

Way Truth Life:
A Journey of Grace
Seeking Grace
John 14:6

- **Prevenient grace.**
Ephesians 2:12a, 4-5

- **Working out what God is working in.**
Philippians 1:6, 2:12b-13

- **Providence and Prevenience.**
Luke 12:35-48

- **Prevenience and Introducing people to Jesus.**

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Way Truth Life: A Journey of Grace¹ *Seeking Grace*

Today we are in the second of our series called, "Way Truth Life: A Journey of Grace." Some of you have asked about these symbols on the wall behind me (by the way, isn't it amazing how creative our tech team is, to be able to do this!?). No, these are not PlayStation controller symbols, and we are not promoting Squid games on Netflix. These three symbols represent Jesus' statement about Himself:

"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." (John 14:6, niv)

"Way" is represented by a triangle because it is pointing the "way." "Truth" is represented by a square because truth is dependable and right (right angles). "Life" is represented by the circle because it is all-encompassing. Got it? What is the triangle? *Way*. What is the square? *Truth*. What is the circle? *Life*. Good! It's great way to remember that Jesus Christ is the...what? *Way, Truth, Life*.

So last week we talked about how amazing grace is, and many of you had opportunity to receive God's grace for the first time in your life, many others realigned yourselves with God's grace. It truly is amazing! So now, for the next five Sundays leading up to Easter, we are going to talk about the different ways that we experience God's grace in our lives. We'll be looking at these:

- **Seeking Grace**
- **Saving Grace**
- **Sanctifying Grace**
- **Sustaining Grace**
- **Sufficient Grace**

These are not different kinds of grace; they are *all* God's grace, but they are different ways that we experience grace. Remember last week we said that God's grace is personal? Well, these are the ways that we experience God's grace in our lives. Now, depending on the stage of your discipleship journey, you'll experience these at different times; there is sort of a sequence to these, but it's not like you pass from one "stage" to the next; there is fluidity to them. Remember too, last week we said that even though we get ALL of God's grace (he doesn't hold back), we can still grow more and more in God's grace...so these are the ways we grow into grace. And we never stop experiencing them, either – it's not like we move out of one and then it's in the past. I hope that makes sense; I think it will by the time we are done with this series.

¹ This series borrows heavily from, and is indebted to:

- David A. Busic, *Way, Truth, Life: Discipleship as a Journey of Grace* (The Foundry Publishing, KC, MO 2021)

But today, we want to understand “seeking grace.” See, the grace that God gives us doesn’t *start* when we get saved or become Christians; God reaches out to us in his grace long before we ever respond to him. God, in his grace and love, *seeks us*. Remember last week we talked about the three stories about grace that Jesus told in Luke 15 about something that was lost, and in each case the person searched with all their energy to find what was lost. The point was that *we* are what is lost, and God is the one seeking *us*! Because of our sin, we don’t naturally seek God; God seeks us. It is because of God’s grace, reaching out to us, that we realize that there is a God and that we need him. This grace that seeks us first is what theologians call...

- **Prevenient grace.**

It literally means “the grace that goes before.” The root word in there is the Latin word “venire” which means to come, so pre-venire means to come before. As a different example, the word “convenient” means “to come together;” “prevenient” means “to come before.” It is the grace of God, coming to us, before we are even seeking him, before we respond to him. That’s how lost in sin we are; we need God to make us aware of him and his love so we can respond to him. Does that make sense?

Last week we read a passage from the New Testament in Ephesians chapter 2 that talks about God’s grace. I want to revisit a part of that, and I want you to watch for God’s prevenient grace in these verses, okay?

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world... But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. (Ephesians 2:12a, 4-5, niv)

Do you see that – when did God make us alive with Christ? Even when we were dead in sin – it is by grace you have been saved! That is describing seeking grace, or prevenient grace.

A lot of times you will hear people talk about the time that they became Christians and describe by saying, “I found Christ when I was 15 years old” or “I came to Christ when I was 32...” Right? They are trying to describe that point when they became Christians. I know for me, I became a Christian less than a month before I turned 17, and I’ve sometimes described in those terms too. But that’s not really accurate; nobody “finds” Christ or “comes” to Christ; Christ finds *us*; Christ comes to *us* first. Remember what we just read? We were *dead* in our sins. The Bible doesn’t say we were “sick” in our sins or that we were “stuck” in our sins. We were dead. Dead people don’t respond to anything.

Of course, when the Bible says we were dead, it is describing our *spiritual* condition, not our physical or mental or emotional condition. We are alive in those ways but still dead in our spirits. We are sort of like zombies – the spiritual walking dead. Those who are dead don’t respond to anything *unless they are first enlivened*. The grace of God does that for us, so that we can respond to him, and that grace is available to *everyone*. Every single person who is still breathing air, every person on the green side of the grass is being given seeking grace from God.

It's kind of like this: have you ever seen those videos of folks who are colorblind, and their

friends or their family buy them a pair of those special sunglasses for the colorblind? Almost every single time, the person is brought to tears, amazed at the vibrant colors in this world that they've been missing all their lives. Watch this example of what I'm talking about. (*We want to acknowledge that the video was created by SeaJay films at seajayfilms.com.*)

That video is a lot like what happens when a person becomes a Christian. God comes to us, offers us a way to see the world that we are not capable of seeing on our own. When we receive the gift of God's grace through Christ, life suddenly becomes filled with vibrancy and color! There have been so many times that someone becomes a Christian and says, "I had no idea life could be like this! This is what you were talking about, but I had no way of knowing before!"

Seeking grace means that God seeks us, but he still leaves the choice up to us; while we require God to "awaken" us to respond, God does not choose *for* us; God is not controlling or coercive – he still lets us respond to his love. Since God is love, love is reciprocal. Love is not forced. It would not be love if God didn't let us choose and respond. It's what we call "free will" – God gives us the freedom to accept (or reject) his grace. But it's important to understand that prevenient grace does two things: it goes before our response, and it enables our response to God's grace.

So once we respond to God, we begin...

- ***Working out*** what God is ***working in*** our lives.

This life of discipleship, this journey of grace that we are on with Christ, means that we are not just passive recipients of grace; we don't just sit back, and God pours out all this grace on us and we just lay around soaking in God's grace. God graciously *empowers* us to *participate* with him in this journey of grace, so we need to work out through our lives what God works into us. Even though it is God who seeks us, it doesn't take away our responsibility. Relationship involves cooperation.

The Bible is clear; it is God who begins and finishes this work of grace in us:

I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:6, nrsv)

But still, it is up to us to participate in God's grace by working out from our lives what God is working in our lives. We must cooperate with the change that God is bringing in our lives. That's why the Bible says:

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12b-13, nrsv)

There are examples of this all through the Bible: In Genesis 12, God called Abraham and told him that he would bless him, make his name great, and bless others through him. Who initiated that? God did. Who began the good work in him? God did. But Abraham had to respond in obedience in order to work out in his life what God was working in.

God appeared to Jacob in a dream and showed him a stairway to heaven, and then later wrestled with Jacob in order to bless him (Genesis 28 and 32). Who initiated that? God did. Who began the good work in him? God did. But Jacob had to respond in obedience in order to work out in his life what God was working in.

Moses was out in the middle of nowhere when God appeared to him in a burning bush and called him to rescue his people in slavery (Exodus 3-4). Who initiated that? God did. Who began the good work in him? God did. But Moses had to respond in obedience in order to work out in his life what God was working in.

The same thing was true in the New Testament with John the Baptist, Paul, Peter, John, and on and on. The same thing is true with you and me. Who initiated the work in your life? God did. Who began the good work in you? God did. But you must respond in obedience in order to work out in your life what God is working in.

So that leads to something interesting. Does God control what happens to us, or does he let us participate? The question is really about...

- ***Providence*** and ***Prevenience***.

There is a difference between providential grace and prevenient grace. You might wonder what this is about or why it should matter, but it's important. Let me explain. The author of our book defines Providence as how God provides for the sustenance and provision of his creation.

God "provides" (pro-vidance) what is needed to sustain the world and to provide for individual people.

God's providence is unique to each person and is very mysterious. I can't tell you why you were born into a Christian home, and I was not. I can't tell you why I was born in a middle-class family in the United States in the 1960s while someone else was born in the poorer castes of India in the 1700s. I can't tell you why you were born into a free country and someone else is born in an oppressive regime. I can't tell you why some people have multiple opportunities to hear about Jesus and others grow up in a country where they never hear about him and where even speaking his name brings death.

All I can tell you is that each of us is responsible for what we have received from Providence; we are responsible for what God has provided for us. Jesus said so; he said:

From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.
(Luke 12:35-48, nrsv)

Each one of us is responsible and will one day be judged by what we have done, whether we ever accept Christ or not.

But if providence is where God places us and how he provides for us, then prevenience describes the way that God meets us, and offers us the ability and the empowerment to behave responsibly with what God gives us for the greatest good of those around us. Our author says, "God persistently and patiently extends himself to everyone." Remember last

week I said that every world religion is humankind's attempt to reach up to God. Christianity reverses that, because in Christ we see God reaching down to us first.

So if you are a Christian, what is part of that ability of response that you are given? (Did you catch that? ...ability of response...responsibility...) You have been given an ability to respond in obedience. And one of those ways is that you are to participate in God's good work of introducing other people to Jesus. So finally, let's see...

- ***Prevenience*** and ***Introducing*** people to Jesus.

Okay let's stop for a second: so far, we've learned what prevenient grace is, right? It is the grace of God that is given to us while we are still spiritually dead in sin, and awakens us to respond to his grace in our lives. It is God's seeking grace, seeking us because we are lost and don't even know it. Then, as a result of God working in us, we can now work out what God is working in. We can respond in obedience to God's grace. Providence is different than prevenience, but prevenience empowers us to be respons-able with what God has providentially provided us with. Okay? And part of that respons-ability you have is to now introduce other people to Jesus.

Let me unpack that. Our mission at West Valley Church for the last 11 years has been this:

Introduce people to Jesus Christ

Equip people with a faith that works

Live as people with purpose

(Love, learn, live).

Don't miss that first statement: Introduce people to Jesus Christ. Notice that it is not our mission to save people, or convert people. We don't save people; Jesus saves people. We don't convert people; Jesus converts people. We don't redeem, transform, or change people; Jesus does. What *we* do is introduce people to the ONE who CAN save them, convert them, redeem them, transform them, and change them. Jesus is the One, in his grace, that does that. So we want to make sure and introduce people to him.

So listen to this: God has providentially placed you in the life of your neighbor or friend or family member. When you introduce your neighbor or friend or family member to Jesus, you are stepping into a stream of seeking grace that God has been pouring out in that person long before you showed up. You are merely participating in God's seeking, prevenient grace. In fact, when you love others who haven't met Jesus, when you serve others who haven't met Jesus, when you introduce people to Jesus, *you are a means of God's prevenient grace to them.*

Think about it: if you are a Christian, someone introduced you to Jesus. God was at work in your life, and when they introduced you, you were ready to meet him. And if not then, then at a later time, you were, and out of your free will, you responded. But it was all God's grace.

So listen, when you think about introducing people to Jesus, doesn't it take the pressure off of you to know that God's prevenient grace has already been at work?! And if they don't

respond, it's okay – pray they will sometime later, but don't stop loving, serving, praying, and introducing. If God won't take away their free will; you certainly can't override their free will. They may or may not respond. But that doesn't remove your response-ability to them. And in the meantime, God is relentless; he never stops seeking, reaching, preventing in their lives with his grace. Get it?

But what happens in places where there isn't someone to introduce people to Jesus? What happens in Iran, for instance, where there are so few Christians and so many people who need to meet Jesus? Here's something really cool that we are hearing being reported out of those countries. Where there is no one to introduce people to Jesus, Jesus himself is showing up. God, in his prevenient grace, is sending Jesus directly. So we are hearing about people who are seeing Jesus in their dreams. We have Nazarene pastors in those countries who are telling us that, "not dozens, but hundreds of our neighbors are having dreams in the night. The risen Christ appears to them in all his beauty and majesty. When they awake, they come asking questions: "Tell us about this man who comes to us in the night." *Is that cool?!*

But then why doesn't Jesus do that for people in our country? Because they have *multiple* opportunities to be introduced to Jesus...BY YOU. It's not Jesus' fault if your friends aren't meeting Jesus.

Our author says, "(But) in places where the church is facing closed doors, the Spirit of God is going ahead of us. The prevenient grace of God knows no boundaries or barriers. The love of God relentlessly reaches even the most difficult, resistant, and hostile persons. They may never respond in obedient faith, but they cannot escape the pervasive presence of the God who will not stop loving them and drawing them." (47)

Are you guys familiar with "The Jesus Film"? It's a movie that dramatically tells the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. It is being taken by missionaries to all the remote places of the world, in back packs with solar chargers that power tiny projectors. The missionaries meet the people of a certain village, tribe, or community, set up their screen and projector, and from a micro disk they show the movie. It has been used as a means of God's grace in the lives of literally hundreds of thousands of people responding to God's love in Christ – even in places where the name of Jesus has never been spoken.

We are told that one time, the chief of a tribe stood up in the middle of a showing and said, "Stop! We know this man! He appeared to our ancestors many years ago and revealed this story of salvation. He said that one day someone would come to tell us his name. And now we know his name is Jesus!" ...prevenient grace intersected with providential design long before (these people arrived with the Good News through the Jesus Film.) (47-48)

The Spirit of God is far ahead of the church; he is far ahead of you in the lives of your friends and family. God has been cultivating the soil of their hearts to receive the Gospel. You are not alone when you are introducing people to Jesus; you are stepping into a stream of grace from God in their lives that has been flowing long before you ever showed up. But they need you to introduce them to Jesus.

Please: listen to what the Bible tells you in Romans 10:

"The same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone

who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!””
(Romans 10:12b-15, niv)

God is pouring out his grace on everyone. Your friends and family can call on the name of Jesus and be saved. But how can they call on him if they don't believe? And in order to believe, they have to hear about him. And how will they hear about Jesus if you don't tell them? And how will you tell them if you don't obey Jesus and go do it? How beautiful are the feet of those who bring this Good News of God's love to others, who go and introduce people to Jesus.

God has providentially placed you in their lives; step into the stream of seeking grace and introduce them to Jesus, so they can start living life in vivid colors!

Worship team, come prepare to lead us as we sing.

While they come, I want to encourage you in a couple of ways: first, if you haven't yet responded to God's love for you, why not? He's been seeking you; say yes to him. Accept his grace for you.

Second, if you already have responded to his grace, why are you not participating in God's prevenient grace, acting response-ably by introducing the people you know to Jesus? Determine that you will, no matter what, no matter when.

Let's sing.

Prayer

Pastor Jason:

God in his grace is seeking you. May you go from here, working out the grace in your life that God is working in. He has providentially placed you in the lives of others; step into the stream of God's seeking grace for them, and introduce them to Jesus. Maybe invite them to church with you!