

Celebrating Fifty Years

Week 2: Celebrating YHWH's Grace at Grace, Part 2

Ephesians 3:20

Dr. Matt Cassidy --- October 27, 2019

Hey, if you haven't made plans and maybe this is your first week here, we'd love to buy you lunch, as a matter of fact --- if this is your first week here. We're going to have a big party out in the courtyard. Kanye West has brought his worship band today. They'll be playing --- I know, I know, that's short notice, too --- that's going to be --- he's not coming ... so ... But please, by all means, stay. We'll have all kinds of festivities for every age group. It'll be a good time.

Fifty years ago, Grace opened its doors to teach the truths that are found in the Bible, the highest form of revelation from God himself. It tells us about the nature of God: who is YHWH and what has He done? His acts of mercy and love --- it gives us hope that future justice will finally take place. And Grace was the first Bible church in Austin and the rest is just history.

It all started in the living room of Dr. Joe McIlhaney. I wonder if Dr. McIlhaney is here today. Is he here? He was here about six weeks ago and he told me a great story I hadn't heard before. I've heard a few stories here. When they were looking at purchasing this real estate, there was a small factory that was here and some of the people involved in making the decision wanted to know a little bit more. So they sent out a reconnaissance team, including some of the wives of the guys that were involved. And so, Mrs. McIlhaney and Peggy Bower and I think one other lady were up here looking around after hours. And they were snooping, and someone called security. And so, they got in a lot of trouble, a little bit of breaking and entering. So, the church started with women doing a little breaking and entering. And when you hear that story, you think, *That's why I feel so connected here!* All of God's pirates said ...[Amen] ... Yeah, I relate to that. I mean, we had a whole campaign called "Grace is Weird" that went on for about five years that sold a lot of t-shirts.

Hey, let's turn up the house lights. Let's do a survey of some fun things that we've experienced together. How many of you guys were introduced and maybe even found Christ, or Christ found you, in the context of the ministries of Grace Covenant Church? Why don't you

raise your hand? Oh, that's fun. How many of you were baptized here at Grace? Awesome. Anyone meet their spouse here at Grace? A few of you guys. How many of you have dedicated a child here at Grace? Wow, okay. Lots of you. How many of you have gone on one of our mission trips around the world? Good things. Have you served in one of the many ministries at Grace? Lots of hands, there you go. Introduced someone else to Jesus Christ --- whether they responded or not is not up to you --- how many of you shared the Lord because of your ministry here at Grace? How many of you have gone on one of our camps or retreats? Awesome. How many of you went to one of the camps or retreats that I did and I left you in hell? I'm really sorry I did that. (I'm not sorry at all --- I'm not really sorry, no. I'd do it again if I could.)

How many of you were here when Dick Flaten was the senior pastor? Let's see your hands. That's great. Max Anders? That was our next pastor. Awesome. Yeah, and Jim Rose? There you go. How many of you have climbed on that oak tree out there? Yeah, there's a lot of hands there. Last few ... how many of you have been here less than ten years --- ten years or less? How about five years or less? Well, great.

We're going to have a great time today because your hands going up in all those various questions --- it is way beyond what you could ask or imagine and way more than the members of that original Bible study ever could have asked or imagined.

Ephesians 3:20-21

**Now to Him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,
21 to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.**

Which calls my attention to a passage of Scripture that was foundational for this church itself. It's in the book called Ephesians. And here are two sentences that serve as the climax of that book. Here's what it says: "And now to Him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we could ask or imagine, to Him be glory in the church" --- that's us --- "... to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."

Those two sentences are, in fact, the summary of the first three chapters of the Book of Ephesians. And Ephesians is a book that's like an owner's manual on how to do church, what the church is, how to run a church, for example. And this serves as a doxology. So, it's leading up to and coming out of --- it's the summary of the first three chapters and serves as a climax for the whole book itself. Because what it's doing here is it's summarizing the abundance of God's goodness to us. It talks about the overwhelming power that is available in Jesus Christ. And then it shows us this mystery of this eternal connection between Jesus Christ and His church. "Abundant far more" it says --- "immeasurably more." That's how he meets our needs.

And then it says, "To Him be the glory in His church." That's first. And scholars have said the reason the Church is mentioned first is because it is through the Church that Jesus receives His glory. It's the means of that. The fact that the Church is even mentioned in this doxology is somewhat amazing. And the purpose of that is to show you that the bride and the groom --- Jesus and His church --- are wed together, for eternity, forever and ever. And that's why it ends with "Amen." It is a prayer. It is the truth. That's the way things are.

And that's how the Church got started. It was built upon the things that we find in this Book of Ephesians, in this idea that the way that God's going to work in the universe is through His church in ways that are greater than we could ever ask or imagine.

Today's going to be an unusual Sunday. If you're here for the first time we don't usually do this. We usually pick a passage from the Bible and look at that in detail and how it can apply to our lives. Today is a special day. It's the fiftieth anniversary of Grace and I thought, "You know what? Why don't we just tell the testimony of someone that I love and you love too?" Her name is Grace. Last name is Church. Middle name is Covenant. Grace Covenant Church. It's a great story of suspense and sorrow and even has a little resurrection part in it. And since so many of you don't know this story, I think it will be fun for you to know that.

Let me tell you how it started. In 1968 and 1969 the Bible study started. But in the context of 1969, the world and, particularly, our country were off balance. Six hundred million people watched a man walk on the moon. Four hundred thousand people went to a concert in Woodstock, New York. It was a troubling time. It was a conflicting time. It was the Age of Aquarius --- peace and harmony. And our cities were burning. It was a confusing time where people didn't know how to make sense of the nonsense. And the concept of "do whatever you

want” --- “just love the one you’re with” --- that has a high price on your soul. And people were walking wounded amongst us.

And so, the Jesus movement got started about that time. And that’s when Grace Covenant opened her doors in a car dealership. Can you imagine? No one had done that before. But think about it – it was 1969 --- *We’re going to go to church in a car dealership. That’s cool, man. Did I tell you it’s a Mercedes-Benz car dealership? Oh, that’s way cool, man.*

And that’s what they did. And the people who started the church felt like, in this context of a culture of confusion and injury, they wanted to bring this: truth and love. If people knew the truth about who God is and what He has done and love, they could respond to that. They had a value that every believer was a minister. And that meant the ministry was in the place of work, the place where they lived, or a place of significance for you. They wanted to teach the Bible with conviction, that there were reasons to believe it was the highest revelation from the Creator of the universe. So they taught it that way.

If you asked those leaders in the early days, they would say, “We didn’t know what we were doing. We were just trying to follow the way the Lord was leading us.” And they did. And so, the Lord blessed them, more than they could ever ask or imagine --- abundantly, immeasurably more than they could ask or imagine.

In the seventies it was a growth spurt for Grace. They bought the land here, they built the buildings that are on our campus today. They started sending missionaries all over the world. They started church planting when church planting wasn’t a thing. They started new churches around the city and around the state. It was a good time. If you asked the leaders during that season at Grace, they would say, “No, we still don’t know what we’re doing. We’re just trying to do whatever the Lord would call us to do.” So, they did. And the Lord blessed them, immeasurably more than they could ever ask or imagine.

In the mid-eighties or so, Dick Flaten, the founding pastor of Grace Covenant Church, was becoming ill. He had cancer. And it was coming back. And he was a much-loved pastor here and he was very sick. It was an extremely difficult time. It was a crushing time for Dick Flaten’s family and the leadership of Grace Covenant Church and their family. Because as Dick became sicker, his good friends had to insist that he step down and resign from the ministry. It was a very hard thing to hear and to say.

And one of the more difficult parts of leadership is that the people in the church would not understand that it was a statement of love. It was an act of love. But it was a deep cut, nonetheless.

But the church continued because God was blessing the church and the church wasn't built upon Dick Flaten or his family. And it continued. And in 1988 the next senior pastor joined us. His name was Dr. Max Anders. He was very well liked, but he was not well. Even when he came here he was not well in that he had several allergies. And he especially had an allergy to Austin. All the allergy seasons of Austin --- he was allergic to all of those seasons. And the longer he stayed here the more ill he became. And as the years progressed he was sick for longer periods of time.

And then on October 11, 1992, in the old auditorium, a woman came up on the stage with a handgun to shoot him. She was tackled from behind and so there were no injuries to anyone. And we had a party that night at his house. We had planned a little dessert party (the staff), and so we had that event. It was as though nothing happened. The next Sunday, Max returned to the pulpit and explained what had happened to those people that weren't in that particular service. And then Max never returned to the pulpit again. He just couldn't climb the stairs. Now his allergies were attacking him with violence and revenge. And he didn't resign. He just kept thinking that next week he would be back. Next week he would be better. And it was drug out --- *I'll be back next week* --- for five months. The leaders at Grace, the elders and some staff, met multiple times a week into the morning trying to determine what they were supposed to do. And after five months Max did eventually resign.

And it was a terribly high price that everyone in the church had to pay, but especially the leadership. That storm season tore the sails and it cracked the mast of the church. Because --- I would say --- one of the most difficult parts of leadership is this: that when you have to make a very difficult decision where there really is no good outcome, there are people that don't know very much of the facts, maybe a few percentages. But they'll tell you that whatever you're doing is the wrong decision. And that just grinds on you like a grist mill. And many of the people here experienced that. It was a difficult time in the context of *What are we doing and who can we trust and is this going to work?*

But do you know what? God had his hand on us. But a person came between services and told me, "Look, I was there when Dick had to resign and I was there when Max had to resign.

And the reason I stayed here was because I had been part of so many churches where when the senior pastor left, everyone else did too. And I looked around and people didn't. And I thought, *This is where I ought to be, then.*" God blessed the church, even in that difficult time. And I would say that God did immeasurably more than you could ask or imagine --- even in that time.

Here's how. You might have heard the expression: You can never trust the man or the woman who doesn't walk with a limp. Or maybe one that goes like this: The knight that's wearing shining armor has never been tested. And during that time, back-to-back senior pastors that grew to a place where they were too ill to finish their job --- that metal was bent and cut and tarnished. That was battle-tested armor. Grace earned her limp during that season. Because sometimes only pain can tell you the truth.

All the while that was happening, there was still great ministry taking place on campus and around the world. We were thriving in our missions program, and ministries were alive because the ministries were built upon "Every believer is a minister." And so, the believers continued to do ministry. The strength of the church was in its foundation. The Book of Ephesians, which is about how the purpose of the leadership is to train the ministers to the ministry ...

Well, in 1994, Jim Rose became our third senior pastor. Now he was a pastor of great notoriety and success. He was very stable and steady. He was a man with no guile. His wife was a spitfire -- an energetic leader --- Phyllis Ann Rose. And this was supposed to be his retirement, his last ministry experience. He moved to Llano after that and started a church, then he started another church, and he still travels the world preaching. So much for that idea of retirement. But it was the last years of that season of his life that he spent his time here, bringing us back. He unified the church, he brought health to Grace and introduced a whole new worship style to Grace. Our contemporary style of worship was done when Jim Rose was here. God was blessing our church in ways that we could never ask or imagine, immeasurably more than we could ask or imagine.

Y2K --- 2000 --- a whole new millennium. In 2001 Jim and I shared the pulpit together. I was looking for a job as senior pastor at other places and it turns out Grace was looking. And I was mildly interested. And in 2002, there was a seamless transition between Jim's last Sunday and my first Sunday. That is a miracle. That doesn't happen very often. It's hard to find a church that has such a flow that way. God was gracious to us in that context.

But what had happened over those years, up until that new millennium, was that the world had changed. It had changed again. And people were still desperately looking for things. Philosophers at the time were saying there's been a paradigm shift. Remember that? There's been a paradigm shift. And people were still hurt and confused, but they were looking for meaning and purpose and identity in ways the previous generations hadn't.

And so, at Grace, the leadership felt like we needed to change what we were doing without changing Grace. We had to change maybe our philosophy of ministry. We had to have a new philosophy of ministry without changing the nature of who she is and who God made Grace to be. And so, we realized that the Bible teaching was absolutely foundational and essential. And we would continue to teach the Bible authoritatively and would try to do as much as we could to apply it to our lives. We'd never give up on "every believer is a minister", because that's a biblical truth and that's the way the New Testament church is to be run. What we did do is we changed the value of pursuing people with truth and love, to love and then truth. It was our estimation that people couldn't hear the truth because the sorrows of life had deafened them to that. They couldn't hear because of the ringing in their ears due to loneliness. There's never been a lonelier time, in many respects.

There was a hopelessness of people's addiction that kept them from hearing truth. They had to have some kind of hope, and that was found in love. People couldn't let go of bitterness of their past. People were trapped in their pasts and didn't feel like they could overcome that. People were scared to live in their present. Some other people were afraid of what their future might hold. And so, we changed. It was like Grace Covenant Church, chapter 2. It was going to be love and then truth. And God has blessed us and blessed the lives that have come here in many amazing ways. The love of God, as expressing itself in the very many ministries that we have throughout our campus that expand across the city and the world, but also our foundation that the Bible is the ultimate expression of God's revelation to man. We bring those two things in a different order.

Our church began to expand again in size. And so, we had to go to three services in 2004. We did three services for five years. That was exhausting for me. We started a capital campaign, our first one in thirty years, that was successful and led to the building of this worship center. Awesome times. But I think between the five years of three services and the capital campaign that we were involved in and even working through the city to get this approved --- I love this

building, I love the joy that was involved in getting us here. But I'll tell you, working with the city was no labor of love. It was a labor of anger. That's what it was. Anyway, the point is that after eight years of the workload and the stress and the choices that I was making was tearing me apart, body and soul. And I was having a terrible time. From October of 2008 until February of 2010 I just needed to get up. That was it. Just get up. It was a daily decision. And I remember praying for Grace because I didn't feel like my prayers were being answered. And I said, "God, Grace can't handle ... I just don't know if she should have to endure another senior pastor who became too ill to finish his job. Could you please make me well for her sake?"

People that knew me and the leadership here carried me and they prayed for me and they helped me get well. I had something wrong in my throat --- a parathyroid that had to be removed. I got some rest and I made some life changes and I got a lot better. I mean, look at me. I'm thirty-seven years old. Look at me. [Congregation laughs.] Is this awesome or what? It could never happen.

And how today, the church continues to grow and thrive all for the glory of God --- way more than we could ever ask or imagine. Way more than we could have ever hoped for. We live with the reputation in the city of Austin that is worthy of our name --- Grace. People know us, in our neighborhoods, that don't even go to church. And they know that we are a church of love and a church of truth. We have a nationally famous Celebrate Recovery --- nationally famous. They know about us on the West Coast, the organization that started Celebrate Recovery. They talk about us often. We have a Grief Care, a Divorce Care, we have a thriving premarital counseling ministry, and an amazing marriage ministry. We have communities that help people navigate life and practice their faith in every season of life. And I read recently in a leadership magazine --- a leadership and church magazine --- listen --- this is the new thing in town. This is how people are thriving in churches --- through adult Sunday school classes. Yeah, I know. Yeah, apparently, they're back. And we are again the cool kids. If you wear your bell bottoms long enough --- See, I told you they'd be back.

So, the way we do discipleship now, even, with the value of discipleship, is being practiced again and again. I mean, we've made this transition as a church that's famous and notorious for excellent Bible teaching to one that was famous for its discipleship and now for its relational discipleship, in a new expression of what a disciple means, to become like Christ in all of life, especially in the context of relationships.

Your personal identity --- who you are in a nutshell ---is two things: what you believe and what your memories are. That's who you are. That's who we are as a church. What we believe -- - YHWH God as He revealed himself in the Bible, throughout history, and as is recorded in the Bible; that it is by grace alone that you're saved; that it is by grace alone that you're transformed. We believe that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was more than sufficient to provide us the gift of salvation. Those things we hold together in our beliefs. We celebrate those. And we celebrate our memories --- who we are, the good and the bad. We celebrate the great memories together, the baby dedications we've had on this stage, the graduations, the weddings, the marriages --- we rejoice and laugh together. And the sad times. The fullness of human experience is high and low like no other created being. And so, we've experienced funerals and deaths together, of our children becoming prodigals, of divorces and separations of things that were meant to live forever. So, we cry together because that's what we do. We're living life together. That's what a church is. It's something very special. It's beyond anything we could ever ask or imagine. It's the fullness of what God has for us.

When we think about our future memories --- this is the application section here. When we think about our future memories, think of this: your purpose. Why are you here now? Why are you here now? "For such a time as this ..." --- it's an Old Testament saying --- "For such a time as this" It's about Esther, who in all kinds of evil --- she's a victim of all sorts of evil --- she's taken away from her uncle --- because she's an orphan --- and sent into a contest to be the wife, the queen, of a megalomaniac, an insane sociopath. And she, what, wins, and becomes the queen? And in that moment of her royal position, her uncle confronts her and says, "You need to go and talk to the king, because who knows but that you have been put here for such a time as this?"

When we look at that storyline of the life of Esther, it's easy to see, in some respects. If you understand the Bible and who God is and what He's done, every single one of us is Esther. "For such a time as this ..." In God's sovereignty, in His foreknowledge, in His middle knowledge of all things that could happen, He could have placed you anywhere at any time, and if it would have caused you to bring more glory to Him, He would have put you there. Or then. But He didn't. So He put you here, now, for this very purpose. So, you need to play your part. You need to see yourself as a single thread in a divine tapestry that hangs at the banquet wall of the king's castle for eternity. It never weathers, it never fades. Just be that thread for such a time

as this. Your choices are expressions to all the world, all the created things, seen and unseen, that you are playing a part in God's divine tapestry. Everybody plays a part. No minor roles. When you do that, you're going to live a life that's immeasurably more than you could ever ask or imagine. Everyone has a part to play ... everyone.

Look, it's World Series season, right? Go, Astros! Think about it this way. Now you clap. Look, guys, those Astros are going to get a World Series ring for being the champions of all of major league baseball in just a couple of games, right? And all the players are going to get a ring and the managers are going to get a ring and the coaches are going to get a ring. Every full-time employee is going to get a ring. I have a ring right here, a World Series ring from the Atlanta Braves. John Flannery, big John Flannery, lent me this ring to show you. He didn't play on that Braves team. He was a recruiter for them. And it fits nicely right here on my thumb. Actually, it's a little wobbly here. I'm going to put it back in my pocket so I don't ...

The point is that everyone plays a part on that team. Look, the full-time people working in the laundry --- they're a part of the team, because if the players are laundering their own uniforms, they don't have enough time to practice hitting a grand slam home run in the seventh inning. It's all part of this team thing. Everybody plays a part. There are no minor parts.

My story --- Melinda had me look it up --- I went through all my old calendars --- in 1988, thirty-one years ago, Melinda and I met with Max Anders, the senior pastor at the time. We'd spent two or three years trying to start a church in Austin and we had nothing. We had no money and we had no hope. And so, we asked Matt if there were any pastoral positions open. And he said, "No."

I said, "Man, I've been watching you guys for years. I just want to play a part on the team. I just want to be on the team. I can fix stuff. Can I work in the maintenance department? I would love to work maintenance. I can fix stuff. I can break stuff, but I can fix stuff, too."

And he said, "No, we've got a guy doing that."

I said, "I've seen that guy, Bob Comp? He's eighty years old! I'm twenty-six, man! Come on, I can hold his tape measure, can't I?"

"No, we've got that covered."

He called me a few months later and said, "Hey, our youth guy left. Do you want to take the youth position?"

I said, “No. I don’t want to be on the team that bad.” Well, you know, I kind of ... there was further wearing down. There’s the part of the story where a couple of elders came to me later on and said, “Do you want to do the youth job?” and I said, “Yeah, I’ll take it.”

What’s interesting ... do you know that one of the moms of the kids in the youth group told me in the lobby between services, “You weren’t doing youth ministry. You said no to that.”

I said, “Yeah, you know what? We were doing an adult ministry to young adults that were still in high school and junior high.” And so, that was the problem. I didn’t want to do my old experience with youth ministry. I wanted to have adult ministry to young adults. And so, I did that --- the best decade of my life. And I’m thankful to God for that.

But the point is that I just wanted to get on the team. I just wanted to be somewhere when the rings were handed out. With a church like this, I got a ring. You know, when I was a student pastor ... have you ever done this? When you get a little bit older and get a little distance from the moment, you look back and you see your motives, what you used to do and why. I think when I was the youth guy I spent those first two years breaking everything. We did a skit where we kicked the door in --- a solid door. And we kicked it off the hinges and it shattered the doorknob and the door when it hit the ground. And now when I look back I was thinking, “You know, those first couple of years when I was breaking hinges and doors and everything else, I think a lot of it was because I was looking over at Bob Comp because he had my job and I resented him for that.” And if he were alive today, I would feel like I owe him an apology. *Bob, I wanted your job ...*

So, anyway, there’s a point. Hold on, wait a minute ... oh, okay, here’s the point. Find that church. You find that church. There are no perfect churches. You find that church where you want to be on that team when they’re handing out the rings. You want to play a part, you just want to be part of that tapestry. You want to be there because that’s where God is doing His work.

Look, we’ve had people at this church who have moved away and then they came back because they wanted to be here. We’ve had people make career decisions that they wouldn’t move because they wanted to be with this church.

Here’s the secret and meaning and purpose of life. Ready? You find out where God is working in miraculous ways and you go figure out a way to sneak into that. You go in the back

door when no one's watching. You do whatever it takes. You get to where God has been working.

God has been working here. This has been a great church. She's not new. She has scars. She has weathered storms. She has done some great things over the years and she has great things ahead. This is a great to have been. It's a great place to be. I want to encourage you to come and stay and enjoy. Get connected. And love ... love deeply. The truths that come from the Word of God ...

Here's what Jesus promises to those who involve themselves in His bride. "Now to Him who by the power of work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we could ask or imagine, to Him be the glory in the church" --- in His church --- "And in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever." And all God's people said, "Amen."