

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 21, 2011**

**THE BENEFITS OF GRACE:  
2. PRAYER**

**Hebrews 4:12-16**

Before we delve into today's text from God's Word, let's quickly review what we took note of last Sunday: The Word of God, the Bible itself, is a means of grace, a means by which God speaks grace and truth into our lives, and enables us to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What does the Word of God do?

- It makes us wise for salvation...
- It shows us our need of a way out of the predicament of our sin, and God's provision for us.
- It points us to the way of salvation, and to the Savior Himself.
- It shows us what God in His mercy and grace has done for us to reconcile us to Himself.
- It teaches us the truth about ourselves, the world, our lostness in our natural sinfulness, and our inability to fix what is wrong with us.
- It teaches us the truth about God and what He has done for us and for our salvation in history, and most specifically in the person and work of His Son, our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.
- It also exposes our sin. It shows us our errors. It convicts us of the sin in our lives and our need of a power greater than our own to overcome it. The Bible rebukes us when and where we need to be rebuked, and does it in a spirit of love.

That's not all. It also corrects us in both our beliefs and behavior, in both faith and life. It shows us the right path to take and guides us in the way of life God desires for us. It is the final and only infallible rule or authority for faith and life.

In addition, the Bible instructs us, it trains us, in the way of life that pleases God. It trains us in godly living.

As Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:14-17, God uses His Word in all these ways to make us equipped in every way for every good work He has ordained for us to do in His name and power, and for His glory, in order to serve His purposes in this world. These are the God-ordained purposes and functions of the Word of God for our lives.

Through it all God uses His Word to change us, to make us more and more like Jesus.

God wants us to get into the Bible, yes. He wants us to get into the Word. But even more, I think, He wants us to allow the Word to get into us. As the Word gets into us, as it gets

absorbed into the spiritual fabric of our lives, it changes us. It transforms us from the inside out. We grow to become more like Jesus. We grow in our understanding and experience of His grace. And we become instruments of His grace. We exhibit His grace. His grace flows from our lives to touch the lives of others who need it more than they know. Just like us.

Let's get into God's Word and get His Word into us today by looking together at Hebrews 4:12-16. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's Word, so that right here and now, we may hear God's voice speaking to us.

Before turning our focus to the topic of prayer as a means of grace, notice what this passage of Scripture tells us about God's Word in verses 12 and 13. It tells us that God's Word is "living and active" (verse 12). It is not just an historical record of what happened in the past – or, even more, a record of what God has done in the past. History it is. Rightly understood, history itself is "His story." God's story: The story of what God has done in His mighty acts of power in creation, in the world of time and space, in the history of humankind and the nations of the world, in the working out of His plan of salvation, culminating in the incarnation, sinless life, vicarious suffering, atoning death, and resurrection of His Son, our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the beginnings of the church and its divinely-appointed mission in the world.

But the Bible is not just about the past. Not just about yesterday. It is about today and tomorrow as well. The Word of God is alive, because it is the Word of the living God. God continues to speak in it, by it, and through it. It is both "living and active" – which means, as one commentator (Leon Morris) said, there is a dynamic quality about God's Word. It not only lives, it acts. It works. It does things. It is purposeful and, as it says in Isaiah 55:11, God's word will not return to Him empty, but will accomplish what God desires and achieve the purpose for which He sends it out. "Though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet" (M. Babcock), and His Word will accomplish His purposes, even if it sometimes seems otherwise to us in the daily ups and downs of life in this world.

God's Word is alive. It is full of power. It is a spiritual sword. It is not just a sword or even a sharp sword, as F. F. Bruce points out. It is "sharper than the sharpest sword. It can do things no other sword of any kind can do. No other sword or weapon or instrument of any kind can penetrate and probe the innermost caverns of the human heart and mind. It is a sword unlike any other. It diagnoses the true condition of our hearts.

Doctors sometimes misdiagnose the condition of their patients. Sometimes they get the diagnosis wrong. Your auto mechanic may misdiagnose the problem with your car, or not be able to find any problem, even though you know something isn't right. Rightly understood, rightly applied, God's Word never gets the diagnosis wrong. It is able to get to the heart of what no one else may be able to see.

In fact, as it says in verse 13, "nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered" – brought out into the light – "and laid bare before (His) eyes."

Proverbs 15:30 says: “The eyes of the LORD are everywhere.” Which is to say, God sees everything. He sees it all – the good, the beautiful, the bad, and the ugly.

In Psalm 139:1-4 David acknowledges and is amazed by the realization that God is all-seeing and all-knowing:

O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.  
 You know when I sit and when I rise;  
 You perceive my thoughts from afar.  
 You discern my going out and my lying down;  
 You are familiar with all my ways.  
 Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.

It can be a frightening thought... Or, if you know the blessing of God’s forgiveness in your life, if you have experienced His mercy and grace, if you know God as your Father in heaven who loves you with an unfailing love, if you know Jesus Christ as your Savior from sin and as Lord of your life, if you know that God is with you and living in you through the person and work of the Holy Spirit, it can be a comforting and encouraging thought to know that God sees everything. You don’t need to try to hide stuff from Him, because you can’t. You don’t need to try to impress God (or anyone else), because God knows everything there is to know about you. And He loves you anyway. We can’t bluff our way past God. Though there are things we would like to hide from God, there is nothing you can hide. It can be an intimidating thought to know that you’re not going to succeed.

On the other hand if you know the blessing of God’s forgiveness in your life, if you have experienced His mercy and grace, if you know that God is your Father in heaven, a Father who loves you with a love that is just beyond our full comprehension, if you know Jesus Christ as your Savior from sin and as Lord of your life, if you know that God is faithful to His promise to be with you and to dwell in you, to live in you through the person and work of the Holy Spirit, then to know that God sees and knows everything is a comforting thought. It’s a reassuring thought, an encouraging thought. You don’t need to try to hide stuff from Him because you can’t anyway. You don’t need to try to impress God or anyone else with how spiritual you are. Because God knows everything there is to know about you.. And God knows everything there is to know about me. And the amazing thing is that He loves me anyway, with all my stuff. He loves you with all your stuff.

So, God’s Word is a means of grace. It’s a way that God communicates His grace and that His grace gets worked into the fabric of our lives.

Prayer is also a means of grace. We won’t have time to talk about this adequately today, so this is kind of an introduction. We come to God in prayer, in response to His invitation. He invites us to approach Him, to draw near to the throne of grace as it says in those verses we read. And He’s provided for us a great High Priest, Jesus, the Son of God, who we learn later in the letter to the Hebrews, is also the perfect sacrifice, once for all, offering up His life as a sacrifice for our sins to make atonement for us to bring us back into fellowship with God. And because of this great, perfect High Priest who has gone before us and who has offered

Himself as the perfect sacrifice, God welcomes us with open arms, He invites us to crawl up into His lap like the child of a loving father, and He promises to meet us there and to bless us with mercy and grace to help us in our time of need.

Prayer is one way that God gets His grace to us. It's one way God uses to enable us to experience His grace and to grow in His grace. Do you think it would be fair to say that in the Bible prayer is not a peripheral matter? Would that be fair to say? That prayer is not something that's kind of out on the edges of the Bible?. It's history. It's telling us the story of God's great love for the world He's created, and God design to redeem the lost.

Prayer is not incidental to that, is it? Prayer is not an insignificant part of the life of men and women who have gone before us, whose stories are told in the pages of Scripture, who cultivated by grace a personal relationship with God. Prayer is not a peripheral matter in the Bible. It's right there at the heart. It's right there at the center. And there are some great prayers in the Bible and great pray-ers, too. There are some great prayers starting in the very first book, the book of beginnings, the Book of Genesis. And going all the way through to the Book of Revelation, the last book in the New Testament.

There is an incredible picture in Revelation, chapter 8. While these cosmic battles are taking place, there's a scene in Revelation chapter 8 that takes place in heaven, where it says that the prayers of the saints come up before the throne of God along with incense. And when the prayers of the saints, the prayers of God's people, the prayers of ordinary folks like you and me, who are set apart to be God's holy ones, the prayers of the saints, when they come up before God, heaven becomes silent.. There's silence in heaven. Because God is giving His full attention to the prayers of His people. That's grace right there. That God would take time to listen to you and me.

Prayer is not a peripheral matter in the Bible. It's at the heart of the life God wants us to live as His children, as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Sometimes a lot of us have a mistaken view of the place of prayer. Too many of us, I suspect, when we think about prayer, say inwardly to ourselves, "I really ought to pray more than I do. I know I should pray more, but I just don't seem to be able to fit it in. I know prayer is something I ought to do." Because we view prayer that way, we have a tendency to connect prayer with feelings of guilt. When I think about prayer I feel guilty if I don't do it as much as I should. It's true that the Bible tells us in a bunch of places and in a bunch of different ways that prayer is something we ought to do. The Bible instructs us to pray. It commands us in a number of places to pray. One of the shortest verses in the Bible, 1 Thessalonians 5:17, says "Pray continually." That's a command. Pray without ceasing. Don't stop praying. That's what God wants us to do. And so it's true that God's Word instructs us and even pleads with us to make prayer a central component in our lives.

But better than thinking of prayer as something I ought to do, I think it's more accurate to see prayer as something I *get* to do. I get to have a conversation with the King of the Universe. I get to climb up into the lap of my heavenly Father. I get to talk to God one on one. Wow! And so do you! It's a privilege. It's a door that God has opened to us. The same thing is true with regard to the Bible, with regard to reading God's Word and studying it and meditating on

it. It's not something I have to do, something I ought to do. It's something I get to do. I get to hear what God has to say to me. I get to read and hear the voice of God speaking to me. Some means of grace, as I said last Sunday, sometimes come to us in disguise. They're packaged as spiritual disciplines and discipline doesn't sound like fun. But grace comes through the discipline. Prayer means grace because God has promised that when we come near to Him and tell Him what's on our hearts, tell Him what we need, we will receive mercy. We will find grace to help us in our time of need, whatever it is. Grace comes when we pray.

Grace comes to other people when we pray, too. When you intercede for another person, grace and mercy flow from the throne of grace to touch the lives of those for whom you pray. Sometimes that grace comes in mysterious ways that we can't see. Sometimes it comes in ways that are so amazing that it can only be attributed to the power and love and direct intervention of God. Sometimes grace comes in little things. Sometimes grace comes in big things. Sometimes grace flows from God's throne into the life of that person for whom you've been praying in exactly the way you've been praying. And sometimes grace comes in ways that you never thought of. But prayer is a means through which God releases His grace into the lives of people for whom we pray.

There is a whole lot more, but it's time for me to wrap this up, so we'll talk about this some more next Sunday. But I want to leave you with a story.

You may have some amazing stories of how God has worked in your life, how God has answered prayers you've prayed. Or you may have heard the testimony of others and heard wonderful, uplifting, dramatic stories of answers to prayers. This is one of the most amazing stories of answered prayer that I've ever read. It's a story told by a man named Tony Campolo. Some of you may recognize his name and you may have a favorable impression of him, or you may think, "I'm not sure I agree with everything he says." That's okay. I don't agree with everything he says, either. But listen to this story. He writes:

"Several years ago I was invited to speak at a small Pentecostal college located near the college where I teach. [He taught at a Christian college in suburban Philadelphia. So this was somewhere either in New Jersey or in southeastern Pennsylvania, but I'm pretty sure he was in Pennsylvania Dutch country somewhere.] I loved going to this little school because the people there seemed to be so in touch with the power of the Holy Spirit.

"Before the chapel service, several of the faculty members took me into a side room to pray with me. I got down on my knees and the six of them put their hands on my head and prayed for me, asking the Holy Spirit to fill me up and use me as I spoke to the students. Pentecostals seem to pray longer and with more dynamism than Baptists do [we could substitute 'Presbyterians']. These men prayed long and the longer they prayed the more they leaned on my head. They prayed on and on and leaned harder and harder. One of them kept whispering, 'Do you feel the Spirit? Do you feel the Spirit?' To tell the truth I felt something right at the base of my neck but I wasn't sure it was the Holy Spirit.

"One of the faculty members prayed at length about a particular man named Charlie Stoltzfus. That kind of ticked me off. I thought to myself, 'If you're going to lean on my head, the least

you can do is pray for me.’ He prayed on and on for this guy who was about to abandon his wife and three children. I can still hear him calling out, ‘Lord, Lord, don’t let that man leave his wife and children. Send an angel to bring that man back to his family. Don’t let that family be destroyed. You know who I’m talking about, Lord. You know Charlie Stoltzfus. He lives down the road about a mile on the right hand side in a silver house trailer.’ I thought to myself with a certain degree of exasperation, ‘God knows where he lives. What do you think God’s doing, sitting up there in heaven saying, “ ‘Could you give me that address again?’”

“Following the chapel talk I got in my car and headed home. I was getting onto the Pennsylvania Turnpike when I saw a young man hitchhiking on the side of the road. I picked him up. I know you’re not supposed to, but I’m a Baptist preacher and whenever I can get someone locked into where I can preach to them, I do it. As we pulled out onto the highway, I introduced myself. I said, ‘Hi, I’m Tony Campolo. What’s your name?’ He said, ‘My name is Charlie Stoltzfus.’ I didn’t say a word. I drove down the turnpike, got off at the next exit, turned around and headed back. When I did that he looked at me and said, ‘Hey, Mister, where are you taking me?’ I said, ‘I’m taking you home.’ ‘Why?’ ‘Because you just left your wife and three children, right?’ He said, ‘right.’ He leaned against the passenger door the rest of the way, just staring at me.

“I drove off the turnpike onto a side road, straight to that silver house trailer. When I pulled into the drive, he looked at me with astonishment and said, ‘How did you know I lived here?’ I said, ‘God told me.’ I believe God did tell me. God may set up things like that just for fun. God must have a pretty sad time looking down on the world and all the things that are going on today. I can just imagine God nudging Peter and saying, ‘Hey, Pete, watch this.’ I told Charlie, ‘You get in that house trailer because I want to talk to you and I want to talk to your wife.’ He ran into the mobile home ahead of me. I don’t know what he said to his wife, but when I got in the house trailer her eyes were as wide as saucers. I sat them both down and said, ‘Now I’m gonna talk and you’re gonna listen.’ And they did listen. During the next hour, I led both of them into a personal relationship with Jesus. And today, Charlie Stoltzfus apparently is a Pentecostal preacher somewhere.”

Prayer is a means of grace. A means by which and through which God chooses to touch our lives, the lives of people we know, and the lives of people like Charlie Stoltzfus whom God sovereignly and mysteriously brings into a person’s life at just the right moment.

Would you remember, if you don’t remember anything else, that prayer is a gift given to you by God? Prayer is something you and I get to do. We get to pray. We get to have a conversation with God. Anytime we want! Take advantage of that invitation from God and talk with Him often this week. Talk with Him often today. Just tell Him what’s on your heart. Tell Him what you need. Tell Him about the people you’re concerned about. And open your heart and mind to receive a greater measure of His grace in your life than you’ve ever hoped.

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of your name. Amen.