

Unit 3 Grace

We began this quarter with wilderness experiences, horrible times of suffering and struggle. In the last unit, we focused on salvation. For our final unit in this quarter, we come full circle to what is perhaps the most cherished and beautiful word of our Christian faith: *grace*. The faith definition of *grace* is the freely given, unmerited favor and love of God.

John Wesley believed, preached, and taught grace as a foundation of the Christian faith. He taught that God's prevenient grace comes to us even before we are aware of it, inviting us into a relationship with God. He taught about justifying grace, the free gift of God that brings us back into that relationship, freeing us from our sin. He also spoke of sanctifying grace, the ongoing experience of God's presence in our lives that transforms us into the people God intends for us to be.

When we are separated from God by our sin, God's grace welcomes us home. God forgives us and restores our relationship. One of the most difficult aspects of Christian faith comes in opening our arms and reclaiming the lives of those who are broken and separated from us. That doesn't mean everything is back to normal, but it does mean we are called no longer to hold their wrongdoings against them. As we belong to God through grace, so our response toward others must also be one of grace, even when they don't deserve it. Neither do we.

May 3 Lesson 10

The River of Life-giving Water

Focal Passage: Revelation 22:1-5

Background Text: Revelation 21:9–22:5

Purpose Statement: To respond with gratitude to the future hope God promises

Key Verse: “Night will be no more. They won't need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will shine on them, and they will rule forever and always” (Revelation 22:5).

Uh-oh. The Book of Revelation. The only other books of the Bible that make my head swim are parts of Daniel and Ezekiel. All three of these biblical books are known as *apocalyptic*, which comes from the Greek word meaning to “uncover,” or “disclose.” The Book of Revelation was written to help Christians who were in desperate straits under the rule of a horrible Roman emperor named Domitian, who led a tremendous persecution of Christians. The images of the end of the world and the creation of a new heaven and earth we find in Revelation helped to strengthen the faith in those Christians' lives, even as they saw their entire world collapsing before them.

Like all Scripture, the truth of one writing in a particular time for a particular people holds truth for people living in other times throughout history. This is true for Revelation.

Because it is apocalyptic, that means it carries with it a great deal of mystery and hiddenness. If you hear someone say that they have the Book of Revelation all figured out, they most likely do not, since much of what is written is indeed mysterious and ancient.

In spite of the terrible persecution Christians were experiencing at the time Revelation was written, Revelation 22:1-5 offers not scenes, not of destruction and cataclysmic war, but words of hope. These verses offer us a beautiful and awesome picture of what the future will hold, and they are packed solid with all sorts of images. Take the time to explore some of the images God holds before us in the future.

One other important thing to understand: When John described this magnificent place, a city paved with golden streets with pearly gates, he was talking about the New Jerusalem, “a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away” (Revelation 21:1). John described it as God’s dwelling. God will “wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (verse 4).

What Is Life-giving Water?

When Aaron and Adam were in their teens, I was always amazed at the number of cans of pop/soda/cola they consumed. I began to wonder after a time if indeed they had tried that clear liquid that comes from a filtered tap. If what they had was life-giving, it certainly wasn’t water! I could imagine them, parched and stranded in a desert, crawling through the sand crying out the name of their favorite beverage.

You know what it is like when you are thirsty. I still recall childhood summer days when we had run ourselves dry. When we went back home, Dad would have the hose on and would kink it so that a full but not blasting stream would pour out for us to drink. We would be recharged, rehydrated, and usually soaking wet. Water is one of the best things in the world because it brings us life, and it sustains us. Experts say that often when we feel hungry,

what we actually are is thirsty—dehydrated and needing to be reenlivened by the gift of water.

In Revelation 22:1-5, the angel shows John “the river of life-giving water” (verse 1) that flows right through the middle of New Jerusalem’s main street. This is more than a scenic view! This river feeds and grows the very tree of life, which “produces twelve crops of fruit, bearing its fruit each month” (verse 2). Even more, “the tree’s leaves are for the healing of the nations” (verse 2). All of this comes from the life-giving water, which becomes eternally life-giving. The image we receive is so rich and inviting that it ought to fill us with hope in our lives, to know that God will make such a creation for us.

But maybe what we sometimes feel is not so much physical thirst as something else, a kind of spiritual thirst. Maybe it is our hearts that need new life once again. What happens when we are so parched inside that we feel almost like the dry bones Ezekiel saw in the valley (Ezekiel 37:1-14)? When we are dried up inside, nothing seems to be bright or vivid or joyful.

We’ve probably all experienced seasons when we seem to be walking in dust that chokes us and clouds our vision. This may come after the death of a family member or a close friend, another tragedy, or a chronic illness that results in ongoing pain. What we want is water. We want the water that can bring us back to life. We yearn for the life-giving water that feeds the tree of life and that can feed us once again and make us whole and able to thrive, even when we are struggling in other ways.

I won’t try to fool you by saying you can just snap your fingers and it will all be better. Not at all. But I will affirm that God’s life-giving water is available to you, even now. Through humble prayer and reliance on God to give us life and get us through, we can receive that gift, even when it feels as though we have been thirsty a long

time. Sometimes it takes more than a sip to be revived. Sometimes we need to linger by the river until we are restored. But God promises this to us and to those we love as an eternal gift.

How spiritually thirsty are you right now?

To See the Face of God

Seven children playing hide and seek in a three-bedroom house required a bit of work, stealth, and planning. My favorite hiding spot, which I carefully withheld from the others, was in the bottom of the linen closet where big towels and blankets were stacked. I would pile the stuff in front of and on top of me so it looked like I wasn't there and then pull the door closed from the bottom. Then I would lie curled up and silent in the dark. The problem with being curled up in a bunch of blankets in the dark in the warmth of a closet is that more often than not, I would fall asleep and remain hidden long after the game ended!

Various biblical accounts talk about the "hiddenness" of God's face. But "when all the people saw the column of cloud standing at the tent's entrance, they would all rise and then bow down at the entrances to their tents. In this way the LORD used to speak to Moses face-to-face, like two people talking to each other" (Exodus 33:10-11), but that was a rare event. Often, the Bible tells us of angels speaking the word of God to people. They didn't see God's face. Art, literature, music, and nature can try to describe or hint at God's face, such as Michelangelo's painting of God on the Sistine Chapel. Or perhaps you recall the line from Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, which says, "To love another person is to see the face of God."¹

Something about the absolute holiness and otherness of God makes the possibilities of seeing God seem to carry a threat of great danger. But Scripture makes clear that God wants relationship with us. God seeks us even before we

are aware of God. Our prayers, our faith, our belief in God are our pathway to connection and relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

In the New Jerusalem, however, "There will no longer be any curse. The throne of God and the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. *They will see his face*" (Revelation 22:3-4; italics added). The curse of sin will no longer separate people from God's presence. We will see God's face!

Do you hear the good news? Finally, after so many millennia of not seeing God, even drawing so close with God's Son, now in the new creation, the New Jerusalem, the nations and people of this world will see God's face. We will see what has been hidden and unknown.

When Dad served more than a year in Vietnam and Thailand during the Vietnam War, Mom seemed to have lots of photos of Dad in different places in the house, almost as if she wanted to make sure none of us forgot what he looked like. Even today, as she lies bedridden, Mom still keeps in front of her a picture of the man she spent her life with and will always remember.

If the power of having an image of another human captivates us so well, imagine what it will be like when all of our poor images of God are replaced with our own eyes being granted the joy of fully seeing God! Can you see how Revelation was so important to the early Christians in helping them hold on to hope in the future that is held by God? Can you see how important it also can be to us as we hold the same hope?

What difference does it make to you to know that someday you will see God's face?

Let There Be Light

In my work as a district superintendent of a district that is over 35,000 square miles, I spend a number of nights

each year away from home since it's too far to drive back from the far ends of the district. My home becomes a hotel room. Hotel rooms are never arranged the way your own bedroom at home is arranged.

Apparently, there is a rule stating that a small table with steel legs must be set in the middle of what should be a normal walkway from one part of the room to the other. And the best efforts to make the room dark enough to allow sleep without a beam of light piercing the darkness also means that the room will be too dark for you to see said small table as you get up in the middle of the night.

When we lived in Nashville, we received over 18 inches of rain in one day, which meant the Little Harpeth River became a flooded and flooding entity. Our electricity was out for three days. Because of all of the hills, when it gets dark in Nashville, it gets *really* dark. We had only two fair-sized candles to help us see. We felt like the people who walked in darkness.

When light comes into such situations, however, all seems to be like a new creation! We depend on light as humans. Our senses of hearing, touch, and smell seem second to the sense of sight. I am quite amazed whenever I am in the company of someone with sight limitations. Their ability to move across a room that is always dark for them humbles me, as I see how they use the other gifts God has given them.

Revelation 22:5 gives us yet another great promise of the future: "Night will be no more"! No more fumbling in the dark, and we won't need a lamp or even the light of the sun, because all will be illuminated by the very presence of God.

In Genesis, we read that God's first powerful creation was light, good light, which, when separated from the darkness, brought order and clarity to what was without form or shape. Now, at the end of Scripture, only a few verses from the end of the Bible's last book, we find light that

is everlasting and no longer dependent on "a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will shine" (Revelation 22:5). It is an image for our future hope.

So, what difference does light make to your world? What does it bring to you? For me in those dark hotel rooms, light brings clarity and a sense of safety. Light brings the ability to see things as they are without having to squint. It helps us know that we are going in the right direction. Perhaps light gives you comfort, like a night light, or the sense that everything is going to be okay. People in the Dakotas often make use of a "happy light" during the long, dark winter days. It's a bright white light that bathes their faces and skin in light and can help ward off depression. Most who use it strongly affirm its value. That's how powerful light is to our existence.

The day is coming, Revelation promises, that all will be light. All will be well; hope will be answered with joy; night will be no more. These are the promises of tomorrow that we can claim and hold as God's children when today isn't going so well. Jesus called us the "light of the world," meaning that God's presence and love can shine through us to others who also need the light. We can point others to that future hope when we will see God's face, and "night will be no more" (Revelation 22:5).

What promises about light from God can you claim and share for yourself and for others?

God of light and life for all, grant me today the ability to trust in your promises, not only for the future but for today, in whatever circumstances I find myself. Use me to share your life-giving water and your illuminating and guiding light with others; in Jesus' name. Amen.

¹From goodreads.com/quotes/49720-to-love-another-person-is-to-see-the-face-of.