

Message: Grace and Our Soul¹

Are you tired this morning?

Some of you are tired physically. You had a long week at work or you were working on your To Do list yesterday. Maybe you caught up on your weekend outdoor activities. Or you stayed up late or got up early or couldn't sleep. This is weariness of the body.

Some of you are tired mentally. You were bombarded all week with information. Or you have lots of things – screens, people and other things, competing for your attention. Maybe you're worried about your unpaid bills or that doctor's visit or how you'll find time to balance work and family. Most likely you're emotionally on the edge. Trying to hold emotions down is a lot like trying to hold a beach ball underwater. This is weariness of the mind.

There is a kind of fatigue that attacks our will. There are so many decisions we have to make on a daily basis:

- What clothes to wear to give a good impression,
- What foods give us pleasure (& are healthy – another decision!),
- What tasks at work will bring us the most success,
- Which entertainment options make us the most happy,
- Which people we dare to disappoint,
- Which events we'll attend – or not, and so on.

Sometimes the options facing us are overwhelming. For example, have you seen the length of the menu at the Cheesecake Factory? Our will grows weary with so many choices.

There's a deeper fatigue that can come on us: soul-fatigue.

That's when the weariness of our body, mind and will combine. When that happens, the difficulty of life overwhelms us. We feel separated: separated from God, separated from ourselves and others. We feel like the things we love most about life and creation are at a distance.

¹ Some material drawn from John Ortberg, *Soulkeeping*, Zondervan, 2014

What we need is rest. That’s really hard for some of us. It’s where God’s grace comes in. Grace is what restores our soul and gives us rest. Grace refreshes our body, mind and will. We find it when we regularly connect to God. When we connect to God’s Spirit, our soul is connected to the source of life. That’s how our batteries are recharged. Our mental and physical batteries are recharged. Our will finds rest.

Jesus shows us the way. Jesus regularly engaged in practices that allowed God’s grace to refresh his spirit:

- ***Jesus prayed***, sometimes all night long (Luke 6:12)
- ***Jesus had a circle of close friends***: twelve who went through every aspect of life with him (Luke 6:13-16)
- ***Jesus regularly worshipped with others*** at synagogue (Matthew 4:23, 9:35, 12:9)
- ***Jesus fed his mind with Scripture*** (Matthew 22:29, 26:54; Mark 12:10; Luke 24:27)
- ***Jesus took long walks and enjoyed God’s creation*** (Matthew 4:18; Mark 11:20; John 9:1)
- ***Jesus welcomed little children*** (Mark 9:36)
- ***Jesus enjoyed partying with non-religious people*** (Matthew 11:19)

You may not have thought about that last one. It actually gave rise to rumors about Jesus. He was accused of being “*a glutton and a drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.*” Do you know what he said? “*...wisdom is proved to be right by her works*” (Matthew 11:19). We need time to rest and be refreshed.

A common problem today is that people think of spiritual practices as obligations that will actually drain them. There are times when we need to be humble, give generously or hold our tongue. These are things the selfish, sinful side of us resists. What we really need is spiritual practices that connect us to God’s grace and energy and joy.

What is that for you? It might be going to the ocean, listening to great music, being with life-giving friends, taking a long walk or hike. Best of all is doing that with Jesus, being with God.

The test of a good, invigorating spiritual practice is this: does it fill you with grace for life? There are a lot of practices, which is good because we're gifted in different ways, given different personalities and we have different skills and interests.

Spiritual practices are meant to be easy and energizing.

They revitalize us. That's good, because the challenges of serving in ministry will be hard. Working with other people and those in need is stressful at times. The joy of being in the presence of the Lord gives life and fills us with joy and peace, no matter how difficult the situation or circumstance may be.

That's how grace works. Grace is the means God uses to work in the world and in the lives of all seven billion people on Earth. Grace moves in a cycle, flowing like a stream. Here are three ways God's grace flows.

Acceptance

Jesus was loved by his parents, Mary and Joseph. He had friends and family. Before Jesus began his public ministry, he was baptized. As Jesus came up out of the water, a voice spoke from heaven: *“You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness”* (Mark 1:11).

For Jesus, identity and acceptance came before achievement and ministry. This is a joy no one can take away. You can't earn acceptance. It's something we can choose to receive – or not.

It's like your birthday. We celebrate you on that special day. But it's a day where your role gets no credit at all. You were never any less weak, slow, dumb, coordinated, skinny, under developed or of a higher nuisance than on the day you were born. Did you know that if you have 100 birthdays you get a card from the President? What did you do? Not to be crass: you didn't die. That's grace.

We forget that the work of our own lives is a gift from God.

Jesus never forgot. We need to depend on God's acceptance. We'll face human rejection, just like he did. Knowing God loves us shapes our identity and assures us of our value as God's child.

Sustenance

One day, Jesus taught a difficult lesson (John 6:35-60).

His followers were grumbling and complaining about it. So Jesus gathered them and said, *“Does this offend you? ... the Spirit is the one who gives life and the flesh doesn’t help at all. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life. Yet some of you don’t believe”* (vv61-63).

Jesus knew some would turn away.

Then Jesus asked the twelve, *“Do you also want to leave?”* (v67).

Peter said, *“Lord, where would we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are God’s holy one”* (vv68-69).

Grace that sustains us gives life. When grace flows into us this way, we’re inspired and revitalized, even when things are difficult. All parts of our soul crave rest. Our will needs to be free from making major decisions, our mind needs to time to play, our body needs sleep and food. Yet finding rest can seem counter-intuitive at times.

For example, one therapist noted that some dual-career couples tend to fight over trivial things every evening. The therapist advised the couples to go home earlier. That seems to make little sense: why have more time to fight? But it was the long hours at work that were draining them. They had nothing left to overlook their spouses’ habits so they interpreted comments in a negative way. They literally gave it all at the office. With rest, their relationships were restored.

Our soul wasn’t made to run on empty. Watch for the warning signs – impatience, indecision, cravings and impulses, poor judgment, less courage or a focus on the short-term. It’s okay to be busy, but being hurried – preoccupied, is unhealthy.

The cure is simple: rest. Take a walk, call or visit friends, listen to good music, go to a party. Let God’s grace refill your soul.

Significance

Jesus knew who he was. He was clear about the significance of his life. He described it in his great “I am” statements. Jesus said:

“I am. Don’t be afraid” (John 6:20)

“I am the bread of life” (John 6:48)

“I am the way” (John 14:6)

“I am the vine” (John 15:1)

“I am the Good Shepherd” (John 10:11)

Jesus knew who we are. He was clear about our significance. He describes us in a series of “you are” statements, many from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said:

“You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14)

“You are salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13)

“You cannot be hidden” (Matthew 5:14)

“You are my friends” (John 15:14)

The third movement of grace isn’t just grace flowing into us.

It’s grace flowing through us and out into others for their sake. This is the purpose of grace. It doesn’t depend on performance or money or power or reputation.

Significance is about who we are before it’s about what we do.

What is the core part of you that God made you to be? If you aren’t clear, ask some people who know you well to describe why they think God put you on earth. That’s your value, your significance.

This cycle of grace gives us the ability to achieve what God has made us to be. Dallas Willard makes an interesting statement:

“Your eternal destiny is not cosmic retirement. It’s to be part of a tremendously creative project, under imaginably splendid leadership, on an inconceivably vast scale, with every-increasing cycles of fruitfulness and enjoyment. That’s the prophetic vision which our ‘eye has not seen and ear not heard.’”²

² *Ibid*, p. 22

As we end of this part of our spiritual journey, I pray that you have discovered something that helps to restore your soul. God’s grace blesses us each and every day. It’s just that we usually aren’t paying attention to how God is present. And, even if we are, we often aren’t able to accept and receive God’s grace in the way God wants us to.

Peace, joy and contentment flow from those moments when we seek and find God’s presence, surrendering our soul to God. Learning to live this way has a great impact on who we become and how we’re in relationship with others.

For example, *“If you ask people who don’t believe in God why they don’t, the number one reason will be suffering. If you ask people who believe in God when they grew most spiritually, the number one answer will be suffering.”*³ God works through things that challenge us to change us and make us better.

Even if we feel like we’re living in darkness and God is absent, there’s hope. A 14th century Spanish monk nicknamed “John of the Cross” wrote, *“God is not content to leave us in our weakness, and for this reason God takes us into dark nights. God gives us dry times. No soul will ever grow deep in the spiritual life unless God works passively in that soul ... [through absence].”*⁴ This isn’t about casual faith.

Our churches are practical places. We generally tell people the answer to any spiritual problem is more: more prayer, more serving, more giving, more trying.

John of the Cross says the opposite. When our soul has begun to enjoy the benefits of spiritual life and then has them taken away, it gets bitter or angry or frustrated. The honeymoon of new faith is over. We make resolutions to be more spiritual. Those resolutions fail.

What we need to be is more patient. We need to wait on God. We need to learn spiritual meekness and humility. We hold on. We ask for help. We rest. We ask someone else to pray if we can’t. We let go of our need to hurry through. You can’t run in the dark.

³ *Ibid*, p. 179

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 182-3

We keep in mind that God is eternal. Things that are deeply spiritual and meaningful take time to change, develop and grow. Most of all, we learn accept who we are: God’s children, redeemed by the love of Jesus.

That’s powerful as a redeemed soul can be many things. They can:

- Be able to say “yes” or “no” without anxiety or duplicity;
- Speak with confidence and honesty;
- Be willing to disappoint anybody, yet ready to bless everybody;
- Be a mind filled with more noble thoughts than could ever be spoken;
- Be able to share without thinking;
- Be able to see without judging;
- Be so genuinely humble that each person they see is an object of wonder;
- Be in love with God.

I want you to know that you’re in a safe place. I’m not just talking about this gathering, but anywhere you go. Your soul is not at risk when you accept that we are in God’s hands. Believe in God. Trust Jesus. Embrace the Holy Spirit. Accept God’s grace. And be patient as you wait for God.

The stream comes from the source. The health of our village depends on the stream. The stream is your soul. And you are the keeper.

How is it with your soul?

Deuteronomy 30:8-14 (The Message)

⁸⁻⁹ And you will make a new start, listening obediently to GOD, keeping all his commandments that I’m commanding you today. GOD, your God, will outdo himself in making things go well for you: you’ll have babies, get calves, grow crops, and enjoy an all-around good life. Yes, GOD will start enjoying you again, making things go well for you just as he enjoyed doing it for your ancestors.

¹⁰ But only if you listen obediently to GOD, your God, and keep the commandments and regulations written in this Book of Revelation. Nothing halfhearted here; you must return to GOD, your God, totally, heart and soul, holding nothing back.

¹¹⁻¹⁴ This commandment that I’m commanding you today isn’t too much for you, it’s not out of your reach. It’s not on a high mountain - you don’t have to get mountaineers to climb the peak and bring it down to your level and explain it before you can live it. And it’s not across the ocean - you don’t have to send sailors out to get it, bring it back, and then explain it before you can live it. No. The word is right here and now - as near as the tongue in your mouth, as near as the heart in your chest. Just do it!

1 Peter 2:11-12 (The Message)

Friends, this world is not your home, so don’t make yourselves cozy in it. Don’t indulge your ego at the expense of your soul. Live an exemplary life among the natives so that your actions will refute their prejudices. Then they’ll be won over to God’s side and be there to join in the celebration when he arrives.

Philippians 1:9-11 (The Message)

So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Live a lover’s life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul, making Jesus Christ attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God.