

GRACE

ROMANS 5:1-5

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

RECONCILING GRACE



A MAKE AND DEEPEN DISCIPLES RESOURCE

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The Evangelical Covenant Church

MAKE & DEEPEN DISCIPLES

WEEK OF PRAYER | A GUIDE FOR INDIVIDUALS AND SMALL GROUPS

About the Week of Prayer



DEAR COVENANT FRIENDS,

The gift of God's amazing grace is boundless, both in its beauty and its many dimensions. In our 2020 Week of Prayer guide, incarcerated students from North Park Theological Seminary's School of Restorative Arts program inspire us to freshly encounter and receive God's grace.

Under the overarching theme of "Reconciling Grace," we will pray together through the many dimensions

of God's grace including comforting grace, chastening grace, anointing grace, restorative grace, and beyond. Through these daily prayers, let us be reminded that we can never fully plumb the depths of the riches of God's amazing grace!

For more than 60 years, the Evangelical Covenant Church has provided materials for a week of prayer during the month of January. Whether you choose to use this resource at the beginning of the year or later, it will both challenge and equip disciples of Jesus to live a life of prayer and continually seek new ways to develop this life-giving practice.

The Week of Prayer can be used by individuals or groups, over one week or over the course of seven weeks. Each day/week of the resource includes reflection and prayer prompts, but we encourage you to use these only as starting points. Feel free to customize the resource for your purposes.

You can download this resource from Covchurch.org/2020prayer or order from Covbooks.com. Guides are available in English and Spanish.

If you have questions, please feel free to contact us at mdd@covchurch.org, or visit our website at CovChurch.org/2020prayer.

Making disciples together,

Michelle Sanchez

EXECUTIVE MINISTER OF
MAKE AND DEEPEN DISCIPLES



COVER ART BY CHRISTOPHER D. (CD) EVERETT

CD is enrolled in the School of Restorative Arts, and last fall in Christian Theology class, he encountered the ECC seal for the first time. The seal depicts a recumbent lamb lying upon Scripture and bearing a cross. Above, two hands clasp in the right hand of fellowship. Moved by the image, CD created his own version for the School of Restorative Arts.

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At first glance, this passage may seem to indicate that it's our faith that leads to our justification and peace with God. But in reality we know that it is only through God's grace, or favor, that we may enter into God's presence and stand before him. Through God's favor we are able to have faith, be at peace in all circumstances, and grow as Christians.

The amazing thing about God's grace is that it has no limits and knows no boundaries. The grace of God can reach all corners of the earth and penetrate the lives of every person. This means God's grace may be found in places where it might be least expected, like prison. Many people may believe that prisoners are undeserving for God's grace, and I agree—because everyone of us is undeserving.

In his epistles, Paul often greets his recipients with the words, "grace to you and peace from God," indicating that grace and peace go together. I have been in prison for 17 years. In spite of the daily hardships I face, I am blessed with peace. Because of God's grace upon my life, I am able to find peace within myself, with others, and most importantly with God. It's God's grace and peace that allows me to persevere in adversity, and it draws me nearer to him. God's grace and peace finds itself in the deepest pits of prison. He can also find you in your life, wherever you are. God's saving grace is available to you, just accept it, and accept the gifts of faith, justification, hope, peace, and strength that God's grace brings.

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, thank you so much for your precious grace that provides us with everything that we need to be sustained in life and in our relationship with you. You bestow your grace upon us indiscriminately. Deliver us from our blindness and our stubbornness that prevents us from accepting you, and bless us with your peace. We need you, Lord, especially in our tribulations, because we trust and believe that your grace and peace will see us through all adversities. In Jesus's precious name, AMEN.

LUKE 15:20-24

So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." So they began to celebrate (NIV).

What a beautiful picture of healing, restoration, and grace we see in this passage. What if every congregation emulated this depiction of gracious restoration in the criminal justice system? What if offenders who are repentant believers were greeted while they were still a great way off—in prison? What if they were lovingly guided home as the forgiving father did? Once a brother or sister in Christ has served their sentence, and is returning home, what if they were graciously welcomed back into the community with a ceremony or celebration of reentry? Such grace could do much to heal the many wounds caused by incarceration.

Let us remember that every person is in dire need of grace—from God, as well as from one another. There is a great power in the forgiveness we receive, but even more so in the forgiveness we grant.

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, we humbly beseech you to grant us your grace, and give us the willingness to grant grace to others. Bring all of your repentant, incarcerated daughters and sons back home to their families. Grant healing to anyone they have hurt, and the forgiveness and grace to forgive them. Help us to do all that we can to welcome them back into the community. AMEN.

About the School of Restorative Arts



GREETINGS FRIENDS,

I am honored and humbled to have you joining us on this journey of prayer with the students of North Park Theological Seminary's School of Restorative Arts (SRA) at Stateville Correctional Center (SCC). The SRA officially launched in the fall of 2018 with 38 inmates enrolling in a cohort-based master's program, but the groundwork and planning for this cohort began several years ago. Dr. Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom, professor of theology and ethics at North Park, developed a passion to bring education to incarcerated people. Because of her dedication and leadership, the seminary began offering a few courses to the men incarcerated at SCC five years ago. Through relationships formed with the Illinois Department of Corrections, we made plans to expand the program, and our accrediting agency, the Association of Theological Schools, gave approval to have an extension site at SCC, allowing us to develop the program into a full MA degree-granting site.

What started with one or two classes per year has developed into a full Master of Arts in Christian Ministry with a certificate in Transformation Justice. In the fall of 2019, we added 39 additional students in our second cohort. The SRA program is unique from other "seminary in prison" programs in that our non-incarcerated students take classes at SCC alongside the incarcerated students; this allows both incarcerated and non-incarcerated students to learn together and from each other's perspective in a very powerful way.

The program has been transformative for the faculty, staff, students (both incarcerated and non-incarcerated), and volunteers who have had the opportunity to be involved in the program. It is one thing as a non-incarcerated person to talk about the incarcerated person or the conditions in prison—it is a wholly different perspective to have these conversations after knowing the men inside SCC and their stories. The stories are hard, they are raw, they are personal, and they are encouraging. There is an amazing sense of hope and encouragement found within the stories of those in this program. They are full of energy and excitement as they deepen their knowledge and understanding of the gospel and are change agents inside and outside the prison walls and to all they encounter.

To learn more about North Park's School of Restorative Arts, please visit: northpark.edu/seminary/school-of-restorative-arts/.

I invite you to join me on this journey of prayer with our students in the School of Restorative Arts and beyond.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "David W. Kersten".

David W. Kersten

DEAN, NORTH PARK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, AND
VP FOR CHURCH RELATIONS, NORTH PARK UNIVERSITY

AUTHORS

DAY 1: IGNACIO ALVAREZ is skilled in the art of carpentry and biblical interpretation from an analytical standpoint. He was born and raised in Little Village in Chicago and believes in the fivefold ministries for the purpose of equipping the saints as outlined in Ephesians 4:11.

DAY 2: MARCOS RAMIREZ is a dynamic innovator focused on restorative justice work. He is determined to be a repairer of brokenness and a bridge for healing inside and outside prison walls. Marcos is a passionate researcher and writer, and a beloved member of the NPTS community. He is currently pursuing membership in the Covenant Church.

DAY 3: MELVIN CENTENO was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, and is one of the spiritual pillars of the North Park and Stateville community. His passion is to bring a kingdom mindset to this earthly territory and to help people realize there is something greater than themselves—Christ.

DAY 4: J.M. is a writing adviser who hopes to help his peers improve how they think creatively through their writing. He is part of an extracurricular performance arts cohort that weaves together stories of multiple students into one piece that will be performed by outside actors. He is devoted to searching for new approaches to understand and interpret Scripture in ways that are relevant to society today.

DAY 5: ALEX NEGRÓN believes in the essence of being in community, in fellowship with Christ, and with the believers of his eternal Church. He is a published author, writer, and poet and seeks to be a disrupter of the walls that keep humanity from breaking the chains of systemic bondage. Alex is also a teacher and preacher who stands on the liberating power of the gospel.

DAY 6: LUIGI is committed to the goal of transforming the criminal justice system to focus on restoring individuals to useful citizenship and away from a model focused on punishment. He is currently a North Park writing assistant and helps organize student writing workshops. He is working to shatter the malicious, dehumanizing stereotypes that incarcerated persons suffer from.

DAY 7: BENNY RIOS is committed to writing and having his voice heard beyond the prison, and to that end, he has published work in scholarly venues. He is devoted to his family, including his wife, Melissa, and his daughters. Benny loves being part of the beloved community that he has been integral in forming at Stateville and beyond.

JOHN 21:15-17

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep" (NIV).

Peter denies Christ three times and decides to take himself out of the kingdom's lineup because he no longer felt worthy of God's calling. Three strikes, and he was out. Yet this passage paints a profound picture of God's grace fully restoring him to a right relationship with God.

Before Peter betrayed him, Jesus promised, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church..." (MATTHEW 16:18).

After Peter's betrayal, Jesus had every right to hand those keys to someone else. But Jesus chose to pour his grace on Peter and restore him to his apostolic office.

Sometimes we gloss over today's passage when it comes to restoring those who have caused harm to our homes, churches, and communities. I was born with two strikes before I stepped up to the batter's box of life—a poor Latino child in a single-parent household. While living a life plagued by drugs, alcohol, and gang violence, I was warned three times by God that a devastating pitch was headed my way. Unfortunately, I refused to heed his warnings, and that pitch became imprisonment. I have experienced the most inhumane treatment a person can endure. This is also the place where I have experienced God's restorative grace. This grace has also allowed me the ability to regain my humanity and the opportunity to change the narrative around mass incarceration in our blessed church.

At times we forget that our place in God's kingdom is secured by grace. We also forget that the same grace that was imparted to us can be poured into the most unexpected persons. Let us take every moment we live for God to remember his grace.

PRAYER: Dear heavenly Father, thank you for restoring all of humanity through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We know that it is through him and by him that we are allowed access into your throne of grace. We ask you to continue to pour your grace upon each of us so we can be instruments of restoration for the sake of your eternal kingdom. AMEN.

JOB 3:2-5

He said: "May the day of my birth perish, and the night that said, 'A boy is conceived!' That day—may it turn to darkness; may God above not care about it; may no light shine on it. May gloom and utter darkness claim it once more; may a cloud settle over it; may blackness overwhelm it" (NIV).

Have you ever felt as if the weight of adversity was so heavy you'd rather die than bear it any longer?

Job was a man who had everything that mattered in life taken from him: his wealth, possessions, children, and health. His adversity so overwhelmed him that he cursed the day he was born. In my own life, I have had several "Job" moments—times in my life where I felt like I could go no further and prayed for death. Losing my grandparents was especially difficult for me as they were the ones who taught me how to love. I felt lost, abandoned, betrayed.

In considering how God demonstrates his grace, it is easy to focus on what we perceive to be our blessings. We might speak of how God delivered us from cancer, or how he provided a way to pay our mortgage just when all seemed lost. In short, we may be tempted to think of grace as deliverance from hardship.

But what if the hardship is actually the grace? What if our deliverance is only the after-effect? Job was so acquainted with grief that his name is synonymous with it. He was a man defined by hardship.

Yet a closer look at Job may reveal that until that point when everything that mattered to him was stripped away, he had been living a life of such great comfort that his faith was brought to question. Maybe it was only after great loss that grace was truly active in Job's life.

Perhaps the grace of hardship is what helped Job see that, above wealth, health, or family, what mattered most in life was his intimate relationship with the Creator. May we also experience God's grace in a way that brings us nearer to him.

PRAYER: Holy Father, we adore you above all else. Forgive us our sins, and guide us in the way everlasting. We ask you to remove any hardship or sorrow from our lives. Yet if we must endure, may we suffer in such a way as to draw us closer to you. May our hearts be always in love with you, O glorious King. In Jesus's name, AMEN.

GALATIANS 2:21

I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain (KJV).

The word that pops out to me in this verse is "frustrate." In Greek, this word means to reject and neutralize. Based on this definition, I believe grace points to the divine influence upon one's heart. So in this verse Paul is telling us to rely on God's grace and not the law, which cannot declare us in right standing with the eternal God.

We also see here that God's influence, favor, and power can indeed be rejected and neutralized when we begin to rely on ourselves. These words appear after Paul rebukes Peter for refusing to eat with Gentiles. In other words, Peter, through his hypocritical actions, was circumventing the divine flow in his own life and in the lives of those he was called to impact. I must admit that I, too, have been guilty of frustrating the grace of God, of neutralizing it because of my reliance upon myself.

Sometimes we fail to realize that God wants to employ his divine influence upon our hearts in order to deliver us from whatever is contaminating our thoughts, attitudes, perspective, and actions.

When God highlights our sin, it is not for the purpose of condemning us but rather because he wants to deliver us. As we come into the light of his word, God's grace begins to flow.

I am in prison for a crime I did not commit, but I believe my imprisonment has served a purpose. It has given me time to face the ugliness of who I had become. When God revealed my heart to me, I was in denial because I couldn't believe all the garbage that was inside me. But as I accepted what I couldn't see within me, God's grace began to flow in such a way where deliverance was possible.

The person I was is not the person I am today, by the grace of God. I learned through humility to "receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls" (JAMES 1:21, KJV). That grace has not ceased but continues, an ever-flowing gift from God.

PRAYER: God, like a master physician, you diagnose the source of our ailments in order to uproot them. At the same time, you call us to yield to your revelatory word that sheds light upon our darkness. In doing so, we invite you, the God of all grace, to flow into our hearts, unhindered, producing tangible and palpable change. We thank you, Eternal Father, that you do not give up on us but rather continuously pursue us, covering us with your manifold grace that is indeed able to recover souls. AMEN.

HEBREWS 12:5-7

And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son" (NIV).

Each one of us has made mistakes in our lives—bad decisions based on an in-the-moment impulse. Sometimes those mistakes cost us dearly, causing years of deep pain, suffering, and devastating loss. In Genesis, we see Esau give up his long-term inheritance in exchange for a bowl of stew, an object of short-term, immediate gratification.

In my own life 19 years ago, I lost my job with the electrical union and decided to sell drugs to make ends meet and provide for my family. As a result of this bad decision, I ended up in prison with a natural life sentence without the possibility of parole. But God got a hold of me and chastened me with his loving grace, transforming my heart through years of fiery trials that have shaped my character.

Our choices can evoke God's discipline, but the good news is that God's discipline extends from his love and grace. His purpose is to correct, train, and heal his sons and daughters. This requires our enduring faith, trust, and obedience in God. Our response to God's chastening is what makes all the difference, that is, whether we receive it as his love, or reject it and become bitter.

When self-destructive behavior from our past threatens to re-emerge in our present in moments of weakness and temptation, how can we begin to renew our spiritual vitality? By following Jesus Christ and drawing on his strength each day as we walk on the straight paths (HEBREWS 12:13). We pursue peace with all people and holiness so that we might not give up the birthright that is ours only by God's chastening grace. Today, because I've chosen to accept God's discipline as his love and grace, faithfully enduring pain and allowing it to train me, I now have joy and hope for today and for a better tomorrow.

PRAYER: Lord God, cleanse our hearts and remove any roots of bitterness that have grown out of our personal rebellion. Give us a renewed spirit and attitude of mind to be readily open to receive your grace. Teach us to endure the pain and suffering of loss and loneliness, of shame, rejection, and ongoing conflicts in our lives, so that we may be trained by them and yield good, godly character, for your glory and for our good. Thank you for your joy and the hope you give us. In Jesus's name we pray, AMEN.

JEREMIAH 31:2-4

This is what the LORD says: "The people who survive the sword will find favor in the wilderness; I will come to give rest to Israel." The LORD appeared to us in the past, saying: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness. I will build you up again, and you, Virgin Israel, will be rebuilt. Again you will take up your timbrels and go out to dance with the joyful" (NIV).

The prophet Jeremiah was called to speak to a people who had forsaken the Lord. When he went out to them, he encountered resistance from a nation that had already been delivered from the oppressive regime of Pharaoh in the land of Egypt. Yet Jeremiah persistently confronted the leaders who had led God's people astray. Even after he was taken captive to Egypt, Jeremiah never stopped doing what he was called to do.

Going through my own wilderness experience, dealing with a monumental miscarriage of justice for 23 years, I have been stretched, challenged, and changed. God's grace—his unmerited favor and mercy—has been sufficient for me as I've been able to overcome obstacles and trust him in all things. No good thing will he withhold from those who walk uprightly in his anointing grace. He will do the same for you.

Each of us was born with a special gift and purpose. Through God's grace, we survive all kinds of trials. Let us remember that his grace is all we need. In grace I am guaranteed sufficiency, more than enough.

PRAYER: Father, thank you for your anointing grace. Thank you that because of your grace, mercy, and everlasting love, we are able to survive our wilderness experience. Thank you that through your loving kindness, we are being rebuilt and restored. Thank you that because of your grace, we are not consumed. Help us to see how much you love us. We love you and praise you. In Jesus's name, AMEN.