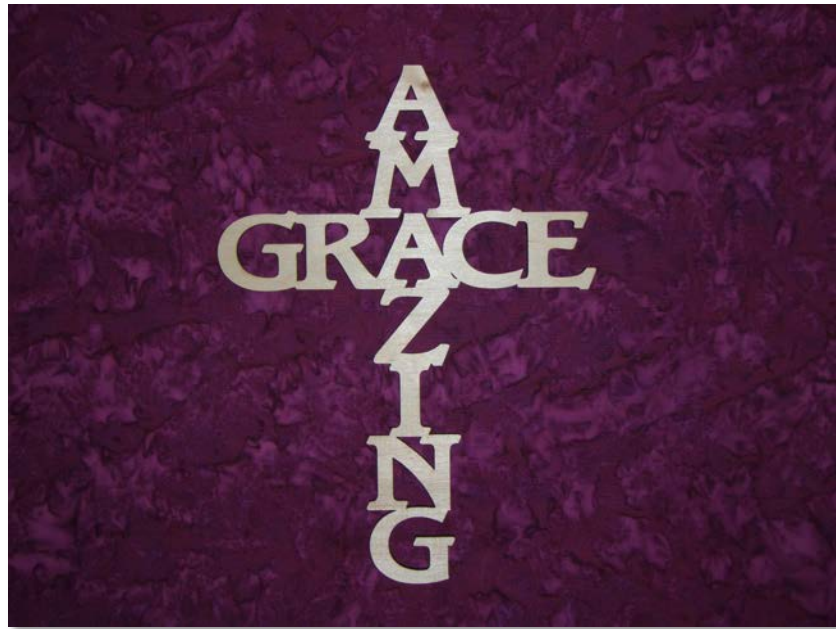


A FRAMEWORK OF GRACE



GRACE FOR YOUR TIME
OF NEED: PART 2

T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

A Framework of Grace

A Framework of Grace
Grace for Your Time of Need: Part 2
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Welcome to *A Framework of Grace*

Grace being what it is – divine in origin, communication, and power – we require some kind of temporal framework within which to realize and express the grace of our Lord.

In Part 2 of our series, *Grace for Your Time of Need*, we consider the framework – of covenant, Kingdom, and Church – which God has established so that we might know His grace and be agents of that grace in the world.

God's covenant establishes the promises of grace; His Kingdom provides the power by which operates; and the Church is the arena where grace abounds to sinners such as we.

In Part 2, *A Framework of Grace*, we will discover why we need each of these entities, and why God's providing them makes His grace all that much more precious and powerful.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

And if you find this study helpful, please let us know. How have you benefited from this study? Go to our website, www.ailbe.org, and use the Contact Us button to share your story.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 God's Gracious Covenant (1)

Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Ephesians 2.11-13

All-sufficient grace

There is a tendency, sometimes, to think of the grace of God in merely personal and temporary terms. That is, grace is real to the extent that *I* experience it, *when* I experience it. Now it's true that all who know and follow Jesus Christ experience the grace of God more or less and at different times and in particular circumstances. At such times – when we are *gladly aware* that God is kindly disposed toward us, and He is communicating that grace to us and empowering us to know and express it – we are confident in the all-sufficiency of God's grace to help us in our times of need.

But what about the other times? When God doesn't feel so near? Or we have not been diligent in seeking Him? When we're going through some trial or season of doubt? Many of us might feel like the grace of God has forsaken us just at the time we need it most. We feel alone, unhappy, and maybe even wondering whether we're saved at all.

This view sees grace as an occasional shower of blessing, that comes just in time and in just enough supply to sustain us through our normal life. But when troubles or doubts come, we feel we have strayed into a desert, or are languishing in a drought, where gracious showers of blessing are withheld, and there's not a cloud of relief anywhere in sight.

We need to remember that grace is not just an occasional shot of spiritual steroids, strengthening us according to our needs for a while. God does not extend His grace to us in measured terms. His grace is always sufficient for all our needs, all the time. And this is so because all who have come to know the grace of God have entered a *framework* of grace, a new *economy* of grace, in which grace is the air we breathe, the road we travel, and the currency we spend.

And foundational to that framework is God's gracious covenant.

God's covenant

God's covenant is the gracious arrangement He has established to unite His people with Himself, bring them into His presence with glory, and make them ambassadors of grace to the world. It entails promises offered by God, responsibilities accepted by His people, and blessings or sanctions according to their obedience to the covenant.

God's covenant is a major unifying theme of Scripture. While there are – as Paul noted – many *covenants* in the Bible, these all are but stages or developments of the one *covenant of promise* – God's gracious covenant – within which framework the story of redemption and restoration unfolds.

The most prominent feature of God's covenant is the promises He makes, as outlined in Genesis 12.1-3. The various promises here are all outworkings of the one overarching promise of grace, which may be summarized in the covenant motto: "I will be your God, and you will be My people." The purpose of God's covenant is to bind to Himself forever a people upon whom He sets His grace for forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life. To accomplish the purpose of His covenant, God has made the entire cosmos subject to it. He rules the heavens and the earth, and everything in them, by grace and holy spiritual power, so that His goodness might come to all His creatures, and especially to His people. God's people of grace come to know

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Him as their God within the constraints of time and space; thus, God causes all time and space, and everything in them, to cooperate as His servants in fulfilling the great promise of His covenant (Ps. 119.89-91).

The grace of God is thus active at all times all around us. The way He sustains the cosmos, His governance of our daily lives, His provision for our needs – all these are reminders that we who know Him live within a framework of grace, a *sea* of grace, as it were, and not merely an occasional shower of blessing; an atmosphere of grace, and not just a gracious breath of fresh air from time to time. We are always carried along and kept in life by the grace of God, which operates in, on, and through all creation to draw and keep His people near to Him.

And His covenant cannot fail, for He has taken upon Himself all the responsibility of ensuring that His grace will be all-sufficient for all our needs.

The promises of grace

Central to God's covenant are the precious and very great promises He outlined to Abram. He promised to bless Abram with a special and binding relationship with Himself; to make of him a great and influential people, as numerous as the stars of the heaven and the sand of the sea; to keep and provide for him, and to guard him against enemies; and to extend His grace through Abram to all peoples and for all times. These "precious and very great promises" find their complete fulfillment in Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1.4; 2 Cor. 1.20). When we come to know Christ, we enter the framework of grace which is God's covenant, and we are submerged in, surrounded by, sustained by, and strengthened by the constancy of God's unfailing promises.

When the psalmist Asaph sensed that something had come between him and the Lord, that he was not experiencing His grace as normally, he realized that it was *his* sin, *his* grief, *his* failure that had blinded him to the reality that God's grace does not change, and He does not move, because He is at all times faithful to His gracious covenant (Ps. 77.7-12).

The promises of God are given to guide our steps each day. As we live *toward* the promises, striving to gain them and reaching out to attain them, we engage the all-sufficient grace of God for everything we need. This is a bit like swimming, when we're more aware of the water, and of its buoyancy and power, because we're working with it to stay afloat and make progress.

God's covenant provides the superstructure of grace in which all who have come to know Jesus live, move, and have their being. We are *never* beyond the reach of God's grace, and when we feel as though we are, then we must merely breathe our prayers to the Lord, and exercise our bodies to engage His all-sufficient grace anew. And because of His covenant, He will not fail to renew us in His ever-present, all-sufficient grace.

For reflection

1. Why do we need to understand that grace is like a sea or an atmosphere, and not an occasional rain shower?
2. What does it mean to "live toward" the promises of God?
3. How would you explain God's covenant motto – "I will be your God, and you will be My people" – to an unbelieving friend?

Next Steps – Transformation: Begin making note, throughout the day, of all the many ways God surrounds you with His grace. Jot them down. Share them with others. At the end of the day, pray them back to the Lord with thanksgiving. Then do it again the next day.

2 God's Gracious Covenant (2)

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. 2 Peter 1.2-4

For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us. 2 Corinthians 1.20

A great idea, but...

God's gracious covenant sounds like a really great idea. He has determined to do good to His chosen people, to restore them to Himself, shelter them in His forgiveness and love, constitute them as a nation of priests and kings, and deploy them for the work of restoring and renewing all of creation. To that end, God rules the vast cosmos so that it serves the purposes of His covenant. He makes all things in life and the world work together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Rom. 8.28).

Truly, God's gracious covenant is a great idea.

Such a great idea, in fact, that it seems too good to be true. Those precious and very great promises – blessing, influence, protection and provision, power to bless the nations – are very attractive. It's clear that, within the framework of those promises, people like us could find meaning, purpose, security, and the wherewithal to make a solid contribution to the world.

All we have to do is obey God's Law and keep all His Word. And that's precisely the problem with people. Or, as Shakespeare might say, "Aye, there's the rub."

For we know ourselves, don't we? We know we struggle with obedience. We neglect God's Law. Give lip-service to prayer and worship much of the time. Pick at the crumbs of Scripture rather than feast on the meat. And tend to keep our faith at a low profile status when we're out in the world, where we should be exerting influence and extending blessing.

And these failures of obedience to God's covenant responsibilities not only keep us from realizing His promises, they provoke Him to bring sanctions and discipline against us, to bring us back within the framework of grace He has established (Heb. 12.3-11).

The covenant is a really great idea. But who can keep it?

It's God's covenant

Only God, that's Who. And He intends to do just that. He Who has called us into this covenant will be faithful to keep us there, and He made it clear from the beginning that this was His design.

Genesis 15.1-20 records an important incident in the beginning days of God's covenant with His people. Abram was puzzled. God had made precious and very great promises to him (Gen. 12.1-3), but he could not figure out how to attain them. He was weak in his body, and his days were slipping away. He had no strength to achieve what God had promised. He couldn't even have a child, the first token of God's promises.

So when God reiterated the promises to bless and multiply him abundantly, Abram could not help but ask, "How?" God's response was fourfold. First, He restated the promise of a child, and through that child multitudes of offspring to come. Abram may have been childless, but he wasn't Godless. God would make the promise happen.

Second, He emphatically reminded Abram Whom he was bound to in this covenant: “I *am* the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it” (v. 7). Remember what I’ve said in the past, Abram, and how I’ve led you and been with you all this time. Remember all that I’ve done for you and through you. Remember that this covenant is *My Word* to you.

Third, God sealed the covenant with Abram by a ceremony that was common among kings in those days. Animals were slain and divided to make a pathway. When kings performed this ceremony, to seal a treaty or covenant, both would stand at the head of the path and declare the terms of the treaty. Then, with their families and armies watching, they would walk the pathway to the end. By so doing, they invoked the penalty of death – like the slain animals that formed that path – for whichever of them broke the terms of the treaty.

In the case of God’s gracious covenant, only the symbols of God walked the covenant path (v. 17). God took upon Himself all the obligations of the covenant, and He exposed Himself to all its threats and sanctions for the disobedience of *any* of the parties.

God would be faithful to His Word, and He would cover any unfaithfulness of His people.

Finally, God applied the promises of the covenant in specific, temporal terms, bringing into focus a place and time to live toward for Abram and the generations that would succeed Him (vv. 13-16, 18-20).

Christ the covenant-keeper

In Jesus Christ, God fulfills the promises and obligations of His gracious covenant; and He bore the sanctions and wrath for our disobedience. Jesus stands at the head of that bloody path and cries, “Come to Me. I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He that believes in Me shall never die. You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” And at the end of that path He displays His nail-scarred hands, ensuring that we may be free from the penalty and power of sin, to serve Him as agents of grace all our days.

Jesus is the Cornerstone of God’s covenant. All the promises of God’s gracious covenant resolve into Jesus. As we come to know Him, grow in Him, are transformed into His image, and serve Him as those He has sent to specific places and people (Jn. 20.21), we experience the power of God’s promises enabling us to leave behind the world and its corruptions and to partake of the divine nature by His indwelling Spirit. We realize the blessings of God’s gracious covenant because the God of the covenant supplies everything we need in our Lord Jesus Christ (Phil. 4.13, 19).

God’s covenant is a really great thing, and the greatest thing about it is that it is entirely fulfilled, realized, and lived through Jesus Christ. Wonderful, the matchless grace of Jesus!

For reflection

1. What can keep us from knowing the precious and very great promises of God’s covenant? How can we avoid this snare?
2. What do we mean by saying that Jesus is the Cornerstone of God’s covenant?
3. All the precious and very great promises of God’s gracious covenant resolve into Jesus. What does that mean?

Next Steps – Transformation: Obviously, we need to know Jesus, and grow in Him, if we are to realize the precious and very great promises that are “Yes” and “Amen” in Him. What can you do to begin focusing more clearly and more consistently on Jesus, both in your times with God and in your daily life?

3 The Coming Kingdom

So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." Genesis 1.27, 28

Made to rule

When God created Adam and Eve, His covenant already existed as the framework for all creation. This is clear from Genesis 1, when God paused at each stage of His work of creation to pronounce the progress thus far "Good".

The cosmos was created good, that is, *according* to the goodness and grace of God, and *unto* the goodness and grace of God. Into that world of goodness and grace, God introduced the man and the woman. From the beginning, God's people have existed in a good and gracious environment in which to know, enjoy, and serve Him.

But as the image-bearer of God, human beings need something to do more than merely exist and reproduce. People are not animals. They are like God – creative, moral, spiritual, purposeful, cultural, social, and made to work. God could have done with Adam and Eve what He did with all the animals, that is, set them in the garden and leave them to eat and reproduce, without any larger sense of purpose.

But that would have been a most unsatisfying existence for beings made in the image and likeness of God. Thus, within the framework of God's gracious covenant, God articulated a purpose for their existence. That purpose was to *rule*.

And in this mandate to rule, we see the first manifestations of what will become increasingly clear throughout the Old Testament and into the New: Within the framework of His gracious and all-encompassing covenant, God is establishing an order for His people, within which they can develop and extend His goodness and grace. He is establishing His Kingdom.

The Kingdom calling

A kingdom defines the boundaries within which a sovereign has authority – over people, resources, lands, and all the rest. Adam and Eve were charged with exercising dominion over the earth and all its creatures. They were appointed to *rule* the good and gracious creation of God, by their efforts bringing it to ever higher states of goodness. Implicit in that appointment is that they should apply themselves to whatever was necessary to preserve, extend, develop, and improve that goodness, beginning in the garden of Eden.

In Genesis 2, the charge to rule is further elaborated, and the ever-expanding scope of that rule is indicated by the mention of rivers and lands beyond the garden, resources buried in the ground, and the intimation of cultures to be created in days to come. Adam was appointed the two-fold task of working the garden and guarding the garden. He worked the garden first by imposing order and structure on it, giving names to the animals, and, we may suppose, to the plants as well, though this is not explicitly indicated. Adam worked the garden by serving each creature, according to its purpose and potential, so that the goodness inherent in individual creatures could be multiplied through their offspring.

We can only imagine how this exercise of rule would have spread from the garden to the ends of the earth, as Adam and Eve bore children to join with them in extending their appointed rule.

But Adam failed in his mandate to guard the garden against whatever might undermine the purposes of God.

A Framework of Grace

Nevertheless, the mandate to rule, and to work and guard the earth for the goodness and grace of the Lord, continued after the fall, as we see in God's mandate to Noah (Gen. 9.1-17). In Noah's case, God explicitly linked the mandate to rule and the covenant God was keeping with all creation, even giving Noah the rainbow as a sign and reminder that his mandate to rule is carried out within a covenantal framework of grace, overseen and sustained by God Himself. God would handle the covenant; Noah and his sons must take up the mandate to rule.

That mandate to rule was still in force when David was king in Israel (Ps. 8), and it remains into the time of the New Testament and the beginnings of the Church (cf. Heb. 2.5-9). The present state of this dominion is not what it will one day be. However, by focusing on Jesus, considering Him in all His beauty, goodness, and truth, God's people today resume that dominion mandate, confident expectation that their good and faithful labors, within God's covenant, will result in their realizing the promises of that covenant unto the good of everything entrusted to them.

A Law

The mandate to rule and bring forth goodness throughout the earth is an exercise of divine grace – special grace, as it is appointed only to human beings and, more specifically, to those who look to God as Lord. And as with Adam and Eve, so with those charged with this mandate to rule: God defines the terms of our rule, as well as its ends and means.

Thus, we fulfill our calling to rule as we look to God for instruction and guidance. Blatant or incautious disregard for God's Word opens the creation up to corruption and the decaying power of sin, and frustrates the purpose of our rule. We must be always circumspect in how we use the time God gives us, lest we lose moments and opportunities to that which intends neither good nor grace for the creation (Eph. 5.15-17).

God's Word, beginning with His instructions to Adam and Eve, and developing in greater fullness through the Law, the prophets, and the apostles, points us to God's King – Jesus Christ – showing us in Him how we may fulfill the counsel of His Word and thus be fruitful in our calling to exercise dominion.

The mandate to exercise dominion is the foundation stone of the larger Kingdom of God, the nature, scope, and character of which unfolds throughout the Scripture, until it arrives at the Prime Interpreter and Architect of the Kingdom, even our Lord Jesus Christ.

For reflection

1. Is the mandate to rule the earth for goodness and grace still in force for believers? What are the implications of this?
2. Within God's covenant, focusing on His precious and very great promises, His people are charged with working and guarding their own "gardens" – their Personal Mission Fields. What does this entail?
3. What happens in the part of the "garden" entrusted to us when we fail to look to Jesus and the Word of God?

Next Steps – Transformation: Meditate on Hebrews 2.5-9. How does seeing Jesus help us to bring goodness and grace to our Personal Mission Field? What are some specific ways you can improve in this work of ruling? Share your thoughts with a Christian friend.

4 The Coming Kingdom (2)

“But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the kingdom forever, even forever and ever.” Daniel 7.18

Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world.” John 18.36

The lesson of the Old Testament

The Old Testament histories are among the most dour and disappointing reading in all Scripture. Whether we’re reading about the united kingdom under David and Solomon, the northern kingdom of Israel, or the southern kingdom of Judah, the story line is one of brief periods of faithfulness, blessing, and hope interspersed unevenly among extensive seasons of drift, rebellion, disillusionment, and captivity.

Rather like what is said sometimes about those of us who are of Irish descent: The Irish have an abiding sense of tragedy that sustains them through intermittent bouts of joy. The Old Testament kingdom of Israel managed an abiding tendency to drift from God and rebel against His Law, interspersed with seasons of undeserved blessing and grace.

Overall, reading the histories from Judges through Esther, and the prophetic literature that appeared within that framework, one conclusion above all stands out: The kingdom established by David and passed down to his heirs was, in the main, a colossal failure.

Precisely as God intended.

Except that the Old Testament kingdom experiment accomplished two important objectives in the divine framework of grace. First, it established the mindset and heartset of a coming Kingdom, a Kingdom that would incorporate even the Gentiles, and would bring everlasting peace to God’s people. Hence, the Old Testament kingdom of Israel established a *habit* of kingdom among the people of God, and a *longing* for the coming Kingdom in which the promises of God’s covenant would come to full flower.

Second, the Old Testament kingdom made it plain that thinking about kingdom the way the nations of the world think about kingdom is seeking the kingdom through the wrong end of the telescope. It’s a vision too small, seen through an improper lens, and sought and carried out by sinful, selfish people for primarily material ends. Thus, by the time of the restoration from Babylon, it was made crystal clear to the leaders of God’s people that no earthly kingdom was to be sought; for no earthly kingdom can satisfy the hopes and promises of God’s coming Kingdom of grace.

The promise of the New Testament

Jesus Christ was sent to earth with one overarching mission: To bring near the Kingdom of God. He announced this at the outset of His ministry (Matt. 4.17), and He was still working for it when He stood before Pilate and insisted that He was the Sovereign in God’s Kingdom. By embodying and proclaiming the Kingdom – God’s rule of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14.17, 18) – and by absorbing the wrath of heaven’s King against the sins of men, Jesus brought the rule of God to the beachheads of the earth. From there, on the first Christian Pentecost, the Spirit of God would launch the new order of the ages toward the ends of the world.

The Kingdom of God as revealed in the New Testament is “not of this world”. It doesn’t originate in this world. It does not take the form of earthly kingdoms, is not subject to earthly political powers, cannot be stopped at the geographical borders of nations, and pervades and restores all of creation, from the souls of men to the luminaries of the vast cosmos.

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The parables of Jesus were intended to capture the imagination of those habituated to thinking about a kingdom, but to launch their imaginations into a new dimension, a spiritual dimension, where the rule of Christ, such as He demonstrated during His incarnation, works through the souls and lives of people to make all things new.

The Kingdom promised, launched, and advancing throughout the New Testament is a realm of holy spiritual power (1 Cor. 4.20) which no amount of politics, racial differences, cultural confusion, or linguistic barrier can suppress or resist. It comes like light into dark places, works like leaven in a loaf of wheat, and preserves like salt all that is good in the world by the grace of God.

What the Old Testament saints failed to realize in their own strength and by their own wits, New Testament saints entered as born-again into a new realm where righteousness rules.

A Kingdom coming all of grace

This Kingdom comes to us all of grace. It was first given to Jesus Christ, Who earned the Kingdom as God's faithful Ambassador and Messiah. God gave the Kingdom to Jesus, and invited Him to sit at His right hand and begin the work of spreading that glorious rule over all the earth (cf. Dan. 7.13, 14; Pss. 2, 110; Is. 9.6, 7; Dan. 2.44, 45).

Jesus received the Kingdom which is not of this world, and now He is giving it to those who believe in Him by grace through faith (Dan. 7.18). We do not *earn* the Kingdom; Christ *gives* it to us. We do not cause the Kingdom to advance; the Holy Spirit is the operative power of the Kingdom for righteousness, peace, and joy (Rom. 4.17, 18; Acts 1.8). Our calling is to seek the Kingdom as the overall priority and objective of every aspect of our lives, that God may be glorified as His grace spreads along with His rule (1 Thess. 2.12; 1 Cor. 10.31).

Graciously called to and given the Kingdom of God, believers come by grace to be transferred into it, into a sure framework of a Kingdom that cannot fail (Col. 1.13). In the Kingdom, we enjoy the privileges of citizens – to know and serve our King unto righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit – and we embrace the obligations of ambassadors – to represent our King and His Kingdom in everything we are and do.

Jesus was sent to bring near the Kingdom of God. Now He sends us, according to God's gracious covenant, and within the domain of His gracious rule, to bring that Kingdom near to the people in our lives, by every means and at every opportunity (Jn. 20.21).

For reflection

1. What is the lesson of the Kingdom of God from the Old Testament?
2. What is the lesson of the Kingdom of God from the New Testament?
3. What does it mean for you to be a citizen and an ambassador in the Kingdom not of this world?

Next Steps – Transformation: Where are you seeing the Kingdom of God – righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit – increasing and advancing in and through your life? Write down your response to this, and offer it back to the Lord with praise, thanksgiving, and pleading for grace to help you in your time of need.

5 The Church: Sign and Outpost

“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” Matthew 16.18

A surprising turn

Jesus had come to fulfill God’s covenant and to bring near His Kingdom. These two spiritual pillars of the divine framework of grace came to concrete, flesh-and-bones reality in our Lord Jesus Christ. In Him, the promises made to the Fathers realized complete fulfillment (Lk. 1.67-75). All the Old Testament laws, writings, and prophesies pointed to Him (Jn. 5.39). He declared Himself to be the true Seed of Abraham, the Son of David, and of Man and God, and thus, the promised King of the Kingdom of David and God. He had allowed Himself to be proclaimed as such as He rode triumphantly but humbly into the capital city of David’s Kingdom.

Jesus taught the Kingdom throughout the course of His ministry. He talked as if He knew it from the inside out. As if, in fact, He had *designed* it. He described it in wondrous and expansive terms – time-and-history-spanning terms – and made it out to be a thing so precious and so valuable that one would easily give all he had to obtain it.

We can only imagine the anticipation that was building in the hearts and minds of those closest to Jesus. Here, walking among them, was God’s covenant, embodied. Here was the Herald and Heir of the Kingdom. Surely the promised new day of grace, which prophets like Isaiah had foretold, was about to break into time in the not-of-this-world Kingdom of the covenant-keeping Messiah.

So it must have come like a bolt out of the blue for Jesus to say, in response to Peter’s confession of His Deity and salvation, that He intended to build His Church.

His *what?* He’s going to build an assembly? Like a synagogue? And how would this fill out the grace framework of covenant and Kingdom that Jesus embodied and taught?

Sign of the Kingdom

Because the Kingdom of God is not of this world, Jesus brought it near, then firmly established it by the outpouring of His Spirit. But that intangible, spiritual realm – the temporal manifestation of the eternal covenant – requires some more concrete and material form, since Jesus Himself no longer walks among us. The form the covenant and Kingdom would take is the Church, the Body of Christ. The Church – the community of those who believe in Jesus and are seeking the Kingdom and living toward God’s promises – is the *sign* that the promised Kingdom has come; and it is the *outpost* from which that Kingdom advances on earth as in heaven, bringing the promises of God’s covenant to people throughout the world.

The Church is the *sign* of the Kingdom. Just down the road from where we live an assembly of construction equipment showed up and began working. Soon the lot was cleared of trees and vegetation. More equipment arrived, and began to dig a large hole in the ground. Every day, the activity increased, and all who drove past must have asked themselves, “What’s going on here?”

The familiar lot had changed. A new order was being imposed on it. Tremendous power was being brought to bear on the earth. People were coming and going and moving around and doing stuff. But for what end?

Then a sign was posted which said that a new drug store was going to be built on this location. The activity got our attention, but the sign said it all: Coming Soon – a new drugstore.

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The Church is the sign of the Kingdom. There's a lot of activity going on in those many different buildings. Churches have programs such as people in the world don't quite understand. They meet at strange times and seem to be very busy in whatever they're up to. Don't you wonder sometimes what nonbelievers wonder, whenever they drive past a church on a Sunday morning? "What's going on in there"?

The answer we should *sign* to the people in our community is: Coming now – the Kingdom of God. Grace, like the renewing rains of spring, has arrived from on high, and by it, God is making all things new. Beginning right here, and throughout this community, with people just like you.

Kingdom outpost

But the local church is not merely a sign announcing the arrival of the Kingdom not of this world. It is the epicenter from which that Kingdom advances on earth as in heaven. Jesus instructed His followers to seek the Kingdom of God as their highest priority, and to pray that it would come to expression on earth as a reflection of the way it exists in heaven.

Churches are the appointed means whereby those priorities are realized. As church members are equipped for good works of ministry and service, they bring the reality of the Kingdom into their everyday lives – all their relationships, roles, and responsibilities. In their Personal Mission Fields, they are a *sign* that the Kingdom has come, and they represent the front lines of the Kingdom's advance in the world. As they bring the values of the Kingdom – righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit – to bear on every place and person to which they are daily sent, and as they announce the Good News of the Kingdom, just as Jesus did, they fulfill their calling as ambassadors of that holy, spiritual realm.

Besides being centers for the equipping of Kingdom ambassadors, churches point to the Kingdom and invite others to consider the beauty of its King in their times of worship. And they serve as channels of grace into their community by undertaking corporate efforts of mission to help those in need, and to be a source of beauty and joy to their neighbors (Ps. 48:1-3). When local churches join together for worship and ministry to the needy, they demonstrate the kind of Kingdom unity which Jesus said was essential for the world to believe that He had come from the Father.

Any church that does not *sign* the Kingdom to its community is a weak link in the grace framework Jesus has established for restoring the world. Do not expect Jesus to put much weight down on it. And any church from which the Kingdom does not advance in the world needs either a new vision, a complete overhaul, or simply to close its doors.

For the Church is the visible token and sign of God's promises and rule; and it is the conduit through which His grace flows, according to His promises and by the power of His Spirit, like rivers of living water, to a dry and thirsty world.

For reflection

1. Why do God's covenant and Kingdom require a temporal structure like the Church?
2. How does the local church fulfill its calling as a sign of the Kingdom? As the outpost of the Kingdom?
3. Meditate on John 17:21 and Ephesians 4:3. What prevents local churches from seeking such unity for the sake of the Kingdom and glory of God?

Next Steps – Transformation: Do you see yourself as a Kingdom ambassador? What difference will it make when that role and calling are the defining role in everything you do each day? Talk with a Christian friend about these questions.

6 The Church: Grace Incarnate

Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. 1 Corinthians 12.27

When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. Acts 11.23

Covenant, Kingdom, Church

The Church is the temporal arena in which the grace of God is most pointedly realized and displayed throughout the world. In the Church – local churches individually and together within a community – believers lay hold on the covenant promises of God, and are infused with His Kingdom power, to the end that grace may work in and through them unto the knowledge of God and His glory over all the earth.

In the Church, believers are renewed in grace, so that the grace they know for each day is enhanced, focused, and experienced with greater consistency and effects. When believers gather to worship, when they submit themselves for training and equipping, as they take up the daily disciplines of grace, encourage and comfort one another, pray and sing, share and prepare for their mission in the world, and give of themselves and their means, they realize more of the grace of God as promised in His covenant and powerfully advanced by His Spirit at work among them. Whether the church of which they are members is large or small, rural or urban, traditional or contemporary, it is invested with divine potential to realize and diffuse more of the grace of God than believers alone can ever know.

This is because the Church is the Body of Christ, and each of us is a member of that Body. While, as members, each of us has a distinct role within the church – by which we contribute to the worship, disciple-making, and mission of the congregation as a whole (1 Cor. 12.7-11; 1 Pet. 4.10, 11) – together, as the *Body* of our Lord, we are the closest thing to His incarnation as the people in our communities will ever see.

So it makes sense that God would concentrate His grace in the Body of Christ, to distribute and employ it among His members, according to His promises and by the working of His mighty power. The local church, and local churches together, demonstrate a unity of the Spirit and a bond of peace that bear powerful evidence of the grace of God incarnate, first in Jesus, and now in His Body (Jn. 17.21).

The Body of Christ

In our day, the idea of the local church as the Body of Christ is like the idea of God's covenant or Kingdom – just that, an idea. In very few instances do local churches demonstrate the kind of every-member participation in worship, life, and mission that Paul outlines in 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4, and elsewhere. In the early Christian communities, believers lived, worked, worshiped, shared, and bore witness together; and their unity powerfully evidenced the grace of God in the world. When the Gospel broke out of Jerusalem and spread to Antioch of the Gentiles, Barnabas could *see* the grace of God at work there, and he knew thereby that this was a true manifestation of the Body of Christ.

But today, most churches do not look like the grace-pervaded incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. In most churches, only a few are actively involved in the works of ministry which the church sponsors – most of which are aimed at church members. The rest of the members see themselves as those who are being served. Churches, as we observe them today, seem to exist mainly for their members, with some members serving and the rest being served. It is as if the body of a local church were mainly hands and a mouth.

Further, local churches not only do not seek to realize the oneness Jesus said was essential to the church's mission in the world by joining together for worship, discipleship, and outreach; they maintain either active resistance to such efforts or, by a studied indifference, indicate their belief that such efforts are neither

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necessary nor useful for incarnating the grace of Jesus. Granted, it is hard work to get local churches to make praying, worshiping, sharing, equipping, and witnessing together a more consistent part of their community life. But the first Christians managed to do so, and Paul said we must work hard at such unity (Eph. 4.3), because our spiritual adversaries have it high on their agendas to squelch and obscure the incarnation of grace in the Body of Christ throughout the communities of the world.

Agents of grace

Barnabas *saw* the grace of God when he arrived in Antioch. It was at work among the new believers there just as he had seen it in Jerusalem. The promised grace of God's covenant and the working power of God's Kingdom were clearly evident among the believers in the church in Antioch. The Church – and local churches individually and together – is the center stage of God's grace at work in the world. In the vision of Isaiah and Micah (Is. 2.1-4; Mic. 4.1-8), grace should be so powerfully at work in the “mountain of the Lord's house” that it propels the people of God into all the nooks and crannies of society, living and proclaiming the grace of God so convincingly, that even lost people can *see* that grace and the difference it makes. Drawn by the grace of God which they see, multitudes of lost people would stream up to the mountain of the Lord's house, to partake of that grace and be saved.

Where is anything like that happening in our world today? Where are people seeing believers working and worshiping together, filled with the hope of glory and transformed by grace, living and proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ with such power that people are streaming into our churches for more?

It's not happening because it's not what we aspire to in our churches. We suffer from an ecclesiastical myopia that does not allow us to see beyond the interests of our own congregation. We're too busy trying to keep our members satisfied and happy to worry about what the church down the street might be up to.

The grace which God communicates to His churches is not intended as a hot tub for our soothing and enjoyment. The disposition of favor with which God looks upon the Body of His Son, and the communications He channels to His people by creation and Word, are intended to issue in divine power for witness – grace flowing within and among the members of Christ's Body, reviving and renewing us to serve as agents of grace in the grace-blind world.

We will never know grace as God intends, nor ever *see* its power at work in and through the Body of Christ, until we take seriously the role of local churches as the primary arenas where covenant promises and Kingdom power come to expression in space and time.

For reflection

1. Why do you think local churches do so little together? What did Jesus mean by what He said in John 17.21?
2. Paul wrote that we must work hard to maintain the unity of God's Spirit, which allows His grace to flow in and through us (Eph. 4.3). What does that entail?
3. How should we expect people to *see* the grace of God working in and through His Body?

Next Steps – Transformation: As a member of the Body of Christ, how are you contributing to the sharing of God's grace with others? How might you improve in this? Make this a matter of prayer, and follow as the Lord leads.

7 A Grace Agenda

Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. Ephesians 2.19-22

Fuel, engine, fire

An internal combustion engine is an impressive piece of equipment, with lots of moving parts, and capable of a good bit of work. But it's only a useless shell until two things are added to it: fuel and fire.

The American landscape is dotted with churches, spiritual engines comprised of many moving parts, and fraught with potential for Kingdom progress. I recall looking out over the city of Baltimore one afternoon, from the cafeteria on the top floor of a downtown hospital, counting the spires. Because the hospital was near the inner harbor, I could see almost the whole city, and I must have counted forty steeples within just a couple of miles of where I stood. And who knows how many churches without steeples were in that mix somewhere?

But I wondered whether many, if not most, of those churches had become mere shells – spiritual engines lacking the fuel of God's Spirit and the fire of grace. At least, the evidence of the city of Baltimore was that the churches there were not having much of an impact for the grace of God. Of course, there were isolated pockets where communities of believers gathered regularly for worship and looked out for one another. But the glowing presence of the Kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy was not much in evidence.

Without the Spirit and grace of God, churches cannot fulfill their calling as Kingdom signs and outposts. And where churches fail in this calling, the Kingdom stalls, the covenant languishes, and churches become ingrown, complacent, and ineffectual.

In His covenant, Kingdom, and Church, God has provided a framework of grace designed to *run on* grace and to *run for* grace in the world. But the spark of grace and the power of the Spirit will only enable the church to do the work of grace God intends as the churches commit to the Lord's grace agenda for the world.

Make disciples

Jesus summarized that agenda succinctly: make disciples (Matt. 28.18-20). Church members – who are members of the Body of Christ, citizens in the Kingdom of God, and partakers of Christ and the covenant – share a common calling to grow as disciples, and to encourage, equip, and assist others in following Jesus. This means they must know Jesus intimately, so that they love and obey Him, and take His grace agenda into every area of their lives, every day.

But for this to be the case, church members must be equipped with the mindset, heartset, priorities, and skills for serving others in works of ministry, just like Jesus did (Eph. 4.11, 12; Jn. 20.21). Making disciples is an “as-you-are-going” calling. Wherever we are, whomever we're with, and whatever we're doing, the order of the day is to make disciples, to make the most of every opportunity and all the time God gives us for building others up in Christ and bearing witness to Him by our lives and words. Each of us has a Personal Mission Field where the Lord sends us, as agents of grace, to bring near the reality of His gracious Kingdom. By encouraging and equipping our fellow believers, and bearing witness to Christ by our lives and words, we take up the calling to make disciples as the defining motif of our lives.

In short, we must *become disciples*, and be thoroughly equipped by God's Word for every good work (2 Tim. 3.15-17), so that we can *make disciples* in all the as-you-are-goings of our lives.

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We do not receive grace from God merely to soak up good feelings about Him. God fires up His grace and Spirit within us, and within the local church, to energize us for the work of making disciples. True disciples – committed followers of Jesus Christ – glorify God by their witness to Christ, their good works of love, and their devotion to bringing the knowledge of God into every aspect of their lives (Eph. 5.15-17; Hab. 2.14).

This is the grace agenda God has written for His Church, for advancing His Kingdom and realizing all the promises of His covenant. Unless this is our agenda, we will fall short of the grace and glory of God, and our churches will become empty shells, lacking true spiritual energy for bringing glory to God.

Grace to help

We need the grace of God to *be* disciples. Let's face it: We are not naturally inclined to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and bear consistent witness to the Lord. Our love for Jesus does not stir us to such efforts with any degree of regularity. We believe in Jesus, but we do not know Him, adore Him, and seek to obey Him like the first believers did. But if we will *admit* this, and repent of our self-centered ways, we can find grace to help in our time of need, so that we can grow in grace and love for Jesus increasingly, day by day.

We need the grace of God to *make* disciples. We are not natural-born encouragers, much less natural-born witnesses for Jesus. We find it difficult to talk with our Christian friends about the Lord – how beautiful and strong He is, what He is teaching us and doing in us, and how our hearts are stirred with love for Him. And we hold back from encouraging our fellow believers to press on in their discipleship because we don't want to seem like meddlers. We're not much better at talking with unbelievers about Jesus, either. Jesus sought the lost to save them (Lk. 19.11). We seek to avoid talking to lost people about Jesus, either because we've decided they aren't interested, or we fear that our efforts may fall short.

That is, we don't see ourselves as having the fuel and fire we need to fulfill our calling to make disciples. Like so many of our churches, we are empty shells, Christians in name only, with nothing of grace or power for the world.

But take heart: The grace of God is abounding on every hand. There is grace, grace abundant and transforming, available to help us in our time of need. But we must make up our minds that, if we would be agents of grace to the world, we must shelter in the framework of grace God has provided – His covenant, Kingdom, and Church – and take up the agenda He has appointed – making disciples.

If we will, God will meet us at the point of our need, and the spark of grace will fire the work of His Spirit to use us as vessels of grace, power, and good works in our Personal Mission Field.

For reflection

1. Have you identified your Personal Mission Field? Watch [this brief video](#). Then download the worksheet and map out the grace terrain to which God sends you every day.
2. How do the Spirit and grace of God work to energize us for good works?
3. What does making disciples require of you with the Christians in your life? With the unbelievers?

Next Steps – Transformation: Are you working your Personal Mission Field? Share your story with us. Tell us what God is doing to help you make disciples, and how we can encourage and equip you more effectively. Write to me at tmmoore@ailbe.org.

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Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What do we mean by “a framework of grace”? Why is such a framework necessary?
2. In what ways is God’s covenant gracious?
3. How does the Kingdom of God express the grace of God?
4. What do we mean by saying that the Church is the sign and outpost of the Kingdom?
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned about grace from this series? How are you putting that lesson to work? Share your experience of this study by going to our website, www.ailbe.org, and using the Contact Us button. Let us rejoice with you over what God is doing in your life.

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Thank you.