

Why Are We Here, Where Are We Going, and How Do You Fit In? (2015)

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Understanding Grace

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Bible Text: Hebrews 4:14-16

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Frequently when I travel around to speak at different conferences, I'm asked of how our church has been able to keep such a large group of people joyfully united and serving God together for such a long period of time. We're sure we have a good number of people who are new, we're glad for that, but you also have people who have been part of our church family for 10 years, 20, 30, 40 years or longer. Frequently asked, how has the Lord done that? In fact, Lord willing, next week I'll be down in the Dominican Republic where it's about 80 degrees but I won't bring that up but I'll have the privilege of being there with one of our seminary students, Newton Pena. We'll have the privilege of teaching persons from all around that country. We're so glad for the opportunity to participate and partner with their church in this conference ministry but I'm quite sure that is one of the questions we'll be asked: how has this church family been able to keep such a large group of people joyfully united and serving God together for such a long period of time? Well, 3 answers come to mind pretty quickly. One is that it's simply evidence of Jesus keeping his promise to build his church. You remember that after Peter made that marvelous declaration that he believed that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God, that Jesus responded to him with this promise and Jesus said, "Blessed are you Simon bar Jonah because flesh and blood did not reveal this," that pronouncement you just made to you, "but my Father who is in heaven. I also say to you that you're Peter and upon this rock," the pronouncement, the confession you just made, "I will," here it is, "build my church and the gates of Hades will not overpower it." The Lord went on in that passage to describe the foundation on which the church would be built: the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, the Gospel, the good news that a price had been paid whereby human beings could be reconciled to a holy God. And so what we experience every Lord's day when we come together in part is just a clear and powerful demonstration of how Jesus keeps his promises.

A second answer I often give is that, and I really believe this, the average person who attends our church is genuinely and practically growing in his or her love for the Lord. You see, religion would not keep us together. Ritual or rules or raw duty or obligation, it's a living relationship with a risen Savior whom we adore, whom we consider to be superior to anyone or anything else. That's why we just sang what we sang with such passion this morning where we would agree with what the writer of Hebrew said, "God,

after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He," Jesus, "is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they." You see, we would agree with every word of that, would we not? And what we then do as a group of people flows out of a profound passion and love for the Lord along with a corresponding amazement that we are now privileged to participate in what Jesus is seeking to do in this world today and in the days ahead. By the way, that is a very important distinction because ours is not a passive love for Christ. It's not a static love. It's not a merely contemplative love. In fact, I'm not sure there is such a thing. At some point, true love always does something. Please don't ever forget that. True love always does something.

Frequently it's an action verb, which leads to the third answer then: how do you explain this? Well, there's a common commitment to fulfilling the mission that the Savior whom we adore has given us. That's why every year around this time we pause and ask 3 questions, don't we? Those questions are: why are we here? And where are we going? And how do you fit in? You see, there are several passages of Scripture that every Christian should know so well on that subject that it just becomes part of your DNA. Not only because when you think "mission" you automatically think these concepts but because when you evaluate this past year, you ask yourself how closely tethered you were to our God-given mission and then as you plan 2015, you let thoughts like this guide you and guide us.

I want to mention 4 passages now and if you don't know them well, here's homework assignment number 1 of a whole bunch of homework assignments today. The first one is write these 4 passages down, review them every day until you just have them as part of your heart, part of your marching orders. The first one is the Great Commission from Matthew 28:19 and 20, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe," note that distinction, not just teaching facts, "teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." You see, God has given us the privilege of living the Gospel and proclaiming the Gospel and encouraging others to make a personal decision to do the same. Then after that decision has been publicly affirmed through believer's baptism, then to provide resources so that we could all, all grow in observing all that Christ has commanded, the Great Commission.

Then there is Acts 1:8 where we're promised, here's a great one, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses." Were you in 2014? You plan to be it in 2015? Our marching orders, "you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." Think about all the various activities our church family was involved in the last 45 days.

Why? A lot of it comes down to trying to walk out our God-given mission of being witnesses because of our love for our Savior who said so.

There's also this, really the marching orders for a local church. I'm just giving you a portion of this for sake of time because, after all, you know if I'm committed to anything, it's brevity. But Ephesians 4:11, "And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers." Well, why? "For the equipping of the saints." Why? "For the work of service." Why? "To the building up of the body of Christ." How long? "Until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ." Here's what that means: we have the privilege of being an equipping church. You see, we don't want to just talk about loving Christ, we want to provide tools. We want to provide resources based on God's sufficient word that helps each one of us walk out our love for Christ in our homes, right? Equipping in our friendships, in our community involvement, in the way we function at work, in our neighborhoods. We're called to equip one another to do that well.

Then one last one I've mentioned several times. I love this passage because it's so clear and succinct, it's Colossians 1:28, "We proclaim Him," Jesus, "admonishing every man." Who would that be? Well, that would be you and everybody else who will listen. "Admonishing every man and teaching every man." I love how comprehensive this is. "With all wisdom, so that we may present every man," getting the point? "Complete in Christ."

So when folks say: well explain the choices and the priorities and the lifestyle of so many men and women who call this church their home well, the short answer is because we want to and we love to let seminal passages like these guide the very trajectory of our lives whether we're talking about as individuals or as a church family. That's why we selected these words as our Mission Statement and I really don't even have to put this up on the screen, do I? Because every person here knows it. You say, "I'm not sure I could have recited it." Well, assignment number 2: you need to write this baby down, review it over and over and over until you know it so well that when I call you at 3 o'clock in the morning to check on you, before you even remember your own name, you would remember our church's Mission Statement. Together: The mission of Faith Church is to glorify God by winning people to Jesus Christ and then equipping them to be more faithful disciples. That's why we're here and we're happy about it, are we not? We love the fact that this is our God-given mission.

Now, to help us understand how we're specifically going to try to walk this out together this year, let me invite you to open your Bible now to Hebrews 4. That's on page 171 of the back section of the Bible under the chair in front of you if you need that this morning. Also in your bulletin today, you have a handout. It's titled "2015 Faith Church Initiatives." I know there are a lot of bibliado in your program this morning but pull this one out, your initiatives. There are 32 of them and that's what we hope to accomplish together. They are organized around this church's core values and let me just remind you of what our core values are. One is growing stronger, believing that God has a plan for

every Christian's growth and that he wants godly lives and families built. You believe that, don't you? I hope you do. Then, reaching out believing that a changed life enables us to reach those without Christ in a way that is faithful and creative. We want to be about outreach here. Then serving together. We believe that God wants us to challenge and equip all of our members to serve him. He wants every member serving, right? None of this 90% of the work is done by 10% of the people tomfoolery. That wouldn't be right. All God's people serving him. And then meeting needs. We believe that our church should address community concerns by doing good works and sharing biblical truths. And then why are Newton and I going to the Dominican Republic? It's not just because it's 80 degrees. Did I mention that? But because our church believes that God is pleased as we seek to strengthen other pastors and missionaries and key lay leaders.

You say, "Well, where did these initiatives on this sheet come from?" Well, every 5 years our church goes through a very thorough and comprehensive strategic planning process and we come up with a five-year strategic plan together. It's very grassroots in the way that it's driven and designed. If you have not recently reviewed this or if you don't have a copy anymore, I would encourage you to grab one on your way out at the Welcome Center at either one of our campuses. Don't feel bad if you say, "Well, I got one when it first came out. I lost it." That's alright. Here's the thing about printing things like this: once you've done 1,000, you might as well do a million. Your cost is in the set up and so we print a lot for days just like today so if you've not reviewed this recently, I would encourage you to get a copy of it and I would encourage you either before or after the Colts win, I would encourage you to review. Not that that's on anybody's mind but I would encourage you to review that 5 year plan.

By the way, while I'm talking about getting things at the Welcome Centers, I know that last week I encouraged you to consider getting one of the Baptist Bible College read through the Bible study guides for the year and then I learned later that we ran out of them or, in some cases, they were just a printed version but not the actual version that would fit conveniently in your Bible. We did get new copies of that this week so they are available at both of our campuses at the Welcome Center so even if you took one of the printed ones from our copier, feel free to get one of those nice ones that will fit in your Bible and help you read through the word of God this year.

Now, back to these initiatives, time is not going to allow me to go through each one of them and explain what was our church family thinking back in 2013 when we said that this is what we ought to do this particular year. I'm going to hit some of them, not all. Let me just make a couple of observations about these initiatives globally. One is, we really think we are following the leading of the Holy Spirit as we assembled all of this. In fact, our deacon who just passed away recently, Kevitt Brown, along with his dear wife, Sarah, would lead our church with a group of people who were praying in the background all year long as we were working through this as a church family to come up with these plans and that's why we take it so seriously. That's why back from last year, the ones in 2014, we could have talked to you about what specific person was responsible for the accomplishment of each one of last year's initiatives. They had to report quarterly on how things were going on the accomplishment of that particular initiative so we take that very,

very seriously. I would encourage you later to read down through all of these ones from 2015 and if one of them especially catches your attention, maybe because of your passion or your particular giftedness, please don't hesitate to contact me. Yes, I travel but the beauty is the church gives me all the technology. I can communicate with you from any place in the world just like we were sitting next to each other so don't hesitate to contact me. Don't hesitate to contact one of our other pastors or our deacons and tell them about your interest. We'll connect you with the particular person who's responsible for the accomplishment of each one of these initiatives of 2015 and allow you to work with that individual.

Also, if you're wondering, "Hey, where does our church staff fit into all of this business?" Well, here's the answer: at our planning retreat in December, we all have to lay out our specific initiatives for the coming year because I don't believe we ought to ask our church family to do something that we as paid church staff members haven't already done and so if you want to see the initiatives for every one of our paid staff members, just go to our website, click on "Church" and then click on the 2015 initiatives for our church and staff and they are all there, hundreds of pages of information but we lay that out to ask for your prayer. But we also lay that out inviting your accountability. Feel free to ask any of us, "What does that mean? And how are you coming at accomplishing what you said publicly you believe God wanted you to do?"

Also as you review those staff initiatives, what you'll notice is that the staff initiatives are very tightly tethered to our church's initiatives and the reason for that is we think it would be disrespectful for us as your church staff to be heading off in all sorts of different directions inconsistent with what our church family already decided the Holy Spirit of God wanted us to do together.

Now, think about this: since that's true, what would happen if every member of our church now chose to do the exact same thing? I'm talking about you. "Well, I'm not a member yet." Well, that's okay. That's just a formality. What if every person who hears this message today chooses to do that? To listen carefully to what we're about to study from the Bible, to review our church's annual initiatives, to review our staff's annual initiatives and then crafted similar statements for yourself and your family. You could actually send them then to one of your pastors. You could send your initiatives to your deacon or to an ABF teacher or a small group leader for prayer support and for accountability. That's what it looks like for a group of people to be on mission together.

Now, to help us understand our annual theme for the year, let's read this great text from Hebrews 4. I'm in verse 14 where we read,

14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest [there is some great news, huh?] We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. [Here is the action:] 16 Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of

grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Our church's theme this year is "Finding Grace," taken in part from that wonderful passage of Scripture so we believe that any genuine progress in the accomplishment of our God-given mission is only going to occur in and through and by the all-sufficient grace of God. To be what God wants us to be, we know we need to find grace. To do what God wants us to do, we know we need to find grace. We believe in what the Reformers termed "sola gratia." We are wholly dependent on God's wonderful grace.

Now, with the time we have remaining, let's let this text give us 3 essentials to being a church family who finds grace together well. What does this look like according to this passage of Scripture? Well, first of all, you have to understand the source of grace. You see, the imagery, the throne of grace, the imagery is of a king sitting on a throne. You understand, in an ancient world you were literally taking your life in your own hands to approach the throne of the king. In fact, as soon as I say that, those of you who know your Bible probably think of what book? The book of Esther where her uncle was suggesting that she go and make an appeal directly to the king on the behalf of the Jewish people. Do you remember what she said? She said, "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that for any man or woman who comes to the king to the inner court who is not summoned, he has but one law, that he be put to death, unless the king holds out to him the golden scepter so that he may live. And I," Esther said, "have not been summoned to come to the king for these thirty days." Call that the king being a tad aloof of his subjects. That's why it was so significant that the God of Israel chose for his glory to dwell in the midst of his people, that they were led by a pillar of cloud by day during the period of the Exodus. Do you remember that? Or a pillar of fire by night. That was a level of a personal intimacy on the part of the king that was previously unknown.

Then when the tabernacle was constructed and God gave detailed instructions about how that Ark of the Covenant was to be built, how it was to be used, the presence of God actually in their midst was of supreme value to them, entirely different than the aloofness of the average ancient king. But even with that, the common man didn't waltz into the Holy of Holies and commune directly with God any old time he wanted. It was only the high priest. There was only one time a year and it was only after he as a human being, passed through a whole series of steps in order to purify himself before he could possibly approach a holy God on behalf of the people. That's the point of the book of Hebrews, that because of the finished work of Christ, you have a more excellent way. You have direct access to the very throne of God any time you want because Jesus is our great high priest. He accomplished something for us that no one ever had, no one ever could.

The text says our high priest passed through the heavens. Unlike the high priest in the Old Testament who passed through the various stations to purify himself year after year after year. We're not talking about a regular old priest here. We're talking about Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God who could die for our sins because he possessed none and he could do that, how many times? Once. And then be resurrected from the dead and pass-through not another set of stations in order to purify himself again but to pass through the heavens

and do something the priest really did, sit down at the right hand of God. The text says he was God's own Son. You see, the Apostle Peter was right, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," which means if you're a Christian, a person who has had a definite time in your life where you've admitted your sin and placed your faith and trust in Christ, your access to the throne is guaranteed by a priest who is God's one and only Son.

He's also one who can sympathize with our weaknesses. That's where Christmas fits into this discussion. We're not drawing near to a person who doesn't really understand why we need grace because he's never experienced the challenge of living in a physical body or living on a sin-cursed earth. He knows why and he knows how we are weak. He's also one who has conquered sin victoriously, been tempted in all things as we are yet without sin. We can find grace from someone who knows how powerful grace can be and the capstone of it is he is seated on a throne of grace.

"Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace." What a beautiful juxtaposition of ideas, huh? If there was no throne, there would be no power or authority. If there was no grace, the power and authority would be beyond our reach. Listen, for all the times we're going to need grace in 2015, do you think there might be a few? For you? For your family? For our church? For all the times we're going to need grace in 2015, where can we potentially find it? At the hand of our high priest, the one whom the Apostle John said was full. You say, "I wonder if he's got enough for my hot mess?" Jesus is full of grace.

These verses also encourage us to anticipate the effects of grace. Think about this: what could happen for all of us as individuals and as a church as we study this great subject together this year? Where could this lead us? The text actually answers that question: to a place where we receive mercy. Do you think there's going to be some times this year where you'll be in need of mercy for yourself? Where are you going to find that? Potentially at the throne of grace. Do you think there will be times where you'll need mercy for others in order to accomplish our God-given mission to them? Do you think ministries are going to require some mercy on your part? Even if serving that person is hard? Even if serving that person is inconvenient? Even if serving that person is unpleasant? Where can you find enough mercy to get the job done for God in that particular situation? It's at the throne of grace you receive mercy and find grace.

Now, this is probably as good a place as any for me to be sure that I said that this assumes that there has been a definite time in your life where you have become a follower of Christ. That was one of the primary reasons this book was written. Did you know this? Some people had been around the Gospel, they had been around biblical teaching, they had been around Christian people but they had never trusted Christ themselves. Think about the horror of that. Which is why the chapter that I've been quoting from begins with these words, "Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you," you who? There are persons who will hear this message today who fit right in the middle of that verse, "any one of you may seem to have come short of it," and for some who hear this message today, finding grace literally starts by acknowledging your need and placing your faith and trust in the death, burial

and resurrection of Jesus. And friend, wouldn't it be great if Christ carries his coming and a whole host of men and women had become followers of Jesus Christ as a result of our church family's emphasis and work this year?

In fact, are you ready for another homework assignment? Are you ready for this? Now, this is a "dare ya." I'll get to double dog dares later on but let's just go with a dare ya right now. I dare you to start praying to the Lord, "Please use me to bring another person in my life to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ." Why not start praying that specifically? In fact, you may already have somebody in mind. There may be somebody that you know you need to talk to and you just haven't. Are you on mission? And I would challenge you to ask our God to use you to draw another person to Christ in 2015. God has that much mercy. God has that much grace.

The passage says we can find help. That's the bottom line, "Let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help." Find grace to help. Find grace to help. By the way, what happens if we don't accept this invitation? Where are the other places that we might tend to go in our time of need? And what are we likely to find when we get there? Well, I'll tell you where some people go who call themselves Christians, during their time of need: they go to sinful explosions of anger. That's what they draw near to over and over and over and they find anything but mercy and grace and help for themselves or anybody else who's in the middle of that drama. Wouldn't it be great to learn to go to a different place this year? You see, where do you go in your time of need? Some go to depression. Or they go to hopelessness. Or they go to booze. Are they go to busyness. Or they go to gratuitous sex. Or they go to material possessions. They go to lusting after the applause and the approval of man. There are a lot of different places to go during a time of need. But here's a promise on behalf of this passage at the throne of grace: you can find God-sized help. Not that puny trash. You can find God-sized help in your time of need

The morning I was scheduled to work on this message, the night before we had 6 inches of beautiful blessing from God. Do you remember that snow, right? So, I had to get out to work obviously and Andrew, our son, also had a doctor's appointment that morning and so we got 6 inches of snow and we've got a pretty long driveway. That's no problem because I've got a snow blower. I've got a nice snow blower. I've got a big snow blower. No problem, get out there and blow that snow off the driveway and get on with it as long as it starts. And in parenthesis, as long as I had been smart enough to actually do some good preventative maintenance before that very second. Let's not get into that. Well anyway, my snow blower wouldn't start. A great opportunity to praise Jesus right there. It was still dark out and I didn't know what to do so I just grabbed my shovel and started shoveling like a wild man and it became apparent pretty quickly that there was no way I was going to get that long driveway shoveled by the time our son, Andrew, needed to get to his doctor's appointment. Then my neighbor, Pete, drove by with his big dump truck and his hefty snowplow. It's still dark out but I heard him yell at me from the road, "Hey, you want me to push that for you?" Of course, I prayed first. I bet 3 solid seconds I prayed before I answered him. "Absolutely. Absolutely." You see, there's help and then there's God-sized help. Do you realize that if we choose to, we can anticipate the effects

of grace this year of receiving mercy from God, finding grace to help in our time of need from him?

Well, this passage also calls us to perform the action of grace. God always does his part but he invites us, you know where that statement is going, right? In fact, he commands us to do ours. The text says, "Therefore, let us draw near," and that is a present tense verb suggesting continuous action day after day after day and we want to learn how to do that this year and for many of us perhaps at a deeper and more consistent level than ever before.

Now, you say, "Well, how so? How do we hope to accomplish this theme this year?" Part of it is by increasing our ability to handle hard times well. You see, finding grace together as we're suffering. One thing I've certainly learned as a pastor over the years is that there is no easy phase of life. Have you figured that out? So if you're right now living for the, "I can't be happy until such-and-such happens," that day probably will never come. So if you're living in the, "We'll be happy when our kids get out of diapers," really? Do you know what happens when they're out of diapers? There in there 2's and, "We'll be happy when they're out of their 2's and into kindergarten. We'll be happy when they're out of..." right? And it just never happens. There is never an easy phase of life. That's why biblical Christianity offers a rich theology of suffering, of learning how to handle trials well. How do we find grace for ourselves during our times of need but in clear practical ways?

So over the next 6 weeks, we're planning to study some of the key passages about grace in the word of God to help us all understand what it means to find grace from our sufficient Lord. Then in the weeks leading up to Easter, we're going to turn to the life of Christ in the Gospel of John, chapters 19 to 21 and we're going to talk about grace in action as Jesus prepares for the cross. This summer we're planning a Sunday morning series on the suffering of Abraham and Jacob and Joseph from the book of Genesis. You see, the goal is that when the year is done, we will all be closer to Christ, having learned what it means to draw near to him over and over and over to receive mercy and find grace to help. We also hope to accomplish this by improving our soul care ministries to every one of our church members. In fact, if you read down through those 2015 initiatives along with the ideas that I'm listing out this morning, you'll see a lot of them are focused on helping all of us grow in grace. So in our small group ministries at both of our campuses, our ABF's at Faith East, we want to be sure that we're making mentors available for any person or family that wants them. We want to be A+ in our deacon's care ministry, etc. etc. We're trying to take this responsibility to present every man perfect in Christ seriously and we want our soul care to be buried in grace. And I realize you might say, "But if you knew me, I've got some significant changing to do." Or, "I know people around this church who have some significant changing to do." Well, okay, what are we learning from this text? Let's lock arms together and run to the the gossip wheel? The road of hopelessness? No, let's lock arms together and learn what it means to run to the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace to help in times of sanctificational need.

We also want to integrate grace into each of our education ministries. When you think about those verses we talked about at the very beginning, much of our God-given mission involves education at all sorts of levels. So you think about our desire to serve our local public schools any way we possibly can. You think about our desire to serve any of the homeschooling parents in our church. You think about what we're trying to do through Faith Christian School at all of its levels. You think about our goals in our seminary. You think about Faith Community Institute. You think about the classes we're holding downtown: Jobs For Life and Faith for Finances and on and on. In order to get that job done, it's going to require a lot of grace but where can we go for that? To the God who drives a dump truck filled with grace.

And it's interesting how all this plays out over time. You know, we try to have a positive relationship with our local public schools for all sorts of reasons. We want to find ways to serve them. One of our local public school principals sent this note to our school's administrator, Scott Grass, the other day. It said, "Scott, Happy New Year to my Faith friend." Aren't you glad that's the way our school administrator would be addressed by a member of our public schools? She went on to say, "The attached parent letter is a good letter to send home to your parents about I Step changes and resources. It was created by the Department of Education. I would also go to the DOE website to get more resources for your teachers." She gave us the address. "My teachers have found this website very helpful. Good luck and hope this helps." You see, instead of finding something to fight about, finding something to be needlessly competitive over, why not just interact with grace? And often it's not just something you find and give, it's also something reciprocated and received. It's just the right thing to do.

We also want to investigate the next steps in our community in worldwide outreach and so that involves how we're serving in our community centers. That involves what we're trying to do in our athletic leagues, our food pantry, our clothing closet, our development corporation. All of that. And you know, the Lord's blessing our community efforts in some significant ways large and small. For example, the day it snowed, what were our teenagers doing? Well, I'll tell you what a number of them did: they woke up at 4 o'clock in the morning that day on a day they were off school to start hitting the driveways of our neighbors of both of our campuses and when the day was done, they had plowed 86 of our neighbors' driveways. So you start seeing these kinds of comments popping up on Next Door, that neighborhood social media site. Here's just one illustrating many that popped up where one of our neighbors said, "I want to say thank you to the group doing snow removal. You all are awesome," and they are. "What a ministry of love you're sharing to do this." Well, how did that happen? There's a group of teenagers who are on mission. There's a group of teenagers who at 4 in the morning went to the throne of grace and they found mercy. They found grace to help in order to serve our community well.

We have a series this year that's especially designed for outreach and one of them is right after Easter entitled "Grace For Your Family," and we're going to be encouraging you to invite your friends and your coworkers. I hope you'll do that all the time but especially we'll have some that are just trying to help us understand grace in our lives and grace in our families.

There's also the issue of identifying ways to make each of one of our counseling ministries more grace-based. God has entrusted us with a lot here. Our Monday training program. Our Monday counseling center for our community. This conference that's coming up in February in just a couple of weeks now. The on the road training that we do around the country. Some of the travel that we have the privilege of doing internationally. Then our Vision of Hope Ministry here for young ladies who are struggling. What we hope to do with men out at Bethany Farms. Look, we're inviting people from our community to come to receive truth from the word of God and they come in droves. We also have the opportunity by God's grace to be involved in all of these different training conferences. There are 3 major biblical counseling training conferences in the world in an average year. One of them is by ACBC, the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors in Louisville that travels around the country. The other is by Christian Counseling, an educational foundation in Philadelphia which also travels around the country. The third one is here in little Lafayette, Indiana and by God's grace, ours is actually the largest of the 3 and we're not saying, "Now, let's beat on our chest." That's not the point of this at all but nor are we going to run for the hills, "Ahh, there are too many people coming to Lafayette!" What are we going to do when we have an opportunity like that? The answer is we're going to run to the throne and we're going to find grace to do what we believe God has called on us to do.

I was so thrilled to hear this morning that all of the housing needs for all of these guests coming from around the country and a number of foreign countries has already been met by the members of our church. Do you realize that for a number of people, that's the only way their church is going to be able to afford to send them to a conference even though the cost is very, very low. Thank you for running to the throne of grace. Thank you for finding whatever was necessary for your family to be able to serve a dear Christian servant in that way. That's grace-based approach to ministry.

Also by involving each member in meaningful service for Christ. Yes, we plan to have Serve 15 this year. Aren't you excited about that? What's better than Serve 14? Serve 15. Although I know many of you are saying, "Well, we're not going to need Serve 15 because so many of us signed up for Serve 14 and we just want to re-up." I fully expect some sort of a brawl over the open serving positions at Faith Church this year. I look forward to that. And also and I'll talk more about this on another Sunday, the transitioning ministry responsibilities to the next generation.

Now, that's a whirlwind tour for sure. I get that but if you're thinking carefully, you might say, "Okay, yeah, there's a lot listed out there that we want to do in our community and around the world, what about the resources?" That's going to be very expensive to do what our congregation believes that we're called upon to do around the world. Well, that's an issue of grace too, isn't it? And I'm going to conclude today by thanking our church family for your generous grace giving in this past year. Grace giving. I rarely talk about money. If you're here for the first time, I rarely do this. I rarely talk about it for a lot of reasons including the fact that I don't have to. But I don't want to fail to glorify God and I don't want to fail to express appreciation for the men and women who have given so

sacrificially and faithfully this past year. That's grace too. In fact, Paul said it like this in 2 Corinthians, "Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God." This is about a love offering that was taken up for Jewish Christians. "We wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God. So we urged Titus that as he had previously made a beginning, so he would also complete in you this gracious work as well."

We just concluded our Faith West Capital Campaign and yes, there are a few folks who have asked to complete their giving in the next few months. That's perfectly fine. But our bank was very nervous about the way we structured this Capital Campaign because it was a 3 year Capital Campaign but we actually started construction of the building in the first 6 months which meant the building was going to be up and occupied at month 18, leaving an entire 18 months to go and our bank, they were as nervous as cats on hot tin roofs which is exactly where you want your bankers, I think, because they assumed that when the building was up and the ministries were going, our people would stop giving. Well, I'm happy to tell you that when the books were closed at the end of last year, we actually exceeded the Capital Campaign goal. That never happens. In fact, we were with our bankers this week. They were shocked by that news. They were introduced to the dump truck of the grace of God. And it's not because people were coerced, in fact, if you've been attending here, you might say, "You know, you've rarely mentioned that Capital Campaign in the last 3 years." That's right. But you see, a lot of folks have learned what it means to quietly go to the throne of grace month after month after month and find help and grace to give generously so the Gospel can be brightly proclaimed and that project is a success because God's people found grace from him.

It doesn't stop there though. The assumption often is that when you have a Capital Campaign like that, people are going to bleed their regular giving into the Capital Campaign and that's going to jam up your missionaries, that's going to jam up your other budget and our church decided back in 2013 that we were going to start last year a Senior Living Development. Well, we invested \$550,000 in 2014 because it's very expensive with the amount of land that we have to do all of the drainage work and all that sort of thing and we assumed that we were going to have to borrow those funds short-term from our own foundation internally and then pay that off over the 5 years of our strategic ministry plan. That was the plan all along. I'm happy to tell you that when the books were closed just a few days ago for 2014 that the people of this church gave so generously that not only were we able to meet all of our budget expectations, not only were we able to successfully complete our Faith West Capital Campaign, but we paid all of those Senior Living Development costs in cash. Over half a million dollars in budget excess was able to go directly into that ministry and what that proves, in case there's any question about what I'm saying, that's about Jesus. Jesus is serious about building his church and I'm so thankful to be serving with a group of people who are serious about living by grace.

It doesn't end there. We don't do what we do so that God would do something for us, the Lord owes us nothing, right? But he has blessed us in some phenomenal ways. Last year at this time, we were able to celebrate the gift of that land, that's 90 acres of ground contiguous to our East Side campus. That was valued at \$1.4 million. That was actually given to us at this time last year. The donors want no credit. The church wants no focus on us. It's clear proof Jesus is building his church on his sufficient grace.

A couple of months ago, I was able to announce that our school had received a gift of \$2 million, a ministry many of us prayed for years before it came to pass. We prayed regularly for God's blessing upon us since the day it was launched. That's an expensive endeavor and we received that kind of gift at his hand. You see, sometimes you're standing there with a snow shovel doing the best you can and the Lord decides to show up with his dump truck. That is the lesson for this church.

That brings me to something I now get to tell you about Vision of Hope. That's Vision of Hope, the ministry that God has given us for young ladies struggling with unplanned pregnancies and drug abuse, alcohol abuse, eating disorders and self harm. I know some people in this town think that's my house. That is not my house. Our family could not exist on a measly 17,000 square feet. That's Vision of Hope and a foundation gave us 1 1/4 million dollars to build that for cash 7 years ago. They also gave us another million and a quarter dollars that was spread out over 10 years to help offset half of the operating budget for the first 10 years so \$125,000 every year to help us get that going. We've loved having Vision of Hope here. Having those young ladies as part of our church family has been delightful. We have now, doing it for 7 years, seen some marvelous stories of grace. We absolutely love that but the clock has been ticking because that grant runs out in 3 years and then what? We've been carefully saving. We've been ramping up our funding efforts and so we actually have saved enough of that grant that will actually carry us out probably 12 or 13 years before we would really be jammed up on that particular ministry. But there is still: what are we going to do? Well, the answer is run to the throne of grace and we were just informed a few days ago that a vibrant, believing lady in her 90s from another city went home to be with the Lord, leaving a substantial estate. We also just learned that Vision of Hope is the beneficiary of one of her trusts. What she did, she set up a trust that's going to care for her elderly daughter for the rest of her life and then on the subsequent death of that child, the entire balance will be irrevocably distributed to Vision of Hope in order to establish an endowment fund for the ongoing expenses of that ministry. And there is no way to know exactly when that transaction is going to take place, what the trust will be worth to us at the time, the people who manage it are continuing to grow it but in today's economy, that trust is worth well over \$3 million. That has been given to us and when you think about those funds safely, conservatively invested, will go a very long way to replacing the support the initial foundation provided for Vision of Hope that year.

You see, when you are trying to serve the Lord, the mercy, the grace, the help he offers is what sized? It's God-sized. I hope it doesn't sound disrespectful but I hope our church

family gets the message: God drives a dump truck and the dump truck is full of grace and he simply invites us to learn to draw near.

Let's stand together for prayer, shall we?

Father in heaven, we thank you for your abundant mercy. We thank you for your abundant grace. The way you shower that upon us as individuals and as a church is simply amazing. We bow before you today. We worship and adore you. And Lord, we commit ourselves this year to learning perhaps more than ever before what it means to day after day after day draw near to that throne. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.