



**WAY**  
**TRUTH**  
**LIFE**

Discipleship as a Journey of Grace

**SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE**

Written by Jeff Stark

Adapted by the  
Africa SDMI Development Team

# HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

This small group discussion guide, written by Dr. Jeff Stark, is meant to be a companion resource for David A. Busic's book *Way, Truth, Life: Discipleship as a Journey of Grace*, and used alongside the **seven videos featuring David Busic**. If you are a small group leader or Sunday school teacher planning to use this resource, there are numerous ways you can get the most out of this download for your context, and the materials are flexible to fit your needs.

This discussion guide can also align and be used with a six-part *Way, Truth, Life* sermon series grounded in the **Sermon Outlines** that are also part of this downloadable resource. Busic's book has six chapters, an introduction, and an afterword. This discussion guide follows the six main chapters of the book to help you lead your group through a robust and meaningful study on discipleship and grace.

This discussion guide has been adapted for the Africa context by the SDMI development team to help make the discussion contextualized to the African culture. All stories added were to help create a greater understanding of the Journey of Grace as experienced by God's people in various cultures.

## **Africa SDMI Development Team:**

- Celeste Macie Chaguala
- Cyrille Ebam
- Rozzaria Nyawa Mumba
- Simbarashe Kanenungo
- Timothy R. Eby
- Halissone Jamissone Nefitala
- Jasron O. Akoyi
- Balibanga Katambu Jacques

# WEEK 1:

# INTRODUCTION

*“I’ve been working on the path that goes to the river.  
If you follow the path, you will find some treasures.  
Now go! Find my gifts for you!”*

—Story by Dorothy Miller with Simply the Story  
Adapted by Africa SDMI Development Team

## ***Treasure on the Path***

A man left his village and went to the city to work. In the many years he was in the city, the man earned a lot of money. When he returned to his home, everyone greeted him as a great friend. Many asked, “Could you provide this for me?” or “Could you help me with this?”

This newly wealthy man wanted to use some of his money to give gifts to his true friends. So he thought of a plan. He said, “I want to help you but not like this. Let’s set a day, and on that day, we will meet again.”

He left his village for a day and then came back. Next, he called everyone together who was saying, “I am your friend,” and he asked them all to come meet him at the other side of the nearby hill.

The wealthy man gathered the people who came and then made an announcement. He said, “I’ve been working on the path that goes to the river. If you follow the path, you will find some treasures. Now go. Find my gifts for you.”

So, the people left and started walking down the path. A few people went a short way, and then stooped down and picked up some sand from the path. They agreed saying, “Surely there is treasure in here. Let’s go home and study this sand for a while.”

Others ran down the path toward the river. When they reached the end of the path, they complained, “We know this path well. There is nothing new. We didn’t see any treasure.”

The next group of people continued walking down the familiar path. They noticed that the sand had been added to the path to make it more comfortable. As they moved along, they noticed that the thorn bushes had been cut back that used to scratch them on the way to the river. They saw that the old fallen tree had been moved out of the way. They also noticed that their friend had planted flowers along the path. They decided that these were the treasures their friend had placed there for them.

The fourth group noticed that the sand had been added to the path to make it more comfortable. They noticed that the thorn bushes had been cut back that used to scratch them on the way to the river. They saw that the old fallen tree had been moved out of the way. They also noticed that their friend had planted flowers along the path to make it more beautiful.

Instead of running down the path to find the gifts, these people began walking even more slowly, so that they could enjoy the results of the hard work that their wealthy friend had done for them.

Then one walker called out, "Look over here, behind these bushes. I found bags of rice!" Suddenly, one walker stopped, and called everyone over to look. "Look by the side of the path here, under this bush. There are bags of beans." Then another walker called out, "Look over here, under the bushes beside the path! I found some brand-new cooking pots."

Again and again, the slow walkers kept discovering hidden treasures just off to the side of the path. They realized that these gifts had been placed there for them by their rich friend. They gathered up the treasures together and took them home.

Those who had rushed down the path, which had been lovingly prepared by the rich man, missed all of the treasures. They did not go slowly enough to be able to appreciate the path, or the path maker. Those who decided to study the sand on the path are still studying. They still have not yet traveled the entire path!

Every story in the Bible is a path prepared for us by God. Those who will walk slowly through the path of a Bible story can discover hidden treasures, gifts of truth from God. As we begin down this path on a Journey of Grace, we need to decide what kind of travelers are we.

Will we rush and simply miss all that God has prepared for us? Will we be so happy with the little truth we find that like the grains of sand we only take a small part of the truth that we are already familiar with? Will we see the beautiful message of the Journey of Grace, but not apply any of the truths to our lives?

If we choose to take the Journey of Grace slowly and with a lot of desire to discover the truths in the Word, then this Journey will bring us much joy. Not only will we find new truths, but we will be able to take them back to our home and begin using them in our daily lives to feed not only our own soul, but to pass on these truths to others.

Are you ready for the Journey? The path is full of treasures; we need only patience to find them.

Dr. David Busic, a general superintendent in the Church of the Nazarene, set out in *Way, Truth, Life: Discipleship as a Journey of Grace* to give guidance to faithful pilgrims and travelers on the Jesus Way. In this book, Busic extends to us an invitation. He simply invites the reader to take the road of discipleship "to discover the treasures of truth found there." He invites us to see the whole of our lives as shaped by a conscious, willful commitment to follow the path of Jesus that leads us through many intersections of grace, each building on and adding depth to the last.

The beauty of this path is that you don't have to wait until you get to the end to discern whether it made any difference. You will know immediately. The journey of grace is radically transformative. It's marked by an immediate impact, where who we've been is overcome by the transformative power of God's grace, shaping us into who we were created to be. From the outset, the decision makes a difference. What we discover on this "pathway of truth," is that—at each moment we surrender our reservations, push through our hesitation, lay down the idols and allegiances that too often impede the lordship of Jesus, and disentangle from the sin that so easily binds us—we discover the full and abundant life God intended for all humanity. This happens now, in the present. We needn't wait until some distant destination to experience in the impact of taking this path.

This discussion guide serves as a trail guide for embarking on the journey of grace with *Way, Truth, Life*, adding opportunities to examine Busic's material and reflect on the immediate impact of this journey on your life. Just as with any journey, there will be opportunities to bow out. There will be diversions on the divided path that will distract you from deliberate and intentional focus. Stay on the path. Each week of this study engages an element of the journey, exploring the different types of grace you will experience along the way.

The bulk of this study will occur over the next seven weeks. Use this material to add some flesh to the concepts and to draw out from participants their thoughts. Each lesson will be broken up into four sections.

First you will encounter a **Discussion Opener**—an opportunity to set the stage for the conversation.

Next you will read aloud with the group that week's **Scripture**. Remember, because this is a journey, not all travelers will be at the same place on the path. Some may have solid knowledge of Scripture while others might be hearing it for the very first time. Don't rush through the Scripture readings! Read as though the text itself matters deeply—because it does.

Third is the bulk of the weekly content in the **Lesson/Discussion Outline**. You will be afforded an opportunity here. Depending on how you distribute your materials, some may have read the lesson before your group meeting, and others won't. Some may have read the accompanying chapter in *Way, Truth, Life*, and others won't. This guide is written so you can either read it verbatim to the group or summarize the pieces that fit the class. Questions for discussion are scattered throughout the lesson. Therefore, whichever way you choose, you will want to stick close to the lesson.

Finally, there is a **Closing**. The beautiful part of this journey is that we were never intended to travel alone. We are given traveling partners. Use this time of closing to build community in your group as a time of commitment, reflection, encouragement, and prayer.

Christianity was never intended to be an episodic affair, moving from one worship experience to the next, one program to the next. Christianity is about taking a serious and sustained

journey into the heart of God's purposes for your life and for this world. This study alongside *Way, Truth, Life* sets the stage for this journey. The steps you take next will determine "the treasure you will find on the path," that God has left for you.

During this, your first meeting, the leader should have each person in the group introduce themselves and, if you are using the videos alongside the discussion guide, watch the first video. The members of this group will be taking a journey together, not only exploring grace as the catalyst for discipleship but also as a journey of sharing among their peers. Work to cultivate an environment of warmth, transparency, safety, and friendship.

# WEEK 2:

# GRACE IS COMPELLING

(WAY, TRUTH, LIFE CHAPTER 1)

## DISCUSSION OPENER

Christianity is about following Jesus. In many ways, it's that simple. That doesn't mean it's always easy, however.

But at its heart, Christianity means embarking on a life-consuming journey of discipleship, of getting up close and personal with Jesus.

- *What have been some of your challenges on this journey so far?*
- *If you are exploring Christianity for the first time, what are you anticipating being some of the challenges you might face?*

## SCRIPTURE

Read John 1:35–42 together.

## LESSON/DISCUSSION OUTLINE

### **Mathematics to Missions**

It was a Monday morning and all the students poured into the classroom with expectation. Some of them were coming from homes that did not agree with our doctrine and stance as a Christian school, but because of the good reputation, these students were sent there to learn.

Mathematics was the first subject for Monday mornings. Since it was a challenging subject, many students were struggling. "Any volunteer can come to the blackboard to solve the homework," the mathematics teacher ordered. There was a long silence. I stood up to go to the blackboard.

"No, Halissone. You have been doing the homework; today I want someone else. If they delay, I will indicate when anyone may come. Rogério, come here," the teacher decided.

"I tried to solve these exercises until I got completely confused," Rogério complained. "You can come to assist your colleague," the teacher called me.

"Listen class, now we are going to solve the limits of Trigonometry," Rogério shouted. The class laughed a little and the teacher commented, "Rogério, why did you not solve alone?"

Rogério answered, "Sir, the only thing I know are the mathematics terms, but to solve them I need help." We solved together and the answer was correct. As we were going to our desks, a young man from the back of the classroom raised his hand.

"Yes, Alfredo, do you have a question?" the teacher said to the young man who had a very worried look on his face.

"Yes, Teacher. I have done my best to do my homework but there are many exercises that I do not understand. How can we get help when there is no time in class to get all the answers?"

Before the answer, Amida asked, "Why is Mathematics the most difficult subject?"

With a smile, the teacher answered, "It is a real science and does not allow relativism." In that way, Mathematics tries to follow Theology. In Theology, yes is yes and no is no. "There is no ambiguity," I commented.

"Hmm! Now I understand why you enjoy math," Abdul commented.

Alfredo was a conscientious student and had a real heart to learn. I myself was studying for my diploma and at the same time was completing my high school. I understood that it was God's grace that made me enjoy mathematics while others were struggling. I decided to create an open group for everyone who wanted to practice mathematics.

"What if we make some groups to study mathematics?" I invited my colleagues. The entire class showed interest in joining the group. "The condition of the group is to start with devotions before we go for mathematics. No one is forced to take part, but once joining, one will be participating in both devotions and mathematics."

"It sounds good," Alice commented. "The way mathematics beats me, I have no choice," Abdul said. "To make it serious, everyone who wants to join the group must inform me and Halissone will be leading us in calculation," Alfredo suggested.

"No problem; it will be my pleasure. Alfredo will lead devotions on the first day."

"I will do it," Alfredo promised. "Thursdays at 4 p.m. is the time for our study, starting this week."

The following Thursday afternoon, Rogério was one of the first students to arrive, and soon our class was filled with more than 10 students seeking help.

"Today we are starting a new journey together," I began. "This class will always begin with a devotional where we will hear the Word of God and seek wisdom before we go into these difficult questions. You will learn more than math in this class; you will also learn about life and how to succeed."



None of the students seemed to be upset with this announcement. They actually looked as though they were looking forward to hearing from the book that not many of them had read. I asked Alfredo to lead us, and he took out his Bible and began, "Proverbs is called the wisdom literature. We will start here . . ."

As the weeks and months went on, Rogério and Abdul began to ask more questions, not only about math, but also about the spiritual lessons we started with before every class. Rogério's questions were related to his conduct at home, which was not good and did not make his parents happy.

Abdul had many religious questions related to his Islamic background. The methodology we were using to solve math forced each member to express in words each step. It was like giving a testimony but in the context of math.

"What do you know about this topic? What is your challenge?" I often asked before proceeding. This method helped us to involve all members in discussion. As time went on, we started to follow the same method for devotionals.

"Our devotional time is too short; I have more question about the Bible than for Mathematics," Abdul commented. "You are right, Abdul," Alfredo responded. "Here we are doing two things, but on Sundays in our local church there is enough time for discussion."

"I will be there!" Abdul confirmed. "I will also join!" Rogerio responded. "I can even pass by your home and then we come together," Alfredo said. "Please, Alfredo!" Rogério implored. "For me, it is better that I come alone!" Abdul said.

If it had not been for their need, they would not have come to class. Could God have ordained a math class as the first contact in the journey of grace for Rogério and Abdul?

Two years passed quickly, and both Abdul and Rogério received Christ as their Lord and Savior. They are now full members of Laulane Church of the Nazarene where the school is located.

The Christian faith is compelling. Why? Because grace is compelling. Grace is the favor and faithfulness of God embodied in the person of Jesus, mediated through the Spirit, at work in this world to align the world to the beautifully life-giving, redemptive purposes of the Father. Grace isn't a panic button or a family-imposed expectation. Grace is an invitation to step into a new journey of life, a new perspective, a new way of seeing and experiencing the world in light of the life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus.

Grace is a compelling invitation, rooted in the person of Jesus. It's an invitation to step out from where we've been and into the story of where Jesus is leading. Grace is an all-consuming, life-transforming, ongoing invitation to travel lightly into the kingdom of God, being manifest where we are right now along life's path.

## Grace Calls Us to Follow Jesus

Jesus was a travelin' man. Have you ever noticed that? You couldn't pin him down for long. He was moving from place to place, town to town, and, more importantly, from life to life. Jesus seemed to be always on the move, traveling along life's highways and byways. He was no stranger to crooked paths, steep hills, dangerous valleys, storm-tossed vessels, bustling city gates, out-of-the-way places, or spaces a respectable person should stay away from. Jesus was moving.

And wherever he went, people clamored to see him. Some chose to follow him. Many were astounded by him. A few were offended by him. However, regardless of the motivation, you couldn't stay away from him. His presence was compelling. *Jesus was the embodiment of God on mission.* Did you get that? Jesus as the Son of God is God, who clothed God's self with human flesh and put on walking sandals. In Jesus, God goes for a walk. When God goes for a walk, it's so intriguing, thought-provoking, curious, and compelling that folks can't keep their distance. They must get up close and personal.

They might not have understood why they were so compelled, but the verdict is in after nearly two millennia—it was grace. What people see in Jesus is the captivating favor and faithfulness of God exemplified in the very concrete life of Jesus. It's not abstract. It's not an idea. It's a life. Grace shows up in the life of Jesus and extends an invitation to join that concrete life of Jesus on this journey of grace.

The Christian faith is not a panic button. The Christian faith is not a family inheritance. The Christian faith is not a transaction that purchases a ticket to a heavenly destination. The Christian faith is an invitation to take up stride behind the One whose life is so utterly compelling that we find ourselves caught up in the journey even before we realize its significance. This is the journey of grace. It is the journey of following the compelling life of Jesus.

As we lean into this journey of grace, there are parts of the journey we should prepare ourselves for. In chapter 1 of *Way, Truth, Life*, Busic states that grace is both personal and costly. This grace that meets each one of us where we are and calls each of us to our unique sacrifices is a grace that is located within the extended story of Jesus in the Gospels.

You know what I love about the "journey" language? It means that Jesus meets us along life's many paths, refusing to prescribe a condition for encounter. The grace of Jesus meets us right where we are, right where we start, and precisely *how* we are. My path to faith, holiness, and wholeness isn't your path. For some of us, grace meets us on a broken road. Life has been dotted with disappointment, heartache, letdowns, and times when challenge seemingly won't let up. For some of us, life's path has left us skeptical or cynical that there is anything more behind what we see in this world than what our eyes can perceive. Others of us have had a pretty solid life, good homes, families, pseudo-success stories that leave us questioning if we

really need this journey at all. For others, we've been deeply committed Jesus followers, no stranger to difficulties and triumph, but still left wondering, *Is there more to all of this?* The great thing about grace is that it meets us wherever we are.

## 1. Come and See

Grace meets you along life's road with the invitation "Come and see." I love this. In John 1, having heard a bit about Jesus from John the Baptizer, a couple of John's followers run off to inquire of Jesus. They want to know a bit about the destination. "Jesus, where are you staying? Where will this take us?" Jesus's response is, "Come and see." Don't you love this? Jesus seems to suggest that the journey of grace is so compelling that if you just come and check it out, and hang out long enough, that will be enough to encourage you to go deeper.

Jesus seems less inclined to obsess about destinations and much more interested in the journey. Jesus doesn't front-load the journey of grace with a bunch of demands either. Jesus, the one who invites us on the journey of grace, simply shows up. He shows up and travels on through, trusting that his life is compelling enough for our inquiries. We catch a glimpse of the One who has come strolling through our lives, and we want to know more. He simply invites us. "Come and see."

- ***What have you found to be compelling about the life of Jesus? What sticks out to you that has brought you to this moment?***
- ***What kind of path were (are) you on as Jesus came strolling by? How did grace meet you?***

## 2. Follow Me

Grace turns your life upside down with the call "Follow me." Grace doesn't end at the stage of curiosity. Hang out with Jesus long enough, and grace will meet you in a new way. That's the thing about grace. It's not a one-time event or simple transaction. Grace is the consistent, steady thread of God's goodness and favor, inviting us, calling us—wooing us, if you like—into the fullness for which you and I have been created. Grace invites, but it doesn't leave us unscathed.

Grace extends the invitation from "come and see" to the call to "follow me." Here's where things get real very quickly. When Jesus says, "Follow me," this is where we experience the "costly grace" that *Way, Truth, Life* speaks about. Here we come face to face with everything that's in the way. Here we come to recognize that we've been toting around quite a bit of luggage, often filled up with our idols and allegiances. Here we begin to realize that we have to dump that stuff on the side of the road. We call this repentance. It's the grace that anticipates

transformation. It's the grace that recognizes, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Discipleship can tolerate no conditions which might come between Jesus and our obedience to him."

The call to follow is the call to abandon authorship of our own story. Instead, we hand the pen to Jesus to script the coming chapters. Grace calls us to leave behind life as we've known it for life as God intended it.

- ***When Jesus called you to follow him, what was some of the luggage you had to leave behind?***
- ***What is hindering you from taking up the call to follow Jesus?***
- ***What were elements of freedom that you discovered in leaving behind life as you knew it for the life God intended for you?***

### 3. You Will Be

Grace transforms your life through the promise "You will be." What started as a compelling invitation moved to a life-upending call and leads us to a heart-changing promise. Hang out with Jesus long, and your life will be changed. Have you ever noticed that the closer the people in the Gospel stories came to Jesus, the less they remained the same? The left-outs were let in. The broken were mended. The sinful were forgiven and called to leave behind their sin. Those on the margins were brought to the center. Those forgotten and isolated were remembered and given a community. Those adrift on the waters of meaninglessness were given a sense of purpose. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus declares, "You will be." *You will be different. You will be changed. You will be mine.*

Grace helps us understand Paul's claim in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that anyone in Christ experiences new creation. Understand that this is not moralism or behavior modification, though you will probably become a better person, and some of your behaviors may change. This change isn't an act of your will. It is grace moving down into the core of who you are and transforming you from the inside out. Grace will make you different.

- ***What has changed in your life since you were met by the grace of God?***
- ***What do you imagine God might still be remaking in your life by the grace of God?***

### 4. Go and Do

Grace sends us out to be witnesses and ambassadors with the command "Go and do." If Jesus is really the embodiment of God on mission, and we are called to follow this Jesus, patterning our lives from his, it would only make sense that our lives should reflect that very same mission of God. The grace that compelled us to heed the invitation, take up the call, and surrender our lives to the work of transformation is the same grace that sends us into the world as

conduits through whom that grace flows into the lives of others. Compelled by grace, we are to live out our lives before others in a Christ-honoring and compelling way.

Through our lives, our actions, our attitudes, the words we speak, the social media posts we write, the love of neighbor we offer, the justice we pursue, the dignity we extend, the forgiveness we give, the peace we make, and the joy we exhibit, people are given a glimpse of this compelling grace. Grace hears the command to “Go and do likewise” less as an obligatory demand of a tyrant and more like the joyous dispatch of someone who knows that his good-news grace is so compelling it may very well change someone’s life.

- *Where might God’s grace be sending you right now?*
- *To whom might you be an ambassador of God’s good-news grace?*
- *Write down their names and start praying for them this week.*

## CLOSING

Take time to share prayer requests. Ask each person to share a request they have for what they hope to experience on the journey of grace. Close your time together with prayer.

# WEEK 3:

## GRACE IS SURPRISING

(WAY, TRUTH, LIFE CHAPTER 2)

### DISCUSSION OPENER

It's time for a little fun. Before you enter the meat of this week's lesson, get to know one another on another level.

*If you were to identify with a character in the Bible, who would it be? Why? What about the personality of that character resonates with how you see yourself?*

Last week we discussed the four movements in the journey, "Come and see," "Follow me," "You will be," and "Go and do." These movements aren't one-time events. Our journey with Jesus is a growth in grace, and we at times experience these movements again and again in various seasons.

*As you reflected on last week's lesson, which of the movements do you feel as though this season of life lends itself toward for you?*

### SCRIPTURE

Read Acts 10 together.

### LESSON/DISCUSSION OUTLINE

#### **A Rebel Becomes Righteous**

A young man was a troublemaker in his family, at work, and in his community. His real name is withheld, so we will call him Mabvuto, which in the local language means "problems." He was the first-born son in a family of five children. His father and mother were both employed in the mines—his mother as a nurse in one of the mining hospitals and his father as a miner. Mabvuto had an opportunity to work as a miner too, even while his father was still alive. But despite his work in the mines, he was a thorn in his parent's flesh! Mabvuto had a terrible reputation as troublemaker—all the time.

At home Mabvuto often physically abused his parents and siblings. Sometimes he went to his parents' home and asked his mother, "Did you leave some food for me?" She responded, "Yes, go to the kitchen and get some." But when Mabvuto ate his food, he said with disgust, "This is not enough!" The mother then replied, "If you want more food, why don't you marry so your wife can prepare enough food for you?"

This made Mabvuto angry—very angry! He went into his mother's bedroom, collected all her clothes, and went out and set them on fire while his parents watched silently, not saying a word. When they tried to talk to him, he started fighting with them for no reason at all. His parents reported him to the police who picked him up and detained him. But the next day because of his parents' concern and love for their son, they would get him released from the police cell.

Another way Mabvuto abused his parents was to steal items from their home and sell them on the streets. When his father confronted Mabvuto about his bad behavior, the young man said, "Father, I did not plan to steal, but sometimes I find myself stealing and misbehaving. I can't help myself." When his father heard this, he suspected that something must be wrong with his son; he was person who

In his community, Mabvuto borrowed money with the promise to pay back the amount at the end of the month with interest. However, when Mabvuto did not keep his promise, the money lender requested that he pay back his loan with the required interest. Instead, Mabvuto insulted the money lender and started fighting him.

Mabvuto's parents talked about taking their son to a witch doctor about his bad behavior. They believed the witch doctor could help their son, that he could be delivered from whatever caused him to do evil and bad things. But that did not bring positive results for Mabvuto. So the parents took their son to different witch doctors and other places, looking for possible solutions. Finally, all their resources had been spent, and still nothing worked for the family.

The grace of God, however, was at work through everything that had happened without Mabvuto or his parents knowing. The key to the grace of God at work in this story is that grace is there without being noticed.

Despite the efforts of the witch doctors, Mabvuto's behavior did not improve at home and work. He had the habit of reporting for work at any time he felt like it. Plus, he stole work tools. So, the company planned to discipline Mabvuto, but the day they planned to deal with him was the same day his father died. The company felt they should not punish him during his time of bereavement.

At the same time, a pastor was transferred from Lusaka to the town where Mabvuto lived. A week later the minister was introduced to Mabvuto. The pastor invited Mabvuto to attend the Church of the Nazarene Sunday worship service. Surprisingly, Mabvuto did not hesitate to attend church the next Sunday. When the usher invited him in and showed him a seat, every person in the congregation was shocked to see Mabvuto there. They thought, "He has surely come to start a fight with someone in the congregation."

After the worship service, the pastor invited Mabvuto for a fellowship meal, which he accepted. After the meal the pastor showed Mabvuto the audio Bible player with the Gospel of Matthew and told him to listen to it at home.

"I have never had a Bible in my life before," Mabvuto told the pastor. The pastor said, "I will get a copy for you plus the audio Bible player of the New Testament."

The next Sunday, Mabvuto attended church service again. The pastor asked, "Mabvuto, did you enjoy listening to the audio Bible player?" The young man said, "I really enjoyed listening to it, because I could hear God speaking to me."

During the course of the next week the pastor visited Mabvuto's home, which was near his mother's house. The pastor knew that the journey to convince Mabvuto's to commit to attend church might be difficult. He knew something about Mabvuto's lifestyle, about his bad behavior. He knew a discussion about his life was necessary. The pastor asked Mabvuto, "Do you know the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal Savior?"

"I have heard the name Jesus Christ, but I have not known Him to be my personal Savior," Mabvuto answered. "Are you ready to receive Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior now?" the pastor asked. "Yes, I am more than ready to receive Jesus Christ." The pastor then led Mabvuto to accept Christ into his life.

One evening soon after, his mother came to thank the pastor and express her great appreciation for assisting Mabvuto to know the Lord Jesus. "I am so grateful that my son is now a born-again Christian," the mother said, smiling.

As the pastor talked with Mabvuto's mother, tears flowed down his face. "I believe God transferred me here for this purpose, that Mabvuto would be saved from his sins. Would you briefly tell me what challenges you have experienced through your son's situation?"

"It's a long story," she said. "And let me tell you that it was not an easy journey. Mabvuto's father and I began to suspect our son of his bad behavior. So, it was easy to take him to witch doctors who told us that Mabvuto's aunt was involved in his misfortunes. We all believed that his aunt bewitched him."

Mabvuto continued to faithfully attend worship services in the Church of the Nazarene with a good testimony. The pastor honored Mabvuto's request for a copy of a Bible and gave him given a copy plus the audio New Testament player. Mabvuto's testimony and the news that he was a born-again Christian went everywhere in the community and his workplace. Furthermore, Mabvuto became a committed Christian and loyal church member. And during the annual church meeting Mabvuto was elected as a church board member. Later he went to the Bible College and became a pastor of a local church.

Indeed, the grace that goes before us visits people unknowingly, without being noticed! While the community, friends, relatives were busy condemning Mabvuto, the grace of God did its work in Mabvuto's life. We thank God for the grace that goes before us and the working grace that operates without being noticed.



- *In what ways are you currently experiencing, or have you previously experienced the prevenient grace of God?*
- *Whom do you know right now, someone you have regular interaction with, who might be under the allure of grace?*

## *Grace Can Show Up Anywhere*

We love celebration stories. We love those testimonies when someone stands up before their baptism and talks about how they were once lost but are now found. And we *should* love these stories! There's joy in watching God work to reclaim the lives and stories of God's children. But our interest in people's stories too often starts at the point of conversion.

My friend Dr. Todd Keller, a pastor in Illinois, says it is tragic that the extent of our curiosity begins at the point of conversion. Dr. Keller instead suggests that truly valuing an individual demands a curiosity that takes us further back into their story. To truly embrace someone, we must lean into their stories to discern the fingerprints of God all throughout the story of their lives, pointing to all the meaningful intersections of God's seeking grace along the way, reminding them there has never been a time when God wasn't at work.

It would be easy to jump to the end of Acts 10, to the moment when the Spirit of God is poured out on all the gentiles living in Cornelius's house and to the moment when Peter orders them all to be baptized. But to begin there is a tragic failure to discern the prevenient grace throughout the story. The stage for the celebration at the end is set long before the moment when Peter shows up.

It's one of those sweet reminders that mission doesn't require us to take Jesus to where someone else is but simply to point to how Jesus has already been at work in that space.

Cornelius was already under the allure of grace. We don't know when and how grace began to sneak up on Cornelius, but by the time we encounter him, we can see the evidence of that seeking grace already at work. It might be suggested that what we see in the life of Cornelius is an incomplete picture of some of the ways in which prevenient grace works every day in the lives of those we encounter. Prevenient grace can be found anywhere!

### *1. At the Crossroads*

The story of Cornelius's celebration happens in the city of Caesarea. Though in the center of the region politically at that time, it was a sort of crossroads in the Jewish-gentile world. Unlike the Jewish strongholds of places like Bethlehem, Jerusalem, or even Joppa, Caesarea was this space of unique collision of Roman authority and Jewish religious influence, which often led to tension.

Cornelius's life is demonstrative of that unique crossroads. Though he was a centurion (a military commander), he was also a God-fearer who was already inclined toward the monotheistic tradition of the Jews. What does that mean?

Grace often shows up in settings of tension at the crossroads of life. Christians would do well to pay closer attention to the crossroads of people's lives—those places of tension where worlds are barely holding together or where unique collisions have created openings for grace.

To go back to the troubled son we met at the beginning of this lesson, it might be suggested that his encounter with the pastor and the invitation to church after the death of his father, became a kind of crossroads for him. Prevenient grace can often be found in those places where tensions converge.

***What are some of the crossroads you've discerned God at work in your life?***

## 2. In Curiosity

In *Way, Truth, Life*, Dr. Busic quotes Lovett Weems, who said, "God seeks us before we ever seek God. The initiative of salvation is with God from the beginning. Before we ever take a step, God is there." Put simply, no one wakes up on their own volition and says, "I think God is a good idea today." Anyone who begins the turn toward God is already under the allure of grace. This truth is often demonstrated in curiosity. As a pastor, curiosity is one of my favorite examples of God's prevenient grace. People ask questions. They show up in spaces they wouldn't ordinarily. They hang out longer than they used to. Unfortunately, well-meaning Christians often sabotage these moments. Feeling the pressure to "get someone saved," we work to make them say "the sinner's prayer." However, the beauty of prevenient grace is knowing that God is already doing the work.

For quite some time, Cornelius had demonstrated curiosity. He'd learned to align himself to the Jewish traditions, and even though he still would have been considered an outsider, it didn't keep him from drawing as close as possible. He was even curious about Jewish practices of generosity and compassion, putting to work in his own life what he'd seen in others. Curiosity often points to seeking grace at work.

***In what ways have you witnessed curiosity about God and the things of God displayed in the lives of people close to you?***

## 3. Through Companionship

Never underestimate the power of those with whom company is kept being an indicator of prevenient grace. God uses people who show up. God uses people who are willing to be

present in the tensions and at the crossroads of life. God uses companionship to fuel the fires of curiosity burning in people's lives.

Though Cornelius might have regularly been kept from the intimate spaces of Jewish culture, his life would have constantly bumped up against those whose lives, faith, and God had rubbed off on him. He was highly esteemed among the Jews, so he was no foreigner to people of faith. Notably, when prevenient grace led him to a revelatory moment, his first act of obedience was to seek the companionship of a Jewish Christian he'd never met—Peter.

Prevenient grace has a way of aligning our lives with the lives of others, whether those others are Jews in Caesarea, a girlfriend, friends, family members—or, in my own case, a Christian couple who walked with my wife and me for three years at three different duty stations in the Army before we decided to follow Jesus.

- *Whom are you currently in companionship with who might be demonstrating God's faithfulness and grace in your life?*
- *Whom are you currently in companionship with who might see you as the important link in their spiritual journey?*

#### 4. Within Conviction

Decisions dot our journey of grace. Each decision we make is evidence of grace at work. Decisions born of true conviction are the evidence of God's Spirit at work in the life of the one seeking God.

We see conviction at work in a number of ways in the life of Cornelius. There was conviction in his turn toward the Jewish religion. There was conviction in his need to help others. There was conviction in his upright moral behavior. There was conviction in his response to send for Peter.

Conviction is the grace that begins to align our lives to the kingdom of God before we've made that kingdom our home. This is why discipleship is so important. Discipleship doesn't begin at the point of conversion. Discipleship happens all along the journey of grace—nurturing, fostering, and fueling the work that God is already up to in a person's life.

Prevenient grace was at work as far back as we can point in the life of Cornelius. By the time Peter entered the story, Cornelius was already under the allure of grace. All Cornelius needed was for someone to explain to him what he was already experiencing, what had already captivated him.

*What kingdom convictions did you experience even before you'd made the kingdom of God your home?*

## Grace Doesn't End There

Prevenient grace was at work setting the stage for Cornelius's commitment to Jesus, but prevenient grace was also at work setting up Peter for a unique calling. This is the part of seeking grace that we often miss. *The same grace at work in the person on their way to Jesus is also at work in the life of the person being sent by Jesus to meet them along the way.* For the sake of brevity, I won't get into all the details found in the story of Peter on the rooftop in Joppa. However, I will suggest that at the exact same time that grace was sneaking up on, drawing, wooing, and calling Cornelius and those in his house to reach out, grace was also sneaking up on Peter on a rooftop, challenging preconceived ideas, dismantling traditionalism, erasing boundaries, softening his heart, and preparing him to join God where God was already at work.

For those prone to believe in prevenient grace, there is a responsibility to respond to God's prompting to show up, to be present, to discern the faithful movement of God that often takes us well beyond the boundaries of our comfort. If prevenient grace is discerned at the crossroads of people's lives, then it is also found among those willing to set up camp at those crossroads to follow God's lead when the opportunity presents itself.

What Mabvuto didn't realize was that, long before he showed up, long before he decided church might be a legitimate idea, grace had already set the stage through a congregation of people who had committed themselves to showing up at the crossroads, who nurture curiosity, who patiently stand in companionship, and who disciple through conviction. The pastor of that church showed up in Mabvuto's life at a moment of crisis that allowed a troubled young man to experience the goodness of God. He heard the Word of God for the first time, and it impacted his life. He might never have entered that church if it were not for the pastor showing up at his moment of crisis.

And just like that, grace surprised us all!

## CLOSING

It is time to reflect through prayer. Discerning prevenient grace at work in our lives and in the lives of others demands that we recognize the obstacles that keep us from seeing where grace is at work. It could be our busyness, our wounds, our assumptions, etc. Ask each person to state one obstacle they face in discerning the prevenient grace of God and then close your time together by committing those obstacles to prayer.

# WEEK 4: GRACE IS FOR EVERYONE

(WAY, TRUTH, LIFE CHAPTER 3)

## DISCUSSION OPENER

Let's take some time and learn to discern and reflect upon the work of God in our lives in real time.

*Last week, we talked about prevenient grace—the grace that is at work often before we recognize it. It points to the steady, faithful hand of God always at work behind the scenes. Faithfulness requires that we grow more sensitive to that working, but too often we don't take time to reflect. What are some of the ways you discerned God working (even in the background of your life) in this last week?*

Seeking grace is God's setup for saving grace. We will explore this part of the journey a bit more fully throughout this lesson. However, I might suggest that when we use the word "salvation" or "saved" from Scripture, we are often translating the Greek word *sozo*. This word means, in essence, to be made whole.

*As we lean into this lesson, what are some places in your life right now that might benefit from a saving grace that not only rescues you from the consequences of your sin but also seeks to make you whole?*

## SCRIPTURE

Read Luke 18:35–19:10 together.

## LESSON/DISCUSSION OUTLINE

### Hugging the Helpless

The Church of the Nazarene on the Kenya Central District has grown tremendously, especially among the children's ministry. The Church has endeavored to reach the vulnerable in the society, like the disabled and the less fortunate. In my training for children's workers and as a minister, I often get opportunities to travel to many places. I once heard of a pastor, who works among the slum-dwellers, narrate to me a life-changing testimony.

Jabali was among the children who were being disciplined in a local church. He was just a street boy at the time his lead pastor took him in. Life in the major cities like Nairobi is tough, with many families living below the poverty line. Very often we find street families who depend mainly on churches and other generous organizations for their livelihood.

Among those groups who have a ministry established to help the vulnerable in this community is the Church of the Nazarene that Jabali attended. He always came on special occasions because there would be some food for him and his friends. One striking blessing, besides just coming for the meal, was that Jabali often sat in the services till the end. Slowly but steadily, Jabali bonded with the members of the congregation, even though some would not be too comfortable because of his filthy appearance.

At this same church was one of the elders Mr. Mulemi, who served under the pastor. On the outside he looked like a respectable Christian, but Mulemi still struggled with some issues in his life. Secretly he was a social alcohol drinker though he did it without others knowing. Similarly, he battered his wife and did not consider his wife's efforts to bring peace and harmony in their home. He became angry many times, lashing out at others and creating conflict in the church.

Though he was respected in the church, and he looked clean and proper on the outside, Mr. Mulemi was actually dirty on the inside. He needed the saving grace of Christ to complete Christ' work and to change him!

One Sunday after the morning worship, Mr. Mulemi who had been in the church for a long time and was the most influential member on the board, was a bit abrasive with Jabali. That morning he confronted Jabali with some hard questions.

"Why do you always come forward every altar call?" he asked with an attitude of condemnation.

Jabali responded, "I always have something to tell God, and it is the only ample time I get to speak to God without fear or interruption from my friends."

Jabali was sincerely seeking the saving grace that would change his life, and soon he found some responses to the questions he had in his heart and mind.

On another day Jabali came to church a bit later than usual, very dirty and with an offensive odor. As he entered the sanctuary the Pastor was getting ready to preach, and as normal, Jabali sat silently and listened to the Word. After the service no one was willing to greet him or even move closer to Jabali.

At last, the Pastor not only greeted Jabali, but also hugged him and prayed with him. The Pastor sensed that God was at work in this young boy's life, and because of that love it was not very long before there was a change in the life of Jabali. He gave his life to Christ and allowed Christ to transform him.

On that same day the Pastor also approached Mr. Mulemi, who at this time was still guilty of his bad actions and hidden lifestyle. The Pastor began reaching out to Mr. Mulemi to meet with him once a week to discuss spiritual things and challenge him to live a lifestyle that was genuine to the faith he professed. Mr. Mulemi also had a journey to saving grace even though he did not recognize or admit it at the time. Indeed, sin had been part of both Jabali and Mr. Mulemi's lives, but as grace reached them, they are now able to live lives worthy of the calling of God and to serve God faithfully as they grow in grace and faith.

***Throughout our lives, we have all fallen under sin's dread sway at some point. Our stories are different, but the problem is the same for each of us. As much as you feel comfortable, share some of the ways sin has manifested itself in your story.***

## *When Grace Shows Up, Everything Changes*

Luke is a masterful storyteller. It's not only in the precise details he offers in his account of the ministry of Jesus that grabs the reader, but it's also the intentional cues he drops throughout the story that pull the reader in, making connections that deepen our appreciation of the stories. Luke 18 and 19 tell the stories of two men whose biographies were radically different, but their problem was exactly the same: neither of them could see.

It's a great story of the traveling Jesus we discussed a couple weeks ago. On the way to Jerusalem, he travels through the ancient city of Jericho, a city that, in Jesus's day, had been built just outside the original Jericho we encounter in the Old Testament book of Joshua. His close followers and others have joined him for this stretch in the journey. Hearing that Jesus is traveling through the ancient city, a blind man—whose ears are probably attuned to pick up heightened sound as compensation for his absent sight—has probably heard many stories about Jesus from those who have traveled in and out of the gates of that great city.

When the man hears that Jesus is passing through, he desperately cries out. The grace that could change everything is strolling by, and he is bound and determined not to miss it. There are those who try to dampen his desperation and quiet his voice. However, when life has left

a person wrecked and wounded, there is no dissuading the desperation of someone who senses that saving grace is near.

I love what happens next. Jesus calls the beggar to himself and, after a brief conversation, pronounces upon this man's life, "Receive your sight; your faith has healed you." Beautiful, right? Don't miss this! The word translated as "healed" is the same word used throughout the Greek New Testament to signify salvation, and in fact other Bible translations have this verse saying, "Your faith has saved you." Grace passed by in the person of Jesus, and the faith of this man in Jesus saved him.

Salvation is much more than the purchase of a ticket to a destination somewhere else. Salvation is discovered when the broken are made well, the wounded and weary are healed and restored, and those estranged from God and others are made right in relationship with God and others.

The blind, haggard beggar—the impetuous, brash, shouting beggar who, in Mark's version of this same story in Mark 10, casts off all decency in shedding his cloak—couldn't see, and it sent him to the saving grace passing through, Jesus. But you must love Luke. Look what Luke does at the beginning of chapter 19, starting with verse 2: "A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd." Did you get that? Here's a man whose life condition is very different. He is a wealthy, though corrupt, businessman. He embodies everything that would have left him repulsed by the sight of the blind beggar, yet he too suffers from the same issue: he can't see.

Both the blind beggar and Zacchaeus are wrapped up in a broken, fallen, sinful world. Both have been the recipients of and participants in sin's dread sway, though in different ways. Neither of them can adequately see the saving grace of Jesus that is passing by. Both have perceptions perverted and corrupted by their plight. However, both appear to understand that all hope will be found in seeing and being seen by the one who has the power to pronounce salvation in their lives.

Though the plight of the beggar left him shouting from the edge of the road, Zacchaeus's plight as a man of little stature and little standing in the community left him scurrying up a sycamore tree. Yet in this story, Jesus doesn't wait for the man to shout and come running. Instead, Jesus calls the man in the tree out and invites himself to his home—scandalous! Here a well-renowned holy man and rabbi is headed to the home of a well-to-do scoundrel who has amassed his wealth skimming ridiculous amounts of money off the top of his fellow citizens. Saving grace might help the needy beggar, but this man? Couldn't that be going too far?

But that's grace. The saving grace of Jesus always takes God too far—because this saving grace isn't dependent on the prior condition of the one being sought, nor does it wait for appropriate alignment; and because, as Dr. Busic states in *Way, Truth, Life*, "grace comes



from outside us. Saving grace comes from God in the person of Jesus Christ." Grace will take God into spaces and places often considered off limits by the religious and to people often considered exempt by the holy.

When that saving grace shows up, everything changes. Saving grace produces a fruit that no act of the moral will could ever produce. Listen to what happens when grace comes home to reside with Zacchaeus in Luke 19:8: "But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, 'Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.'" And then listen to how Jesus responds in verse 9: "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

The same Jesus who pronounced saving grace over the life of the blind beggar now proclaims that salvation—a cognate of the same word for salvation used in Luke 18—has entered the life of this corrupt swindler. Their biographies are different. Their problem is similar. Their need is the same. Saving grace is administered regardless of merit, biography, or assumptions—because that's what grace does.

When we in the church talk about saving grace we often do so in a way that suggests that saving grace gets us out of the condition of our sin and into the destination of heaven—but there is so much more to it than that.

## *1. Saving Grace Lifts Us from Our Misery*

Sin can leave us in a pretty broken condition, haggard and desperate along the path of life's road. It can leave us destitute and desperate. When saving grace comes by, it lifts us to our feet and sets us on a path toward healing.

***In what ways has the saving grace of God lifted you out of misery and brokenness, healing and restoring you?***

## *2. Saving Grace Removes the Blinders*

Sin has a way of corrupting our perception of the people and the world around us. We see through the eyes of our own woundedness, ego, self-righteousness, and selfishness. When saving grace comes by it restores our sight. We no longer see the world as we would want it but as God has created it.

***How has the saving grace of Jesus in your life helped you see the world differently?***

### 3. Saving Grace Restores Us to Our Community

According to Dr. Busic in *Way, Truth, Life*, sin is about estrangement. We are estranged from God and from others, from the meaningful relationships for which we've been created. When saving grace comes by, it restores right relationships, inviting us into communion with the God of our salvation and the people from whom we've alienated ourselves.

***Can any of you share about a relationship that God has healed in your life since you came to faith?***

### 4. Saving Grace Calls Us out of Hiding and Slips into Our Homes

Sin will drive us up a tree and out of sight. Sin breeds the twin siblings of shame and guilt, neither of which like to be exposed. However, when saving grace comes by it calls us out of hiding, shedding the shame and guilt, and makes a home with us so that our encounter with it isn't a one-time passing-through but a daily transformation.

***Guilt and shame are soul-damaging. In what ways has God's saving grace transformed the way in which you understand his favor in your life?***

### 5. Saving Grace Convicts and Liberates

According to Dr. Busic in *Way, Truth, Life*, sin is also about rebellion. The longer we feed the beast of our own obstinacy, the more our hearts harden. However, saving grace slides past our defenses and convicts us of our sinfulness and reveals to us our need for that which we can't give ourselves—a fresh start. When saving grace comes by, it softens our hearts and liberates us from the perpetual tyranny of our own rebelliousness.

***Can anyone share about a way in which God has liberated (freed) you from some form of bondage through his grace? In what ways can you provide hope for others?***

### 6. Saving Grace Restores and Commissions

Sin mars and corrupts the human vocation. In sin we are not what God intended us to be. However, when saving grace comes by we are restored, as Dr. Busic suggests in *Way, Truth, Life* near the end of chapter 3: "In Christ, we are seen as beautiful, perceived as valuable, and created to be an expression of our Maker, the Divine Artist."

***Take some time to discuss the ways in which saving grace has changed your life.***

## *A New way and Another Chance*

This was a turning point in the life of both Mr. Mulemi and Jabali. From that time on the two became closer and sometimes Mr. Mulemi not only spent time with Jabali but he began contributing to the upkeep of Jabali and his school fees. Jabali now not only comes to church with confidence but also realizes that God loves everyone regardless of who they are and how their story began. The saving grace had changed both Mr. Mulemi and Jabali both inside and out.

## CLOSING

Let's turn our prayers into an act of gratitude. Go around the group and ask anyone who feels comfortable to share one or two things they are grateful for that the Lord's saving grace has done for them. Once everyone has spoken, close your time together with a prayer of thanksgiving.

# WEEK 5:

# GRACE CARRIES US

# THROUGH THE GAP

*(WAY, TRUTH, LIFE CHAPTER 4)*

## BEFORE THE MEETING

This week, choose three people from your group (or more, or fewer, depending on your group dynamics) and ask them to develop a three-minute version of their life or faith story to share with the group. Don't pressure anyone; they should be comfortable and willing.

## DISCUSSION OPENER

Last week was a powerful session of taking a deep dive into an understanding of salvation that was holistic, hopeful, and transformative. Let's begin this week with a little work on our testimonies.

Often people feel as though they can't be used by God because they don't understand the whole Bible or don't know much about theology. However, that's simply not true. One of the most powerful tools we've been equipped with is our testimony of faith. No one can take away our story of transformation! Everyone needs 1-minute, 3-minute, 5-minute, 10-minute, and extended versions of their stories of salvation. Different settings demand different levels of depth.

Introduce the participants who have agreed to share their stories with your group today, and then give time for each of them to share their three-minute testimony.

At the end of this time of sharing, challenge the entire group to spend some time this coming week on their own 3-minute versions of their stories of transformation. Some questions they may want to consider:

- What was their life like before Jesus?
- What were the circumstances that led them to Jesus?
- When did their encounter with Jesus change their life?

- How is Jesus transforming their lives?

## SCRIPTURE

Read Acts 1:6–14 and 2:17 together.

## LESSON/DISCUSSION OUTLINE

### The Role of New Fellowship

The way Rafique grew up shows that people are influenced by others. His Christian parents tried to educate their children in a good way. Consequently, all Rafique's brothers and sisters did not give their parents many problems. For the most part, Rafique was an obedient boy, but he used to go to visit his uncle, whose behavior was not good. Rafique's life changed when he passed grade 7; he had to leave his school district to pursue his studies in another district.

Instead of focusing on his studies, Rafique felt free to do whatever he thought he could not do at home. Through influence of other students with bad behavior, he learned to drink alcohol and began smoking. As a consequence, he repeated grade 8 for three years. His parents told him that they could not continue paying for him just to fail, and so he returned home. He grew up, remaining in his village.

At home, he was well known in his neighborhood for his capacity of fighting and beating anyone who might provoke him. In the tavern he was normally able to drink beer without paying. He would even provoke others just to beat them up. "My uncle trained me, so no one can beat me," Rafique bragged as he challenged everyone who was there.

One Saturday night while at the tavern, he decided to drink everyone's glass of beer. A young man who looked like a stranger reacted, "Rafique, I heard that you consider yourself a champion. Today will be your end!"

Rafique answered: "Who are you?" Those were the last words Rafique uttered, as he was knocked out when that young man punched him just once.

Rafique could not trust his eyes and ears when he saw nurses and doctors speaking. Rafique asked one of the nurses, "Where am I? How did I come here?" The nurse answered him, "You can answer for yourself, if you knew who you are!"

"I am Rafique," he answered, adding his step-mother's name. "But this answer does not help me understand where I am and how I came to be here," he complained. The nurse said, "Your answer is correct, but incomplete! You are Rafique, a patient. They brought you here yesterday because you were unconscious. We were told that you were punched."

One day Rafique heard a pastor preaching to other nearby patients in the hospital from 1 Peter 2:24. "He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed." The pastor asked the patients if they were willing to receive Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Rafique realized that if he did not change, his life would be ruined. Suddenly he raised his hand and asked the pastor to come and pray for him. He was one of the people that needed to make a change. "I have been hearing a similar message from my father all my life, but I was not taking it seriously. Now it is time. My parents did not know that my uncle trained me to beat up others, but I can see that someone else has defeated me."

Long before he realized it, Rafique was on a journey of grace that was filled with prevenient moments. Now at the age of twenty-five, he found himself in a hospital ward and all alone with Jesus. In that moment the saving grace of God met him in such a profound way that, to this day, has changed everything in his life.

He was a beginner. He knew nothing. While he had a basic understanding of some of the more popular Bible stories, he did not know much. He knew about Jesus, but did not really know Jesus yet. Rafique decided to make this Jesus-centred journey of grace his number one priority. He read his Bible. He went to every church service offered in his village church. He gave up obvious vices and worked to behave more like he imagined a Christian would.

However, it was not until he met Daniel that he truly understood what it meant to live for Christ. Daniel was a Christian and a local businessman, who loved the Lord so much. Rafique thought that all businessmen were crooks. He did not trust anyone who said they were in business. However, Daniel operated his business in an ethical manner. He seemed to be a godly man and he was married to one woman. They had two handsome boys. They looked like the perfect family that he desired to have. So he started to watch every move Daniel made.

At church Daniel was a respected man who honoured God with his life and wealth. He supported the work of God with his time, tithes, and offerings. He seemed to be a good family man who loved his wife and children. Rafique had the opportunity of visiting one of Daniel's business premises and found that even people outside the church respected this man.

Daniel was also a Sunday school teacher at church. Rafique began to follow him. He wanted to make sure that he did not live a double-standard. Daniel appeared holy, so he watched his every move. He watched him with his wife and children, he sat in his classes at church, and he associated with him at men's prayer breakfast. Daniel wasn't perfect, but there was something about him that was remarkably different. Rafique had tried to be a good Christian; however, the residue of his rebelliousness still lingered. How does a person become what he witnessed in the life of Daniel? The life of this man impressed Rafique so much that he decided to ask him an important question: "Why are you so different than other Christians?"

Daniel said that you could only live a life to please God on one condition. That is to seek holiness. Rafique told Daniel that he wanted to know more about this holiness he was talking about. In Rafique's mind, he thought only God is holy. Daniel took time to share with Rafique what God requires from us. That all of us can surrender our lives to God and allow him to take control. To practice holiness until it became our lifestyle.

Rafique began to learn the new way of life and also to unlearn some of the habits that he had acquired before knowing Christ. The church had a camp for the men's ministry. All the men in the church participated. It was at that camp that Rafique got the opportunity to draw closer to Daniel. They were assigned in the same room for accommodations.

They had fruitful conversations that lead Rafique to surrender completely to God one evening when they had a service at the camp. This was a turning point of his life. Rafique wanted God to cleanse him from all the bad things that he had done. Rafique asked God to fill him with his Holy Spirit. Then Rafique's life was truly transformed completely. The optimism of this grace and the promise of God's Spirit at work in his life became the prayer of Rafique's heart.

- *Perhaps you've been on this journey with Jesus for a while yet feel there are still parts of your life that feel like baggage and residue. What do you struggle with, even as a follower of Jesus, that you'd love to have victory over?*
- *Whom have you witnessed in your life who seems to embody a walk with Jesus that is out of the ordinary? What about their life do you admire? How do you witness holiness reflected in their life?*

## *The Difference a Couple of Months Can Make*

Near the end of John's Gospel, Peter went fishing. That's at the *end* of John. The end! You got that, right? Fishing was Peter's origin story—it's where he came from. Fishing was what Peter used to do before Jesus called him away from his nets to fish for people, and before Peter was caught up in the journey of grace. Peter walked closely with Jesus for years. So much in Peter's life had changed, yet after Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension, Peter was up against several internal and external circumstances that threatened to sabotage the future of his faithfulness. It's not that he wanted to come up short—it's just that the journey of grace took him far beyond what he had the resources to navigate.

That's the way of the journey. If you travel along the road with Jesus long enough, you will find yourself in any number of situations where you do not have the personal willpower or spiritual resources to persevere. You may try. It appears to be wired in us. We come up short and convince ourselves that if we just try a little harder, read more of the Bible, pray more fervently, volunteer for another ministry, we'll get through. However, what ends up happening more often than not is we find ourselves burned out and frustrated, stumbling and bumbling into attitudes, words, and actions that are out of alignment with the journey of grace.

It can be taxing and defeating. No matter the miracles all around us, we sort of throw up our hands and, like Peter, go back to what we knew before. We find ourselves slowly and steadily bending back toward those deeply rooted default settings in our lives—default settings that misalign our lives. For Peter, that's fishing. After enduring the agony of his own betrayal, the despair of his friend's crucifixion, and the inexplicable reality of the resurrection, Peter has had enough. He goes fishing, and he takes others with him.

Fewer than two months later, this same Peter will be standing in the wide-open market, loudly proclaiming the good news of Jesus in a way that pricks the hearts of thousands in attendance.

Wait, what? What did we miss? How does a person—who was a loyal follower of Jesus but who came to the end of his reserves a few weeks ago—become this courageous evangelist proclaiming life to those who attempted to kill the movement of Jesus? How is that possible?

What happens in the gap makes all the difference in the world. No amount of moral will or spiritual good intentions can make that significant of a shift. It's the gap that matters. We can lament the moments when we, like Peter, have gone fishing—gone back to our defaults. We love to celebrate the coming of God's Spirit at Pentecost, which is what seems to provoke Peter's boldness. However, it's the gap that matters. We can't get from fishing to faithfulness in a couple of months without what happens in the gap.

In chapter 4 of *Way, Truth, Life* Dr. Busic suggests that sanctifying grace is the remedy to the inward bend we experience toward the defaults in our lives—or, what I've called the baggage and residue of sin. Sanctifying grace is the work of God in us that empowers a faithfulness that exceeds our limitations. Sanctifying grace is the amazing gift of God that moves us toward a fuller picture of who we were created to be in Christ Jesus. Busic states, "God not only saves us, but he also transforms us. He accepts us where we are but loves us enough not to leave us there. He reimagines, remakes, and remodels."

***Think about a time in your life when the journey of faith took you past your spiritual reserves. No amount of moral strength or good intentions was enough. What was the situation, and in what ways did that situation reveal to you a deeper need for God?***

## *You Don't Get There Overnight*

Sanctification isn't a magic trick that God suddenly pulls off. Just as God demonstrates throughout the whole of the biblical story, God cooperates with humanity in the coming to fruition of God's purposes. God alone sanctifies, but partnership in the gap sets the stage for sanctification.

So what is the gap? For Peter, the gap is the upper room. In Acts 1, weeks after Jesus rescued Peter from the fishing boat (*again*), Jesus declares that Peter and the others will bear witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Then Jesus puts them in timeout. In my paraphrase, Jesus says, *Before you go off on your own, thinking you can do now what you were incapable of doing before, go and wait.* So, it's off to the upper room for nearly ten days, and that is where Peter experiences the work that's done in the gap between knowing what we've been called and created for and knowing the limitations of our own resources.

Sanctifying grace is the outcome of the upper room, but the work of the upper room is costly. In the gap Peter is forced to come face to face with his own weakness, with the magnitude of his purpose and the deficit of his capacity. The gift of sanctification often results from a prolonged time of honesty and self-reflection. For Peter, and for us, the work of the gap might look like confronting our past, present, and/or future.



## 1. Coming to Terms with Our Past

The past has often left a mark. From the past we amass baggage, residue, wounds, and default settings. An honest movement toward sanctifying grace means recognizing and consecrating (turning over to God) where we've been and what got us there so we don't remain stuck. I've often stated that the fruit of sanctification is recognized when a person no longer blames everyone and everything else for their sin. It's not that they aren't aware of conditions that might have contributed, but it's simply that they recognize their responsibility to own their own role.

***Take a few minutes to write down on a piece of paper, in the cover of your Bible, or make a note in your phone about some of the elements of your past that might be hindering your journey of grace.***

## 2. Coming to Terms with Our Present

This is a loaded part of the self-reflection. Coming to terms with our present means looking at our shame, guilt, ego, and arrogance. It's reckoning with our preferences, demands, prejudices, and biases. It's owning our fears and self-deceit. Coming to terms with our present means identifying our reluctance to embrace the fullness of God's work in our lives and surrendering those reluctances. Coming to terms with our present means renouncing our allegiances to ideologies, political platforms, and idolatries that run counter to God's kingdom at work in our lives.

***Take a few minutes to write down on a piece of paper, in the cover of your Bible, or make a note in your phone about some of the elements of your present that might be hindering your journey of grace.***

## 3. Coming to Terms with Our Future

For many of us, when we became Jesus followers, we sought to hand over our stories to Jesus for the sake of redemption. Unfortunately, we kept the pen—you know, just in case we wanted to write a few of our own chapters. The work in the gap means we hand over the pen to Jesus, and he scripts our story and every line that follows. We are willing to enter the kind of relationship with God where we take our cues from him. It's a posture of malleability, willingly formed and transformed in an ongoing manner. Jesus becomes not only the Redeemer of our story but also the Lord of what comes next.

***Take a few minutes to write down on a piece of paper, in the cover of your Bible, or make a note in your phone about some of the elements of your future that might be hindering your journey of grace.***

There is a lot of work done in the gap. The gap sets the stage for the sanctifying grace of God to meet us in a profound way, transforming who we've been into a truer picture of who we were created to be. Like Dr. Busic states in *Way, Truth, Life*: "Simply put, the world apart from God deforms and malforms people. God reforms and transforms."

- *As you look at the work that's done in the gap between knowing what we've been called and created for and knowing the limitations of our own resources, which areas will require for you the most self-reflection?*
- *Which areas of your life are you most apt to cling to? What are you being called to consecrate to God?*

### *Better Caught than Taught—though Teaching Doesn't Hurt*

In the life of Daniel and others like him, Rafique witnessed the Christian faith lived out in radically compelling ways. He knew the Sunday-morning-once-a-week faith just wouldn't make it for him. Rafique knew he needed this "holiness" and "sanctification" that Daniel talked about with such passion. Rafique was entering the gap, where Daniel stood with him. For months, Daniel spent a couple of hours each week discipling Rafique, teaching him, and challenging him on what he needed to consecrate to God.

In those extended times of conversation, prayer, and learning, Rafique started to understand the substance of the life Daniel was living. It was a substance that would be translated to his life through the work of the Holy Spirit and one for which Rafique was eternally grateful. It is true that everybody needs a "Daniel" in their life.

## CLOSING

Take time to share prayer requests, and then use your closing prayer to ask God to send mediators of grace to the life of each person in your group, or to prepare them to become mediators of grace for someone else.

# WEEK 6: GRACE REQUIRES PRACTICE

**(WAY, TRUTH, LIFE CHAPTER 5)**

## DISCUSSION OPENER

Last week we challenged our groups to go home and spend the week working on their 3-minute testimonies. Start this session by asking if two or three volunteers might be willing to share what they worked on from last week.

After the testimonies, move into a time of reflection.

*Growing up as a child, what were some regular routines or family practices that shaped your life? Did you have a nightly routine? What about the holidays? Were there certain chores you had to do? Did your parents have you tithing your allowance?*

What impact did those practices have in shaping your life?

## SCRIPTURE

Read Acts 2:42–47 together.

## LESSON/DISCUSSION OUTLINE

### The Power of Couples Fellowship

I came to faith in Jesus Christ when I was 36 years old. The moment I said yes to Christ I felt relieved because I laid all my difficulties before Christ and I thought that was all. I did not realize that I needed to find a group in the community or at church so that I would find time to be in the presence of God. It has not been as easy as I thought it would be—not until the

time I started attending Couples Fellowship with my wife. It was at the Couples Fellowship where I began to draw near to Jesus and started feeling and seeing the change in my life. I began to learn more and more about the grace that purifies us and makes us holy. It was there that I had the moments of encounter with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Through that journey, I became familiar with my weakness and uncertainty, and I was aware of the damage my previous uncontrollable behaviors had caused. I knew I needed more. I didn't need to substitute the grace of God by working for holiness. I simply wanted to ensure that I was living in a way that was most suitable to sustain that grace in my life. During this time our church started a Couples Fellowship where couples from the community are invited to gather for building friendships and to encourage one another.

The purpose of the Couples Fellowship is to help people find the way to come out of their "hurts, habits, and worries" in pursuit of discovering wholeness and healing in Christ. I was a recovering alcoholic, so this program looked like a good fit for me because it helped me to replace alcohol with a juice drink. Each time I felt thirsty for alcohol I would kneel and pray, then take a bottle of juice and drink. I spent nearly a year journeying through a close group of brothers and sisters, doing the deep work of the humbling work of confession, and the hopeful work of clinging to the ongoing grace of God at work in my life. Couples Fellowship became a tool that was a key in my journey, and became a kind of a second home.

I felt at home when I traveled with the people from Couples Fellowship through this journey of grace. Why? Because it has led me to commit myself openly to the faith of the restoration of my life. Christ gave me a fresh grasp of his promises, new assurance, and the truth of His Word. However, it helped me to always feel fresh, to be realistic, and to be real in my Christian faith. Furthermore, it was holistic ministry. There is no magic formula to Couples Fellowship. What makes Couples Fellowship such a key part of so many lives is that it provides predictable, dependable steps and practices, varying levels of accountability, transparency without judgment, and essential assurance that people are pulling for you.

You come to know that you don't have to be defined and controlled by hurts, habits, and worries. There are celebrations of victory over compulsive and impulsive behaviors. There are testimonies of encouragement from people "just like you." At the meetings I've attended, there is no presumption, legalism, shaming, or judgment. There is no superficial holiness or pretending to be something we aren't. Everyone is for everyone else. At those meetings, I've witnessed the grace of Jesus pull from the gutters the most wrecked lives and sanctify what the world might call the most unsalvageable sinners.

I remember being at a meeting shortly before leaving my last pastorate. And as I sat in that meeting worshiping, applauding, standing, and naming my vulnerability, sharing a meal, and being held accountable by these brothers and sisters in Christ, I thought, *Why isn't the rest of the church more like this?* Couples Fellowship has at times reflected the church more to me than what we might traditionally call the church. I've found that not only does Couples

Fellowship prepare a person for heaven, but it also equips them to live a full and whole life here on earth, with the necessary grace to sustain that journey for the long struggle.

- *What keeps the church from being a place that can be open, vulnerable, and real?*
- *Why might people who speak so highly about the sanctifying grace of God that makes us holy have such a difficult time speaking about the sustaining grace necessary to keep us holy?*
- *Why do we struggle to name and confess our dependence and vulnerability?*

## *Hanging Too Much on Too Little (Focusing on Nonessentials)*

Sanctification is not a destination of arrival but a facilitator for a compelling journey. Though there is great power in the facilitator, the journey requires that we nurture what began in the life of the believer through the work of the Holy Spirit. We need to sustain the movement of grace in and through our lives. If it ever grows static, we will end in despair. Though displaced from our hearts through the Spirit of God, if left untended, the soil of our hearts can again produce the same toxins that once contaminated our lives and damaged our witness.

We need to practice nurturing grace in order to foster an environment where we can thrive through the Holy Spirit. But how do we nurture grace? What sustains us? It often depends on whom you listen to. Many are looking for the key, the answer, the action that will be enough. We want to reduce the Christian faith to “a thing” that will maintain our holiness.

If you listen to some, it’s about an **experience of God**. We reduce our journey of holiness to an emotional experience often felt in corporate worship gatherings. Many will hang their hat on the altar, thinking that’s where holiness is found and maintained. In no way do I want to diminish the importance of epic moments at the altar (which I love), but it can feel as though we are asking an experience at an altar to carry more weight than it should.

For others, it’s about **behaviors**: the Holy Spirit *made* us holy, but the rules will *keep* us holy. We live in perpetual fear of the world around us and the kind of contamination it can cause. We avoid the world. We build around our Christian lives a set of boundary markers, regulations, codes, and rules to protect us from the terrible things that the world would throw at us. It might appear to some that, though we are victorious in our sanctification over sin, we have also developed an autoimmune deficiency that’s made us susceptible to sin’s infection. Legalism is not only incapable of sustaining holiness in our lives, but it also has a tendency of stripping from our lives the very grace we need.

For still others, we are nothing more than walking brains. Life is reduced to **Intelligence**—what I think, what I believe, and what I know. Knowing, holding onto, and preserving the truth is what makes us holy. Too often that turns holiness into a set of propositional truths. We believe certain fundamental truths about God, about Jesus, about the Bible, about the end times, etc.

As long as we adhere to the right set of beliefs, that knowledge will sustain us on the right path. The problem for the walking brain is that my body and my mind don't always agree. I can think a lot of things and do the exact opposite.

Finally, for others, it's about **spirituality**. Holiness is maintained as we pray more, fast more, read and study our Bible more, have perfect attendance at church, volunteer for every ministry, go on prayer retreats, attend conferences, and represent our church at every denominational activity. We devalue what we do in our day-to-day lives, whether it's our jobs or our time with our families, only valuing the spiritual side of our lives. Everything else gets in the way of our spirituality. We know nothing of rest, joy, or the beautifully holy collisions of grace with the ordinary in our day-to-day existence.

- *Which of these four are you most likely to trust in your life to keep you holy and on the straight-and-narrow path with Jesus?*
- *In what ways have these four failed to deliver to you the desired results? Why do you think that is?*

In the end, all four of these suffer from two fatal flaws that fail to sustain holiness of character, attitude, temperament, relationships, and witness.

First, we often focus on each of these as individuals instead of as members of a community. We go at it alone. We fail to recognize the essential accountability of community.

Second, we try to hang too much weight on a single component, failing to recognize that none of these alone can sustain the entire weight of our lives.

## *No Simple Reductions*

I hesitated to include this week's scripture. Acts 2:42–47 as it is well known. It is often used as a prescription of what the church should do or claimed as the evangelistic hope of a church who, if they get it right, will experience God adding three thousand to their number. I mean, who doesn't want to grow like the church in Acts, as long as the conditions of the church in Acts (persecutions, killings, diaspora, etc.) don't follow—right?

However, I couldn't avoid the scripture because I think there is more happening here than meets the eye. I think what this text contains is a glimpse into why Couples-Fellowship felt like such a home to me and why more of the church doesn't look like what I experience through Couples Fellowship.

In chapter 5 of *Way, Truth, Life*, Dr. Busic does a masterful job of refusing reductionism. He recognizes throughout the chapter that to nurture an environment conducive to the ongoing work of grace in our lives, that environment must be holistic. We aren't individualists made up primarily of emotions, behaviors, mind, or spirit. We are who we are as a part of a body of

believers who live out the Christian life in such a way as to shape and form the whole of our lives. This is the brilliance of Acts 2:42–47.

The early church—this church shaped and defined by this Pentecost moment, an experience of power coming from on high that radically transformed their lives—seemingly understood that they needed to organize themselves into environments for the ongoing nurture of the gift of grace. That’s what we find in this passage. It is a holistic approach to life *in community* that nurtures grace and cultivates lives conducive to the reception of that grace.

### 1. *They Are Together*

The Christian life is never to be lived in isolation, and holiness can never be nurtured through individualism. The journey of grace *always* presupposes a community of people who together covenant to be open, vulnerable, and real with one another. Community is a form of accountability. We can never substitute a worship gathering for meaningful forms of being in community with one another.

### 2. *They Experience God Together*

As this community came together in sincerity and vulnerability, there were moments when God would move in transformative ways. They were “filled with awe at many wonders.” God doesn’t withhold an experience of awe. However, he does refuse to allow us to become addicted to experiences. He longs for intimacy—between us and God *and also* between us and one another. He’s not into parlor tricks and razzle dazzle.

### 3. *They Meet Regularly Together*

Nurturing grace isn’t haphazard or random. We are creatures of routine and rhythm. Too often people assume that a little dose of God every once in a while, will be enough. It isn’t. They devoted themselves to meeting regularly, seemingly understanding that we need to regularly be together for the sake of encouragement, challenge, accountability, and celebration.

### 4. *They Are Vulnerable Together*

They had everything in common. This meant they didn’t hold back from one another. They lived their lives before one another and didn’t mind that their lives were being examined by those who loved and cared deeply for them. Is this risky? Most definitely! However, that risk in its most natural form is often the pathway toward a life freed from the barriers we construct and the pretending we often do.

## 5. They Practice the Faith Together

As Dr. Busic notes, there are means of grace that are formative in the lives of believers. These means of grace—prayer, breaking bread, worshiping together, and more—are vital activities for those who have committed to live out the Jesus journey.

## 6. They Learn Together

The scripture says that they devote themselves to the “apostles’ teaching.” We can assume that the teaching is often a reflection on what we call the Old Testament, the stories of Jesus we call the Gospels, and the content of what will later come to be some of the letters of the New Testament. In short, they studied together the story of God, a story that wasn’t merely informative but formative. They were being shaped by the teaching to live their lives in accordance with the teaching.

## 7. They Witness Together

Evangelism isn’t an *activity* of the church. It’s the natural expression of a church community that lives out the grace of God in community day in and day out. Their lives reflect to others the restorative work of God. They embody what others long for.

It’s not *one* of these activities alone that sustains the grace among the early Christians. It is the disciplined inner-weaving of *all* of these practices, experienced in and through community, that sustains the grace among them. There is no secret key to be extracted from the list, just as there is no one single compartment of our lives today that holds the key to our own ongoing holiness.

The whole of who I am is caught up in the whole of who we are as we together live out the whole of the means of grace that nurture grace’s ongoing impact in our lives.

***Which of these areas stand out most in your life as lacking? Are you experiencing a sense of true community? What steps can you begin to take right now to change what is lacking?***

## *It’s Not Perfect but It’s Home*

I don’t want to paint an idealistic picture of Couples Fellowship. It’s open, vulnerable, real, and often messy. That’s what true spiritual community is. That’s what happens when people break down their barriers and let go of their presumption. When people get real, grace looks messy. People stumble. People betray. People lash out. People disappear when they get frightened. But the Couples Fellowship—continues to gather. They continue to meet. They continue to risk. They continue to grow. They continue to learn. They continue to forgive. They



continue to restore. They know that—although they may have lived in harmonious relationship for 3 or 5 or even 10 years—they need to be careful of overconfidence in how firmly they stand, lest they fall. In that humility, dependence, and vulnerability I find my home. I find a reflection of what sustaining grace looks like in the holy life. And I learned confession: *We continue to take personal inventory and, when we were wrong, promptly admit it.*

Couples Fellowship helped me realize I'll never be done or finished. I'll never *arrive*. I'm always a work in progress. They hold me accountable to faithful reflection and faithful action to ensure that the soil of my heart remains fertile to the faithfulness of God's grace running through my life.

## CLOSING

Take time to share prayer requests, and then use your closing prayer to ask God to infuse each participant with a sense of commitment to a community—if not *this* community, then one elsewhere—that can hold them accountable to the continued practice of receiving grace in their lives on an ongoing basis.

# WEEK 7: GRACE NEVER ABANDONS US

*(WAY, TRUTH, LIFE CHAPTER 6)*

## DISCUSSION OPENER

We've arrived at the end of this series of lessons together, but it will be important this week for you to ensure that your group understands the journey of grace is not over! This week things have the potential to become emotionally vulnerable and raw. You've spent the last few weeks getting to know one another, sharing, and growing together. This week will explore some of the more broken areas of our lives. Please ensure your group knows they need only share what they are comfortable with. Affirm this group as a sacred, safe space where everything shared remains confidential.

1. Read Psalm 139 out loud (perhaps breaking it up so that various people read different parts).
2. Affirm to them that God is there with you.
3. Take time to cover the session in prayer. Perhaps have several people pray, with someone closing out in prayer.

## SCRIPTURE

Read 2 Corinthians 12:6–10 together.

## LESSON/DISCUSSION OUTLINE

"He's coming to Sunday school with me next week."  
She stood in front of me with an expression on her face that indicated competing emotions. I'd known her for a few years at this point. She'd consistently been part of my Sunday school class since I'd taken over. She'd worked tirelessly alongside me in compassionate ministry. I'd

been intimately connected to her family through the years, even officiating her daughter's wedding. But her expression was new to me.

"My dad—he's coming to Sunday school with me next week." Throughout our years together, she'd shared bits and pieces of her story with me. I knew that her home life as a child had been particularly complicated. I knew that somewhere along life's journey, she'd been damaged. I also knew that the empathy and compassion, which made her perfect for the work she did in and out of the church, showed from an awareness of brokenness that ran deep. I also knew that she took her journey with Jesus seriously. It had been the very element of her life that had sustained her throughout the many ups and downs of life.

But as we stood there and talked, her complicated expression became clearer. This was the moment that she dug around in the luggage of her past and began showing me some of the broken articles she'd been carrying with her. Her home life hadn't been merely "complicated." It had been agonizing. She grew up in a home with a father from a generation that struggled to articulate love and affirmation. In fact, much of her life had been the opposite. She'd grown up on the blunt force side of verbal, emotional, and sometimes physical abuse. She'd been neglected and uncared for by the man who was supposed to be her protector.

She'd carried this pain throughout much of her life. She often said to me that if it had not been for the grace of Jesus and the steadfast presence of the Father's love through the Spirit of God, she would have come unhinged. She would have been unable to hold life together. Grace had held her together.

And now he was coming to Sunday school. That expression was a mixture of utter spiritual excitement and the rawness of the pain she still felt from his neglect. He'd never been one for church or religion. However, recently he'd become ill. Having lived the life of a difficult curmudgeon, he had few people in his life who could or would step up to help him—except my friend.

Despite the agony of the memories of abuse, the years of neglect and disconnect, and the lack of care and affirmation, she was deeply aware that the call of God was upon her life. She knew that the same grace that had reached out to her in her misery, in her pain, in her rebellion, was the same grace now reaching out to her father through her. In a way that can only be explained as an act of God, she and her husband decided to make space for her father to move into their home and live with them until he reached the point they could no longer care for him.

And now, not only had agony moved into their home once again, but he was also coming to Sunday school. For the next several months, I watched a man be cared for tenderly and become part of our class on the invitation of someone he'd wounded deeply. Each time we

talked, her conviction was clear. It was the all-sufficient grace of God that kept her amid the challenges of extending to a man the same grace that had been extended to her.

**As much as you are comfortable, name a season of your life when you were keenly aware that it was the sufficient grace of God alone that kept you together. In what ways did you experience that grace?**

## The Ups and Downs of Life

You know what I love every time we sit around the table, under the tree, or at the fireplace and we listen to the stories that our parents or grandparents tells us? It's the resolution of the story, the ending part because there is always a happy ending.

The estranged couple is reunited. The villains are vanquished. The person either recovers from their sickness, or the family moves on, smiles, and appears to overcome their grief. The drug addict gets clean. The court ends, the ruling in favor of the innocent. Of course, I know there are exceptions—but unresolved fictional endings are dissatisfying to me. I want to walk away knowing that all has been made right.

How often are we tempted to embrace that same need for resolution as part of our journey of faith? We are captivated by the “once was but now am” stories. We love the testimonies of the addict touched by grace, filled with the Spirit, who walks away from their drug of choice never to touch it again. We love the healing stories about the rare cancer that was no longer there when the doctors went in to operate. We are inspired by those stories of couples who have rebuilt their marriages in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, all because of the grace of God. And we should. We should celebrate those stories. We should celebrate with those who have been touched by grace in such definitive ways.

But not all stories are resolved. Faith is often worked out against the ups and downs of our lives. Grace meets us amid the ebb and flow of joy and sorrow, hope and brokenness. The ups and downs of life can leave deeply imprinted marks on our souls. Some damage runs deep. Some disappointment threatens to haunt us. Some addictions aren't overcome in an instant but require the one-day-at-a-time commitment to recovery, working the steps, leaning on the sufficient grace of God moment by moment and step by step. Sometimes the person we prayed for still dies. Sometimes the innocent person doesn't get justice. Sometimes that person we relied on lets us down.

None of this signals an absence of God or a failure of faith. We live in a world that is particularly prone to uncertainty, brokenness, and tragedy. However, God's grace is present even, and maybe especially, when the stories aren't resolved. God's sufficient grace moves in and through our struggles, sorrow, and suffering. Grace doesn't leave us lying as a casualty or carnage on the waste piles of dashed dreams and shattered hope. As agony attempts to

make it home with us, grace is already there. Grace isn't afraid of agony. Grace pulls up a chair and sets the ground rules. Grace reminds agony that, though it has a place in the home, it will not wreck the home. It will not define the home. It will be respected as a sign of our fragility and serve as the backdrop against which God's strength is made perfect in our weakness.

**In what ways does the belief in and embrace of a grace that works amid the unfinished, complicated, and continuously broken elements of our lives bring you comfort?**

## What Grace Does

I would never want to dismiss the radical moments of God's intervention in the lives of the broken and battered, the wounded and weary. I would never want to flippantly dismiss those instances of amazing grace that radically transform a person or a situation. However, I also believe it is important that we understand what grace does and doesn't do amid unresolved stories and complicated spaces in our lives. First, let's take a look at what grace doesn't do.

### 1. Grace Doesn't Remove the Memories

I've often heard people say, "Forgive and forget." Wouldn't that be great? Wouldn't it be great if we could just forget the damage we've done or the damage that's been done to us? I assume what people mean is that occasionally there are instances in our lives that aren't life-altering or deeply significant and that, once we've worked through them or forgiven the person, we have trouble calling to mind what it was even about.

However, there are also experiences in our lives that are so damaging and painful, so chronic or cataclysmic, that forgetting isn't possible or often advisable. Grace doesn't remove the memories.

### 2. Grace Doesn't Exempt Us from the Damage

The ups and downs of life will leave a mark. It would be great if a trip to the altar on a Sunday morning could render the damage we've experienced null and void. For some it does—at least to some degree. For others, it's more complicated. Those wounds run deep. The damage has warped our sense of identity. The baggage we carry comes with long straps, and we tend to drag it around for a while. There is often remaining evidence from the damage and an awareness to the sensitivity of our pain. Grace doesn't exempt us from the lasting impact of our pain.

### 3. Grace Doesn't Extract the Sorrow

Grace isn't a scalpel that cuts into the core of our soul, removing from us our grief and sorrow. Loss lingers, at times, like an uninvited houseguest. Some losses are so devastating that they can't be ignored. We can't evade or avoid. It's there. It demands to be acknowledged, named, and respected. Well-meaning advice from good-hearted Christians who seek to rush the process because of God's grace are looking for a story-like resolution for a situation that might look more like a long-lasting series. Claiming the grace of God doesn't mean we casually move on from the soul-wrenching pain we've experienced.

### 4. Grace Doesn't Resolve Our Fragility

Grace doesn't make us invincible. The grace of holiness—the sanctifying work of the Spirit—still operates in jars of clay. We are, from our earliest formation in Genesis 2, fragile like dust. Paul has stated, "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Corinthians 10:12). Without the work of the sustaining grace discussed in chapter 5 of Way, Truth, Life, we are prone to fickle hearts, fragile character, and failing bodies. Grace doesn't resolve our fragility.

Many of us in life have faced misunderstandings about what grace should do in our lives. When we've failed to overcome tragedy, grief, or our own emotional fragility, a sense of shame can set in. We can feel as though we aren't enough. Which misunderstanding about grace does this list about what grace doesn't do help you leave behind?

## SO, WHAT DOES GRACE DO?

### 1. Grace Reframes Our Stories

As mentioned above, grace doesn't remove our memories, but the grace of God moves through our memories so we can reframe our stories. Grace helps us to see our experiences in the light of God's enduring favor, unyielding presence, and steadfast love. Grace helps us no longer be defined by wrongs we've committed or those committed against us but, instead, by the faithful working of God in and through each of those wrongs. We may not forget; however, grace enables us to remember and retell our memories differently.

### 2. Grace Works in the Cracks

Though we aren't exempt from damage, that damage need not destroy us. God has consistently demonstrated throughout Scripture the profound capacity to shine light through the cracks and crevices of our lives left by the damage. It's often out of the damage that our

life's passion flows. God's grace has a profound capacity to connect our life's vocation with the areas of our lives we are most prone to want to ignore. God's grace cultivates empathy, patience, and humility that enable us to walk through the pain and wounding of others.

### 3. Grace Deepens Intimacy

Sorrow isn't the absence of God—it's the invitation of God into a deepened intimacy. Grace draws us into the tenderness of God's embrace. Grace takes its time with us. It sits with us in those moments we feel like we can't carry on. It slips underneath us to catch us when we feel as though we are letting go of the end of the rope we can barely hold onto. Grace doesn't hurry us toward the destination of our healing but journeys with us into the depth of our dependence on God. Grace gets us out of bed in the morning, redeems our day, and holds us as we weep at night. Grace is there.

### 4. Grace Reveals Its Source

Instead of clinging to the illusion of invincibility, we might begin to recognize, as Paul recognizes, that each of our weaknesses is revelatory of the faithful strength and work of God in our lives. God has opted to partner with a fragile humanity in pursuit of God's overarching redemptive purposes. Our fragility isn't a hindrance to those purposes but the terrain through which God moves. When we live and act in acknowledgment of our fragility, we do so pointing to the One who makes that living and acting possible. The good we do is revelatory of the grace and goodness of the One who does it through us.

Grace is sufficient. Dr. Busic states in *Way, Truth, Life*, "Sufficient grace is the Lord's way of saying, *When you come to the end of your human strength, I will give you my supernatural strength. When your energy runs out, my energy will be made alive in you. When you cannot go any farther, I will pick you up and carry you. Rest in my arms for a while.*" This grace comes as gift. This grace is enough. Grace is a reminder that living in the grip of God's grace means God is always enough.

**Reflecting on this list of what grace does, which element stands out to you, comforts you, or empowers you—and why?**

### Living in the Grip of Grace

After months of caring for and tending to her father, it came time for my friend to move her father to a hospital that could more adequately provide for his needs. It would have been easy

for her to say, “I’ve done my duty. I’ve been a good caretaker. I’ve been faithful to Jesus. Now someone else can take care of him.”

However, grace didn’t work that way in her life. Though agony had moved in, grace was already leading her life. Grace had enabled her to reframe her story, speaking of the strength of character and resilience as a result of the pain she’d endured. Grace had reminded her that her empathy toward the broken was the result of the brokenness she’d endured. Grace had deepened the intimacy she had with God, seeing God as the steadfast, faithful, loving, affirming Father her earthly dad couldn’t provide. Now, grace was again revealing its source.

After taking him to the hospital, she went above and beyond the call of what the world expected from her but was directly in line with what God’s all-sufficient grace was inviting her toward. She got a job at the hospital so she could be close to her dad. As often as he was able, she brought him to church, ate with him, and—even in the lack of affirmation cared for her father. She was living in the grip of grace. She was living in the sufficiency of God’s grace that is our strength in our weakness.

## CLOSING

As you bring the group to a close, take a few moments to offer opportunities for people to share what living in the grip of grace looks like for them. Once people have shared, give thanks to the Lord and offer closing prayers.