later to tell me about this cute new lieutenant in his squadron. He asked me if I wanted to meet her. I said that I did; my friend arranged a lunch date for us, and the rest was history.

Though I didn't have the confidence to approach Cecilia on my own, my friend gave me access to her. Even more so, though we hesitate to draw near to God, Christ—our advocate—gives us access to Him. And we have better access to God than to our closest friend or relative. While I'm able to talk to Cecilia multiple times a day, I'm able to talk to God every minute of the day! Christ gives us access to God so that we can draw near to Him.

Father, thank You that Jesus has given us access to You by His blood, and please enable us to confidently draw near to You.

– Pastor Greg Grindinger

*Man steps are ordained by the Lord, how then can man understand his way.
Proverbs 20:24 NASB*

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. Philippians 1:6

GOD IS AT WORK in you and me. Although we accept Jesus into our hearts, that is not all there is. We are a work in progress through the Holy Spirit who lives in us.

He continues a work in us that exposes our sins, anxieties, and weaknesses, always helping us to work through them, healing the brokenness in us. Like a loving father, He does not condemn us—but walks with us and loves us. He leads us with His still, small voice so we can have a better understanding of His ways.

Lord, help us grow with a better focus on You and Your will for our lives. Trusting Your Holy Spirit to lead in us in Your way. Amen.

– Steve Biegler

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD. Jonah 1:1-3

GOD OFTEN PRESENTS US with difficult choices or situations. When Jonah was told to go to Nineveh he displayed a series of choices that many of us mirror in our own lives. Immediately after being faced with a command from God, Jonah fled.

Take a moment to reflect on your own heart. Sometimes we can get so wrapped up in our lives and plans that we forget to take time for God. Spend time listening. Is there anything God is trying to tell (or has already told) you?

Read Jonah 1:4-16. Jonah was desperately trying to escape. He probably wanted nothing more than for God to just give up. Thankfully, God is incredibly (sometimes irritatingly to us) persistent. When faced with the oncoming storm, Jonah had no choice but to confront God.

After we acknowledge what God wants, we have to make a choice. As Jonah discovered, God doesn't let up. We can give God control, or we can clench our fists and hold on to sin while God pries our fingers open. What will it be? Face the instruction from the Spirit and make a decision, or run?

Read Jonah 3:6-10 and 4:1-4. When Jonah obeyed he feigned giving over control, but he still wanted control over the outcome. Just because God is in the driver's seat doesn't mean you get to be a backseat driver.

Lord, help us accept Your plans for us and teach us through them.

– Noah Parker

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

Proverbs 3:5–6

MY GRANDMOTHER GAVE me a new Bible before I left for college. She wrote inside the cover, “This book will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from this book.”

As a young person I took little notice of what she had written until later. When I was feeling low and discouraged, I opened the Bible and read those words in Grandma’s handwriting.

She was wise in many ways, and she never judged us growing up. I hadn’t appreciated this until later, when I was on my own. I had grown up in a Christian home and was a member of Grace Presbyterian Church most of my life.

In Proverbs 3:5–6 we are told, positively, to trust the Lord and, negatively, not to trust our own understanding. Those two things are mutually exclusive and opposite. In other words, if we truly trust in the Lord, we cannot also depend upon our own ability to understand everything God is doing. This is difficult for us, as we naturally want to control everything. And society screams, “Be your own person; do it your way!”

Lord, help us apply this direction to our daily life, and focus on You and not man. Give us the strength to persevere, and let You alone direct our paths.

– Wayne Pullen

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16–17

GOD HAS GIVEN US His Word as our map of life. In today's language we could say the Bible is God's GPS. God knows our best path for living righteously as it says in Psalm 119:105. And in the beloved Psalm 23 we learn of our loving Shepherd leading us "in the paths of righteousness."

Jesus also tells us in John 17:17 that God's Word is Truth. We not only have a GPS for life, but it is true and reliable. We can trust it if we make a habit of reading His Word.

But as the words of the hymn "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing" remind us, we are prone to wander. We like our own path, and we can find all kinds of reasons not to read the Bible. However, the grace of God extends beyond salvation, and also *trains us* "to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age" (Titus 2:11–12).

Grace Presbyterian Church has always placed a high value on God's Word. During our time attending Grace, we have been taught not only the importance of reading and learning God's Word, but also trusting and relying upon it in all aspects of life.

Lord, help us continually develop the habit of relying on Your Word. Help us not to wander, but instead read, study, and trust the Bible as the map You have given us.

– Sandy & Steve Kershaw

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Philippians 4:4

THIS VERSE REPRESENTS what I've seen God do since coming to Grace Presbyterian 10 years ago with my husband, Mike. We moved from the south to the Midwest in order to establish Campus Outreach as our church's ministry to the college campuses in Central Illinois.

The college campus needs to hear and be discipled in the gospel of Jesus Christ. As I've walked in partnership with the church, God has allowed me a small part in His plan of ministering with Grace Presbyterian to college students.

There have been challenges at times, but also immense satisfaction seeing the fruit God is producing on the campuses. His Word, particularly this chapter, has moved my heart toward Him often. I learn in Philippians 4 to bring my requests before God, to train my thinking on the true, pure, lovely, and right, and to know I can do God's will in Christ's strength. As I often come back to these words, I am assured the peace that leads to contentment in "plenty and hunger, abundance and need" is there for me as I follow God's plans and live in His ways.

Father, please continue to provide peace and contentment in our hearts as we share Your gospel with the students on the college campuses in Central Illinois. Give Grace Presbyterian the vision and means to make disciples in all realms of our world.

– Stacey Jackson

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. Ephesians 2:8–9

SHE WAS THERE ONLY a few years at the first church we attended as a young married couple. Who? Doreen. She talked about Jesus like He was her best friend. She prayed about *everything*. After inviting me to a Bible study in her home, with free babysitting, I agreed to go.

It was there that God drew me to Himself. I admitted I was a sinner, believed that Jesus died for me, and I accepted Him as my Savior and Lord. I was a sinner, saved by grace.

Shortly after, God moved us to Peoria where we found Grace Presbyterian Church. As a baby Christian I was spoon fed by godly, wise pastors with sound, truthful teaching from the Word of God. Knowing I needed to grow, God provided spiritually mature women at Grace to disciple me, teach me, and love me in the Lord.

From the fullness of Jesus' grace, I have received one blessing after another at Grace Presbyterian Church. I often ponder the astonishing gift of salvation—by grace, through faith in Jesus! It's entirely a gift—not a result of works.

Jesus' grace is sufficient for all, but its sufficiency is for one day at a time.

Let our hearts overflow with gratitude for the fact that grace continues to be clearly taught at Grace Presbyterian, even after 150 years.

– Mardi Bielema

But He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." 2 Corinthians 12:9

"LORD! I CAN'T DO THIS!" I said as the tears streamed down my face. I sat alone in our living room crying out to God as an overwhelming sense of fear came over me. God had called me to a task at Grace Presbyterian Church, and I felt like the burden was about to crush me. It was in that moment that the Holy Spirit brought the words of 2 Corinthians to my mind... "My power is made perfect in weakness."

"Father, I am so weak. But You say Your power is made perfect in my weakness," I whispered. "So take my weakness, Lord. I surrender it to You." I literally stretched out my arms to my Heavenly Father and rolled the burden over to His strong arms. His peace began to flood my mind and heart.

And He reminded me again... "My grace is sufficient for you. I am all you need."

Father, thank You for the promise that Your power is made perfect in our weakness. May the gift of Your all sufficient grace help us to live out the calling of the gospel wherever You may lead us.

– Rhonda Anderson

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Jeremiah 29:11

IT WAS 1978 in late July when I answered the phone to hear, “This is heaven calling!”

“What’s the message, heaven?” I recognized the voice of the secretary to the Personnel Director of the Peoria Public Schools. We had spoken several times in the past few weeks. “If you can be here by Friday to sign a contract, I have a Math opening for you.”

I had sought a teaching job in Vermont, but nothing had opened up. Now it appeared God was leading me back to my roots. My home church, my family, and emotional support team were greatly needed as a single mom raising two sons ages six and eight.

On the flight to Peoria that Friday afternoon, I looked at my teaching certificate and was stunned. It expired that day! If not renewed I would need to complete coursework before being able to teach. The plane landed and I drove as quickly as possible to the courthouse. I ended up arriving 15 minutes before the Regional Office of Education closed—with the stamp of renewal on my teaching certificate!

Not long after my move, Roger Hampton and I renewed our past friendship and eventually fell in love. We will celebrate our 39th anniversary in April 2018.

God is in control. His perfect timing is always best!

Lord, we praise You that Your plans for us are good, that You give us a future and a hope and help us every step of the way.

– Pat Hampton

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you. Philippians 1:3

THIS WAS MY MOTHER'S favorite verse. Her wise application of it taught me great lessons about thankfulness. As a result, I think with gratitude about the many faces of Grace—the people who by intention or example have shown me God's character and impacted my relationship with Him.

These are but a few examples. When I was in high school, my parents divorced. One family, sensing our sorrow, regularly invited my mother, sister, and me out to their lake house to rest and relax. Their compassion and kindness live with me still. As a young adult my Sunday school teachers challenged me to make a commitment to a Bible study that would help me develop consistency and intimacy in my walk with God. Later, another woman's example led me to change my thinking about prayer. It was a simple thing, really. I noticed that when she prayed aloud she would address God personally as "Father dear" instead of formally, "Dear Father." God used that switch to somehow lead me to more freedom and closeness in my prayer life.

There are always more stories to tell. It is a joy to know that God is at work through the people of Grace.

Father dear, thank You for using the people of Grace to impact my life, and please help all of us to be sensitive to Your leading and intentional about encouraging others.

– Nancy Kinnick

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Romans 3:23–24

STEPHANIE AND I OFTEN marvel at the third chapter of Romans, where God describes our fallen state and His provision of a gift for our redemption. It is wonderful to be recipients of this gift. Our wonder stems from the freedom and forgiveness we find when we open the gift, tearing off the ribbons and tossing aside the wrapping paper. We are grateful to the Lord for providing this gift to us both as young children.

As we matured, we were able to dig deeper into the box, pulling out the tuft of tissue paper, searching to see if the box held any other wonders. To our surprise, at the bottom of the box we found a receipt, left intentionally—not mistakenly—for us to find. Printed on the receipt was verse 26 from Romans 3: “It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

This gift of grace came with a high cost; a cost that kept intact God’s character, His mercy, and His righteousness. Grace required justice, and having been justified at great cost, it requires that we leave our nets and follow Him.

Lord, thank You for the costly gift You so graciously give to us.

– Adam & Stephanie Saatkamp

For 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 1:16-17

WHAT EXACTLY IS GRACE? The adage, “mercy is not getting what we deserve; grace is getting what we don’t deserve,” gives a general idea. Through our years at Grace Presbyterian, we have gradually come to recognize God’s grace in our lives. The preaching, Bible lessons, conferences, worship, classes, etc. have been a gift to us.

But as wonderful as these activities have been, perhaps the most profound teachings have come from brushing elbows over the years with people who exemplify living out God’s grace. However, we realize that grasping the depth of God’s grace is a lifelong lesson that we may never understand completely while on earth.

The lesson of grace begins with a realization of how truly self-focused and unworthy we are. It requires us to understand that there is absolutely nothing we, in our humanness, can do to make this situation right—no matter how hard we try or how “good” we are. The best part of this lesson, however, is when we finally understand that because of God’s grace, our depravity is taken care of! He gave His only Son so that we are able to receive what we don’t deserve...God’s love and acceptance...His grace!

Father, we thank You for the fact that Jesus Christ has been proclaimed and Your grace has been taught throughout the 150-year history of Grace Presbyterian Church. And we pray for Your continued blessings on this church and body of believers so that You alone, oh Lord, will be glorified.

– Larry & Marilyn Kauffman

*Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
Isaiah 43:19*

AS THE SUN CAME UP, the dark sky began to glow in reds and yellows. I could not help but feel a sense of freshness. The tide had washed away yesterday's footprints and now the beach was a clean slate. A glorious new dawn to remind us that God is always doing a new thing—and when He does a new thing in us—it is good.

No matter how dark the day before, the storm clouds in our heart can be washed away by what God is doing in us. By God's grace we are made new. We have freedom from the sin and guilt in our past, and the fuel to move forward with hope and joy. Constantly, day after day, He cleanses us and washes away our sins like fading footprints in wet sand.

Only God can turn darkness into light.

His faithfulness endures forever.

We can choose to dwell on the past or we can choose to believe in the Creator God and the personal relationship He has designed for each of us.

God, give us the power to let go of the heartache of yesterday for it is a new day. Do a new work in us each day, oh Lord, that we may give You glory.

– Brian & Julie Doolittle

*I entreat your favor with all my heart; be gracious to me according to your promise.
Psalm 119:58*

ALMOST 50 YEARS AGO, God's unmerited favor led my parents to find a church where God's Word would be believed and preached as truth. They also wanted to find a church where the five of us kids could be involved in a solid, biblical youth program.

Unmerited favor allowed me to grow up under Dr. Dunn's teaching, to find Christ at a young age, and to be encouraged by many Sunday school teachers and workers along the way.

Unmerited favor exposed us to great teaching and great examples in ministry. We heard stories of great faith from Grace missionaries who spread the gospel across the globe in different cultures like Taiwan and Papua New Guinea. We soaked in Bible teaching where we learned to more eagerly look for the Lord's return and to reach all those that we can with the good news before He comes.

Unmerited favor has doubly blessed us to carry the message of His love and grace for sinners to some of the farthest corners of the planet, through the generosity and prayers of many Grace Presbyterian members over the past 25 years.

Lord, help our church continue to spread the good news of Your unmerited favor, available to all who believe.

– Brian Cordes

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. John 10:27

IN PSALM 131, the psalmist says, “O Lord, my heart is not lifted up...” That is a confession that I cannot always make. When I look into my soul, I often find various forms of self-absorption. I like to imagine I am great. I want to declare myself to be a top-notch leader, fantastic husband, model father, and beyond. When I look up the term “awesome” in the dictionary, I want to see a selfie.

So when Jesus calls me a sheep, it can hit my soul hard. Sheep don't seem that valuable. Sheep aren't great leaders nor are sheep change agents. Sheep aren't the brightest animals. Sheep need resources, direction, and leadership. They are needier than they could possibly know. I am needier than I could possibly know.

But, Jesus doesn't just say that I am a sheep, He says that I am His sheep. When Jesus thinks about my identity, it is always connected to Him. Is that the way I think about it? Do I think of myself as His, or do I search for a sense of identity beyond Him?

Father, thank You for making me Yours. It is the greatest privilege of my life. Help us strive to find our identity in You.

– Mike Jackson

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. Matthew 11:28-30

JESUS ISSUES A COMMAND, an invitation, and a guarantee. The question is whether we will take Him up on it or not. As a Master Shepherd, He knows we are weak and needy people, and He cares for us and gives us rest. In this verse Jesus speaks of a yoke. A yoke is a strap or a fitting on the backs of animals attached to a load.

We carry the yokes of others' expectations, approval, and acceptance of us high above our Heavenly Father's words over us. We feel the pressures of the world and its empty promises. We are constantly bombarded with lies from Satan. Then there are the burdens placed onto us from fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who are struggling. For these reasons and many more, it is easy to grow weary, labor hard, and feel the heaviness of life.

We need a kind and gentle Savior who embraces us and gives us rest. He removes anxiety from us. He is not a heavy burdener, but the reliever of burdens. His burden is light. His yoke is easy. With Christ there is grace upon grace for weak people who need it. Soul rest is promised.

Lord, help us to approach You with confidence as a kind and gentle Shepherd whose yoke is easy. Make us aware of yokes we carry that don't belong. Help us to take Your yoke and learn from You.

– Stephen & Courtney Lawrence

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. Ephesians 2:8-9

EPHESIANS 2:8-9 GIVES US a groundbreaking, profound truth. Nothing we can say or do (be it tasks or performance) can save us, or any human being. If you think about it and study it, Christianity is set apart from all other religions simply by what Christ Jesus has done—already. Not what we can, have, or will do. *Trying* won't save us, but *trusting* will.

God's gift is to be accepted, not a prize to work for. Plainly, it's a matter of choosing to accept that His brutal and sacrificial death for all mankind was enough to save us from the penalty of sin, which is eternal separation from God. As much as we may try, or think we can earn salvation, there are no sacrifices to be given today. They did exist in Old Testament times, but that was before the ultimate sacrifice—God's son, Jesus Christ—who lived a sinless, perfect life. Christianity is divine accomplishment, not man's achievement.

Jesus's death was sufficient in fulfilling God's righteous standard. The law of righteousness (right standing with God) does not come from external rules or performance. His grace overrules our every transgression. Christ's death is grace for every person.

Father in heaven, we thank You for grace; that it is enough for us, and all You require of us is to believe it.

– Leslie Rebbholz

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. John 8:32 NIV

I HAVE A DEAR FRIEND who moved far away. To keep in touch, we developed a habit I call texting truth.

Weeks could go by without hearing from each other, but suddenly I got a text from her, “Please pray for me today. Had a rough morning with my five year old. Need wisdom.” I texted back, “Do not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up” (see Galatians 6:9).

A few days later I texted her, “Pray for me! I feel like a failure as a mom and a wife.” She replied, “Those are lies. You need to listen to the voice of Truth.”

In 2010, my son, who was then just two years old, had major kidney surgery that lasted six hours. During the long, terrible wait I texted my friend. “I’m so scared. They should be done by now. My mind is going to dark places. I feel sick.” My friend replied, “He is in God’s hands. God is in that room. He is guiding the surgeon. God knows the very hairs on his head. This is Truth.”

I love how God uses the family of Christ to shine His Truth in darkness.

Lord, help us be a church family who encourages, prays, and speaks—our texts—truth to each other.

– Danielle Crowell

Then the righteous will answer him, saying, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?"... And the King will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." Matthew 25:37, 40

FOR YEARS I HAD ENCOURAGED my friend Greg to join me at church. At long last, he decided to give Grace Presbyterian a try.

Greg fell into the category of "one of the least of these". His hygiene was poor. He rarely bathed and his appearance was unkempt. In addition, he suffered from a mental illness that made him suspicious and fearful of any social interaction. Yet many in our church reached out to Greg in an attempt to welcome him into the family of Grace. Although Greg resisted those attempts, I know he was impacted by the welcoming efforts of our church.

Greg was an Air Force veteran. I was with him during the Veteran's Day service on a November Sunday. I recall how he enjoyed standing to receive recognition for his military service. Someone shook his hand and thanked him. Greg seldom received a kind word or a human touch. That simple gesture of shaking Greg's hand and thanking him meant the world to Greg. A few weeks after that Veteran's Day service, Greg died.

If we love Jesus, we should love the "least of these." I am grateful to our church for treating Greg with love, mercy, and compassion.

Lord, help us to be a church that reflects our love for Jesus in our care for "the least of these."

– Scott Reed

For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. 2 Corinthians 4:5-7

HAVING BEEN INVOLVED at Grace since college—20 years ago!—I've certainly been challenged to grow in my walk with Christ through not only the preaching, but the music ministry as well.

However, for the past two years, as executive producer of Pastor Bryan's "Unlimited Grace" radio program, I've been able to immerse myself in these grace-centered messages five days a week. This has allowed me a deeper reflection in the truth that "it ain't about us...it's about Jesus."

Being reminded to look at my sinful, broken life through the filter of God's amazing grace has brought about a greater sense of His love for me, and in turn, my love for Him has grown as well.

Lord, thank You for Your unfailing, unceasing, and unwavering love for us. May we be reminded daily that we can never earn it...it's Your gift to us.

– Shawn Degenhart

That God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. 2 Corinthians 5:19–20 NIV

“BUT WHY WOULD HE LOVE YOU?” Those words were spoken to a lost young man over 30 years ago. And, indeed, why would He love me? The answer is found throughout Scripture. He does love me, and He loves you. He wants us to seek His glory and gracious love.

It is through our acknowledgement of Him by prayer and repentance that we receive redemption and grace from Him who wants us to seek His gracious love. It is through repentance and redemption that we will “be reconciled to God”. To be reconciled is to seek a life honoring Christ. His love is like no other as He accepts us in our weak, broken human state. Only through Him can we find life everlasting.

In reconciliation we die so we may be born again.

God, we praise Your name for all Your glory, power, and love. Alone we are but weak and broken. Through You may all things be possible. By Your love for us, we now know true peace, joy, and courage.

– Craig Harlan

Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. Colossians 4:6

MY PRAYER REQUEST to my adult Sunday school class was for my neighbor's foster daughter—a crib for her coming baby. A woman responded, "I have a crib she can use." So we got it to her.

Time passed, and the family moved. I had no idea of their whereabouts. Whenever I saw that class member, I felt sheepish for never returning the crib to her. She never brought it up, but I remembered. Feeling guilty, I decided to apologize and offer to pay for the crib. Approaching her nervously, I voiced my regret and my inability to return her property. She said, "Don't worry; I'd forgotten all about it and don't even need it!"

With her gracious answer, a weight left me, and a relationship that had felt strained and awkward was no longer that way. My classmate had shown me grace. And receiving her grace gave me a desire to treat others graciously, just as God treats us. Grace can be contagious!

Dear Lord God of grace, thank You for the grace You show us and for the opportunities for the giving and receiving of grace among Your children. In Jesus' name, amen.

– Aletha Hatfield

Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.”

Mark 10:29–30

“IT IS HARD TO LEAVE HOME!” “It’s not fair to put a career on hold.” “It’s hard to miss graduations, and Christmas, and funerals, and weddings.” All spoken by missionaries across the world since the Great Commission. While true, they diminish the glory of the promise—that our reward is in Christ—knowing Him, enjoying Him, and suffering with Him. And these promises are true not just for missionaries, but for anyone who takes the gospel seriously and realizes that following Christ is daily taking up your cross and leaving comforts, convenience, and entitlements.

The words of Matthew 6:33 give such gospel comfort: “All these things will be added unto you.” By faith we believe that eventually all is made right, but what about right now? We see it fulfilled now in the continuing expansion of the church—those wayfaring stations along the way—literally brothers and sisters and mothers and houses across the world that share Christ in common. What sweetness to find fellowship wherever we may venture! These words should also bring us some solemnity, because there will be persecutions (even a hundredfold!) for His sake. But oh, the sweetness of the promise to know they are for the sake of Christ and His gospel!

Oh Lord Jesus, grant us this day the ability to see the expanse and the majesty of Your Body, the church, across the age and across the expanse, knowing that we have gained mothers, brothers, and sisters a hundredfold. Please give us also the ability to relish in Your promises that even in trials and persecutions, we have the privilege of knowing You and Your gospel as we relinquish our lives. For the sake of Your kingdom and Your glory, amen.

– Abram J. Bicksler

Abram and Rebecca have lived and worked in Chiang Mai, Thailand, for almost nine years, with their children Ellie (8) and Benji (6). Abram is the Director of the ECHO Asia Impact Center, which is a Christian technical resourcing and networking organization that equips workers with ideas, innovations, seeds, and best practices in agriculture so they can help improve the lives of the poor in Asia.

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Ephesians 5:15–16

A SEA OF INNOCENT FACES looked up at me as the simple message of Christ's love was told. "Is this a true story?" one child blurted out. "Yes, every word is true," I gently answered. With heads bowed and hands folded, children accepted God's amazing gift, angels rejoiced, eternity granted, and grace extended to young hearts. Light shining in the darkness, our church has seized the opportunity to share Christ in the public schools through Good News Club.

The King James translates this verse in Ephesians using the phrase "redeeming the time." Does redeeming the time mean that we are to guard our moments as the swing of a pendulum ticks into eternity? Do we examine an isolated raindrop or the entire rainfall? Or possibly, does Jesus call believers to lay hold of what is essential in life; to live with a purpose and fulfill God's eternal purposes? We are to be molded into God's image as we bear the name of His Son. Every day, in the middle of the mundane, we are to see beyond the temporal. We are called to fix our eyes on Jesus.

The sand is quickly pouring through the hourglass. We are to walk intentionally, embrace His grace, and focus on the author and perfecter of our faith.

Jesus, You are full of grace and mercy. Let us live intentionally for Your kingdom.

– Nancy Frantz

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. Philippians 4:6

IN HIGH SCHOOL I helped remodel a building for a new church. At one point a fellow volunteer dropped a nail. I waited while he searched the floor.

Finally I said, “Why don’t you get another nail?”

“I just prayed God would help me find that nail,” he said.

“You prayed about finding a nail!?” I said. “Maybe we ought to save prayer for things a little bit bigger.”

“Oh no, Bryan,” he said. “The Bible says ‘in *everything* by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known to God.’”

That day I learned God wants us to pray about matters both large and small. We may hesitate, fearing we may “bother” Him with minor matters. Yet, “everything” means everything!

As a pastor, my heart has been touched and thrilled to read the prayers of God’s people in this devotional. The reason is more than mere sentiment. Long ago a wise man wrote that prayer is not simply seeking a greater work of God—prayer *is* a greater work of God.

As we celebrate 150 years of God’s faithfulness to Grace Presbyterian Church and her people, we should remember the greatest work of God in us is making us a people reliant on His grace. No practice more reflects such reliance, or ensures His future work in us, than being a people of prayer—in everything.

Lord, help us to pray about everything so that we may experience Your grace in all things.

– Pastor Bryan Chapell

A HISTORY OF GRACE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

by Christopher Summers

Grace Presbyterian Church has two birthdays. The church itself was established in 1868, but it grew out of a Sunday school outreach that was started six years earlier in 1862.

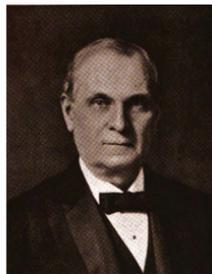
In 1861, Daniel W. McWilliams moved from New York to Peoria to take a job with the Logansport, Peoria, & Burlington Railroad as secretary and treasurer. He was 24 years old and newly married. At that time, Peoria was small at about 14,000 people, but was growing quickly because of its distillery industry.

McWilliams joined the Second Presbyterian Church in Peoria. During his first year in town, he was invited to a friend's house for dinner to meet a little-known evangelist from Chicago named Dwight L. Moody. The two men were the same age, and Moody made a big impression on McWilliams. They became lifelong friends.

McWilliams visited Moody in Chicago and got a tour of Moody's parish. "We visited house after house of the poor, sick, and unfortunate," McWilliams later wrote of that trip. "[Moody] was everywhere greeted with affection, and carried real sunshine into those abodes of squalor."

This trip evidently had a big impact on McWilliams. Just a few months later, in the spring of 1862, he worked with some other members of the newly-formed Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) to establish a "mission school" in the roughest part of Peoria at that time. The city was divided into wards, and the fourth ward was located in the northern part of the city, which today is called the "near north side." The city tried to keep the taverns and brothels confined to this area, making it essentially a red-light district.

The goal was to reach the children of the area, and through the children, the parents. A committee was appointed to find a meeting room for the mission school, but no suitable meeting place could be found. However, the area by the river was a large train yard for the Chicago & Rock Island Railroad, and there were several passenger coaches standing on the tracks. Someone—most likely



D. W. McWilliams

McWilliams—suggested getting permission from the owners to use one of the coaches temporarily until a meeting place could be built.



Permission was granted, and on Saturday, March 1, 1862, the Fourth Ward Mission School held its first meeting. McWilliams was elected the first superintendent. Nineteen children attended that first day.

Over the next several weeks, many more children came, and they had to add a second coach. The railcars were used for four months, during which time the YMCA acquired the land and means to build a permanent meeting place: a 28-by-40-foot building situated at the intersection of Clay, Adams, and Green Street.

In the winter of 1863, the workers at the mission school started having evangelistic services at night to reach the adults of the community. One of those present at the time, John C. Weis, later recalled, “When we held preaching services on the corner of Adams and Clay, the crowds around the saloon would jeer at us, but we kept right on preaching. We held Sunday morning prayer meetings on Water Street for outcasts, preaching in the jail and workhouse, and cottage prayer meetings around the homes of the people who lived in that part of the city.”



First building at Clay and Green Streets (1862)

The evangelistic work continued, with little fruit until the spring of 1866. At that time, an evangelist named Edward Payson Hammond held meetings in the city, and a great revival followed his work. The Saturday evening services increased in attendance, and by the winter of that year over fifty adults were converted. This led directly to the formation of the church over the next several months.

On Friday evening, May 1, 1868, Grace Presbyterian Mission Church was organized by order of the Presbytery of Peoria. Fourteen members transferred from the First and Second Presbyterian churches, and thirty more became members on profession of faith as part of the fruit of the revival of 1866. By this time, D. W. McWilliams had moved back to New York, so the work was carried on by a local businessman named George H. McIlvaine.

The church had temporary pulpit supplies for the first six years. They had a difficult time finding a permanent pastor, but in 1874 the Rev. W. W. Faris accepted the call to be Grace's first pastor. That was the same year that the congregation built its first proper church building at the corner of Wayne and Madison, just a block north of St. Mary's Cathedral. It was a wood-frame building, and in 1890 it caught fire on a Sunday morning just before the congregants began arriving for morning services. It was a total loss. A new, brick building was erected in its place within a year, and it remained until the church moved to Forrest Hill and Knoxville nearly seventy years later.



Fire destroyed the church at Wayne and Madison

By the early 1930s, church attendance and finances had fallen very low, and the future of the church was in doubt. There were talks of merging with another church or possibly dissolving the church completely. By a slim margin, the congregation decided to try calling one more pastor who might help the church grow.



Albert Lindsey

In May 1933, Albert Lindsey, Jr., accepted the call to be Grace's pastor. At the time, money for the church was raised by doing an annual canvass of the membership. Each family would pledge a certain amount to the finances of the church. Lindsey did away with this method of fundraising, and instead emphasized the blessings of tithing. Using examples from the Scriptures, he persuaded many of the regular givers to take part, and then challenged the entire congregation to try it as well. Church finances were improved dramatically.

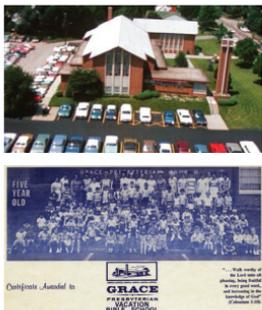
The church then began several efforts to reach the community for Christ. Evangelistic meetings were held, special weekly programs for children and youth were provided, daily Vacation Bible School was inaugurated during the summer, and in the fall of 1939, Grace's morning worship services were broadcast over radio for the first time on local radio station WMBD.

Dr. Bruce W. Dunn was called as pastor of Grace on May 9, 1951. At that time, radio stations in Peoria would broadcast a church's services on Sunday mornings for a month, then



Dr. Bruce W. Dunn

broadcast another church's services the following month, putting churches on rotation for air time. One of the first things Dr. Dunn did was find a radio station that would broadcast Grace's services every Sunday morning. He negotiated a sponsorship agreement with Kenneth Koch Motor Company to buy air time on station WPEO every Sunday.



*Forrest Hill and Knoxville
1957-1973*

Church membership had grown to nearly 900 by this time, and the leadership looked at their options for expansion. They determined there was not enough room in their current location to expand any further. They purchased land at the corner of Forrest Hill and Knoxville avenues in October 1953, and a new building was designed to alleviate overcrowding and provide ample parking. It also offered a new luxury: air-conditioning! The first service in the new building was held on Wednesday, September 8, 1957.

Dr. Dunn was “a man of the Book.” He was passionate about preaching the Word, and he brought prophecy conferences, missions conferences, and guest speakers. God blessed this work, and the membership increased to more than 1,400 by 1971. Daily Vacation Bible School was reaching over 1,300 children as well. Meanwhile, the radio ministry grew to over 80 stations, taking the gospel message across the nation and into other countries.



*Grace Worship Hour
Reach in 1973*

In 1973, the church building was expanded. A new sanctuary, along with new offices and Sunday school rooms, was built on the south side of the existing church building. The old sanctuary was converted into a gym. The new sanctuary was built to accommodate a new medium: television.

Dr. Dunn recognized the power of media as early as 1944, when the movie “Going My Way” starring Bing Crosby as a Catholic priest led to a surge in Catholicism. Dr. Dunn wanted to harness the power of media for the message of the gospel of salvation through grace by faith alone. Expanding from radio into television was a natural step.

The “Grace Worship Hour” went on the air in October 1974 on WEEK-TV, channel 25. Even more cutting edge, the church began broadcasting on its own channel on local cable television. Cable TV was new to Peoria at that time, and Grace was able to program channel 13 with not only the “Grace Worship Hour,” but dozens of other programs for children and adults produced by the church, including “Black Buffalo’s Pow Wow,” “Harvest Fields,” and “God’s Rock House,” to name a few.

Over the years, the mainline Presbyterian denomination had been getting more liberal. For a long time, Grace Presbyterian was able to resist this drift because it was a large church in a small presbytery of only 19 churches. However, as the 1970s drew to a close, the church was brought to a decision point. The denomination restructured their presbyteries, and Grace became a part of a presbytery with over 100 churches, most of which were theologically liberal, meaning they didn’t believe in the authority and inerrancy of the Bible. They even ordained a man as a Presbyterian minister who did not believe in the divinity of Christ. To preserve the doctrinal purity of the church, it was deemed necessary for Grace to leave the mainline denomination.

This was a major decision. There were disputes over who owned the property (the local congregation or the denomination) and whether the church could continue to use the word “Presbyterian” in its name. Nevertheless, on May 25, 1980, at the best-attended congregational meeting in the history of the church, the members of Grace voted 989 to 2 to separate from the United Presbyterian Church denomination, and trust God to work out the details.

In the end, Grace Presbyterian Church was able to keep its property and its name. On April 7, 1982, the church joined the more conservative Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), a denomination that takes a strong position on scriptural inerrancy and accepts the Westminster Confession of Faith as its system of doctrine. It remains part of the PCA today.

Dr. Dunn was the pastor of Grace for just under 40 years—nearly a third of the church’s life up to that time. He retired in 1991, and Rev. John Queen was called to Grace in June 1992. Rev. Queen brought many changes to Grace during his time as pastor. He changed the name of the “Grace Worship Hour” to “Grace Alive.” And he brought in a new music minister who produced a new Christmas concert called “A Grace Family Christmas” as an outreach to the community. The first Christmas special was broadcast on WEEK-TV in 1993.

Since the church had decided to join the PCA, there was a shift during this time in some church practices to align more closely with Presbyterian theology. One thing that didn't change was the commitment of the church to the Word of God and faithful preaching from the Scriptures. The church also continued its strong emphasis on Christian missions. But the physical appearance of the church did need to change. The sanctuary was over 20 years old and showing a lot of wear, and modern church buildings were incorporating video screens into their worship centers. Pastor Queen initiated a complete remodel of the sanctuary with a capital campaign called "Forward with Grace" in 1997.

In 2000, Dr. Ben Johnston was called to be senior pastor after the departure of Pastor Queen, and the church leadership decided the time was right to look at moving again. The church building was landlocked with little green space for the children. The church had bought the office building across the street and was using it for additional Sunday school space, but this meant that attendees had to cross a state highway to go to and from Sunday school. They wanted a building where everyone could be together safely with adequate parking and room for future growth.



Sixty acres of land was purchased on Illinois Route 91 on the north side of Peoria, and a capital campaign called "Future Grace" was started to raise money for a new facility. Ground was broken on April 13, 2008, and the church held its first worship service in its new church home on September 26, 2010.

The church partnered with Campus Outreach to see college students won to Christ, expanded its women's and men's ministries, established English as a Second Language classes, introduced a life-on-life discipleship program, continued its Vacation Bible School, and many other efforts to reach the community with the gospel.

In 2013, Pastor Johnston left to lead his late brother's church in Perth, Australia. Grace then called Dr. Bryan Chapell, former president of Covenant Seminary, to be its new senior pastor.

This look at the Grace Presbyterian Church's past shows us how the Lord has helped us over the years. It is a great encouragement as we press forward with the same gospel message preached here since 1862: "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, [and] that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

Not by our own ingenuity has Grace grown over these past 150 years. It is a blessing from God, who is pleased to use imperfect vessels to do His work in the world. We will continue to pray for God's guidance and blessing as we strive to be a church with God's unlimited grace inspiring all generations and peoples to follow Christ in glorifying worship, gospel dependence, gracious humility, and global discipleship, so that we may join in the song of Revelation 5, impacting Peoria and the world.

