

Two Sunday ago... after church... my wife and I decided to drive up to the Newberry Volcanic Monument area. ... Only... this time... instead of driving the ten or fifteen miles into the National Park... we thought we might turn off much sooner... at the McKay Crossing... (not far from Highway 97)... and explore the Peter Skene Ogden Trail. Although we have lived here for sixteen years... we had never before walked this river trail... which is so close to home. I always thought that the real beauty was further up the road... at the higher elevations. But over the years we kept hearing about a river-rock water-slide... which the locals call the “Paulina Plunge.”

We found a place to park... even though there were plenty of cars around. From the start of the trail head... the hike was about three miles. It was very scenic... but... at this time of year... there are a lot of people... horses... and dogs... who share the trail to this popular destination. ... It was about 4:00 in the afternoon... and after watching many visitors and vacationers sliding down the water ride... we decided to head back to our vehicle. ... On our way back... is when we encountered the most people... who were headed for “Paulina Plunge”... late in the afternoon. Coming face-to-face with them on the trail... we could see the excitement and anticipation... of their eventual arrival at this natural water park.

I’m not exactly sure what possessed me at the time... but as we were about to pass one family with an energetic young boy that had “adventure” written all over his face... I said... “*You had better hurry... because they turn the water off at five...*”

... ..

Do you ever stare with amazement at a rushing river or a creek full of water... and wonder where all that water is coming from...? How is it... that water just keeps coming... and coming... and it never seems to end...? Unless the river starts at the dam of a reservoir... there is no faucet or spigot to stop the flow. (It doesn't turn off at 5... or 10... or even midnight...)

It was after a camping trip near a river with my family several years ago... (when I had been amazed at the constant water flow)...that I decided to use Niagra Falls as an illustration of God's unfathomable and never-ending grace. ... An estimated 500,000 tons of water rush over Niagra Falls every minute... of every single day. ... What a picture of God's grace that He has for you and I...! It never runs dry. It is constant. It is abundant.

Oh! Wait a minute. ... I read this week that there was a time... when Niagra did actually run out of water. (TRUE STORY!) On March 29... 1948... the falls suddenly stopped. ... People living within the sound of the falls were awakened by the overwhelming silence. ... They believed it was a sign that the world was coming to an end. ... It was thirty hours before the rush of water resumed.

What happened? ... Heavy winds had set the ice fields of Lake Erie in motion. ... Tons of ice jammed the Niagara River entrance near Buffalo and stopped the flow of the river... until the ice shifted again.

So now... my use of Niagra Falls to illustrate God's grace has changed... because of the ice-stopping incident of 1948. Let me try it out on you... Just as only one thing – ice - has ever stopped the massive flow of water

over Niagra Falls... *The massive flow of God's grace in our lives can be blocked ONLY by cold indifference.*

The grace of God means something like God telling us: “*Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because of My grace. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. I love you...*”

But God’s grace has a catch. (Here is the fine print.) ... Like any other gift... the gift of grace can be yours - only if you'll reach out and take it.

(In other words)... *The flow of God's grace in our lives can be blocked only by cold indifference....* Lack of appreciation... (ignoring... not regarding God’s grace as relevant to us)... will block its flow to you and I.

I don’t know about you... but I want to learn to recognize it... and grow in my appreciation of it... because I do not want its flow to be interrupted... or hindered in any way... in my life. That is why I am very thankful for the passage that we come to this morning in our study of Genesis. We are going to consider God’s grace through different angles. It is my prayer that (every day) each of us might identify it better... appropriate it more... and rely on it with greater dependence.

Why...? Why is it so hard to recognize...? And what is so amazing about grace...? ... Grace is often unnoticed (in spite of it being amazing)... because it works against the grain of common sense. ... Hard-nosed common sense will tell you that you are too wrong to meet the standards of

a holy God. ... Persistent grace tells you that God will still act on your behalf... in spite of so much *in you* that is *wrong*.

Realistic common sense tells you that you are too weak... too harassed... too human... to change for the better. ... Grace gives you power to send you on the way to being a better person. ... Plain common sense may tell you that you are caught in a rut of fate or futility. ... Grace promises that you can trust God to have a better tomorrow for you... than the day you have made for yourself.

So let's get started with our study now... in order that we might better appreciate this tremendous gift of God to us.

The first angle for us to investigate... started with our passage of study we had last week. In it... we saw that the son of promise (Isaac) was finally born to Abraham and Sarah.

The coming of this little boy (Isaac) into the home... sure did produce a great deal of difficulty. ... We find that the boy who was already in the home... (the son of Hagar... who was named "Ishmael")... was mocking. ... And in this cruel act... we begin now to see the nature and the character of Ishmael. ... (You see)... Up to this point... Ishmael seemed to be a pretty nice boy. ... But now... with the appearance of this other son in the family... Ishmael really shows his true colors.

The readiness to mock God's promised son... was deeply imbedded within Ishmael's heart... apparently so imbedded that he would never change. God knew this... so the only way the conflict could ever be resolved was for Ishmael and Hagar... his mother... to be sent away. ... The mocking by

Ishmael made it impossible for he and Isaac to be in the same household... so a separation resulted.

There is bitterness... grief... and tragedy all over this story. ... Abraham disowns his son. ... Ishmael and Hagar are out of the household and must struggle in the wilderness alone. ... And the irony is... God pronounced this the right thing to do.

Genesis 21:11-12

It is extremely hard for human beings to understand the difficult things that must happen... and the anguishing... hard choices we must make... to straighten out the problems... (which were created by our sinful choices.) Full obedience to God... can seem wrong... because it may involve pain. ...But it is only through our full obedience... that God can make right... what we made wrong.

As we saw last week... the Apostle Paul... in Galatians 4... used our Genesis 21 passage as an illustration... of the fact that a believer has two natures. ... Until you are converted by Christ... you have an old nature... and that old nature controls you. ... (You do what you want to do.) ... And what you do that comes naturally is not always the nicest sort of thing.

But when you are born again... you receive a new nature. ... And when you receive a new nature... that is where the trouble always begins. Because when we have two natures... there will be a battle going on... between the old nature and the new nature. Paul expresses this battle over in Romans chapter 7: "*For I do not do the good that I want, but the evil that I do not*

want, I keep doing" (Rom. 7:19). That is... the new nature doesn't want to... but the old nature wants to do it... and the old nature is in control.

The time comes when you have to make a decision as to which nature you are going to live by. ... You must make a determination in this matter of yielding to the Lord. ... You either have to permit the Holy Spirit to move in your life... or else you have to go through life controlled by the flesh. ... There is no third alternative for the child of God. ... The son of the bondwoman must be put out. ... That is exactly what we have here in Genesis: the son of the bondwoman Hagar had to be put out.

We might think that Abraham did an overly harsh thing. But here is the spiritual lesson for you and I... behind Abraham's action. **We are to make no provision for the flesh. Only harsh measures will do.** ... If we give it encouragement... or indulge it... back it will come.

Is there a sin in your life... that you know you have not been harsh enough with...? ... Do you still keep the tools that you use for lust close by... (available to be used in future weak moments.) ... Do you see how close you can get to the fire (playing with sin) thinking that you can run away if things "get out of hand"... (whatever that means?) Abraham's harshness is an illustration for us to deal harshly with our sin nature – even if it anguishes us.

Genesis 21:14-16

Why did Abraham not give the two exiles more abundant provisions for their journey? ... Why did he not give them cattle and tents? ... Certainly he was rich enough.

Hagar and Ishmael had soon used up all their provisions. ... There was no more bread and not even any more water left. ... They were so exhausted that they could go no farther. ... Ishmael (who was a sixteen or seventeen year old young man)... had apparently fainted from thirst and exhaustion. Hagar pulled him over under a bush and went off and sat down about a bow shot away. ... There was no more hope. ... The situation was now beyond repair. ... Hagar could do no more. She just could not bear watching him die.

This seems so cruel and unnecessary. ... **UNTIL** we stop and consider the danger he would have put them in... by giving them cattle and tents.

Abraham knew the character of the people in that area. Do you remember what Abraham told Abimelech...? "*I thought that there was no fear of God in this place...*" ... So if Abraham sent a defenseless slave woman and her son (just the two of them)... out among such godless people... and they travelled with great riches... for all to see... such as cattle... ... - how long could we reasonably expect... before they would be murdered... and those goods stolen from them...? Travelling with any recognizable wealth would have imperiled them. It would attract murderous thieves who would be emboldened by their weak and defenseless condition.

In any case... the day before they were sent away... NOTICE what God promised Abraham...

Genesis 21:13

God promised eventual prosperity for them. Abraham (no doubt) believed God... but did not want to put them in *immediate* danger.

Lastly... so that we do not get the wrong idea that Abraham was excessively cold-hearted... by the time we get to Genesis chapter 25... verse 6... it will be revealed that Ishmael was given gifts from Abraham. ... Although he was put out... Father Abraham did provide for them... (at least this one time. There easily might have been other times.) And when Abraham died... Genesis 25:9 says that Ishmael was beside Isaac... as a recognized son... while Abraham was buried.

Worn out with the rigors of the way... and with her son exhausted and spent... Hagar helped Ishmael to a shelter under a nearby shrub... and then sat down and wept. ... On the purely human level... we can only try to imagine the bitter thoughts must have been hers. ... What unforgiving thoughts must have had flooded her mind about Sarah and Abraham. How humanly impossible it must have been for her to think well of these two Old Testament Saints... from which she had been expelled.

Their backs were against the wall. ... They were at the end of their ropes... and were helplessly hanging on. ... In her last recorded words (in verse sixteen)... Hagar lifts up her voice and weeps... in exhausted frustration and despair. The claws of loneliness had her in their grasp... and death was stalking both of them closely... waiting for the moment to claim its prey. ... Imagine the hurt they were going through. ... Ishmael has lost his father and now is about to lose his life unless God intervenes. ... Imagine the sting of rejection they were both facing.

However... behind the scenes... God was still at work and... in wonderful grace... He came to the desperate woman to minister personally and

directly to her needs. ... In His Own loving way... He saved Hagar and Ishmael... and sent them on their way to work out their destinies in the world.

Genesis 21:17-21

There may be times in our life when our resources dry up... like the bread and water of Hagar. ... There may be moments in our life... when people we love and depend upon... turn their backs upon us (it seems.) ... Our back may be against the wall... and we don't know what to do... or where to turn. ... All we can do is cry (it seems) as Hagar did.

So what do we need to know about God's grace for moments like these...?

The times of our utter helplessness... the times when our back is against the wall... are God's opportunities to show Himself ***strong***. ... But do not try to reach up to Him... with any kind of sense that you deserve His help. (We read in verse 13... that God would help Ishmael... because he was Abraham's offspring.)

Both Haggar and Ishmael had spurned God's truth... which Abraham believed and was therefore considered "righteous." ... Both had mocked the son... who God had promised. ... And they continued to show how worldly their hearts were. ... Ishmael became a hunter. ... He made his dwelling in the wilderness and took the final step that cut him off from all spiritual potential by marrying an Egyptian. ... The scales of his life... already weighed toward the world... now went solidly down.

The point that I would like for you to see about God's grace is this. (I said it earlier... but hear it again... this time through the illustration of today's passage)...

Hard-nosed common sense will tell you that you are too wrong to meet the standards of a holy God. ... Why would God even care about your blight...? ... But God's pursuing grace tells you that God will still act on your behalf... in spite of so much in you that is wrong.

Realistic common sense tells you that you are too weak... too harassed... too human... to change for the better. ... (But because you are related to Jesus)... God's grace will give you the power to send you on the way to being a better person. ... Do not discount God's grace! Do not inhibit its flow to you. ... Plain common sense may tell you that you are caught in a rut of fate or futility. ... God's Grace promises that you can trust God to have a better tomorrow for you... than the day you have made for yourself.

Here is another thing to notice about grace - **we often cannot recognize it.** ... God was bringing about nations from both Isaac and Ishmael. They had to be separated... in order for that to happen. To Abraham... God's grace only seemed like agony... when he had to separate them. ... And then Ishmael's and Hagar's agony... was really the needed toughening process of desert survival... so that the nations that would come from him... could develop... and develop completely distinct from God's people (the Jews) ... Ishmael's descendants would thrive in the harsh regions... where few people could live. But God was with him... and made it possible.

Now... at this point... I think there might be a blessing for us if we did some deep thinking. The truth is... without affliction and hardship... we

would be trivial... superficial... flat-sided beings. (LISTEN!) You and I would be people without depth or substance (people with shallow faith.) This truth is a life-changing revelation when taken to heart. ... God works in and through the fluctuations of life to mature our faith.

But let me re-phrase this point slightly. Any hardship that is in your life right now... (anything that looks like a **curse**)... is just as likely to be a **blessing**. ... More often than we think... even the anguishing trials that we face... are God's **cures** for whatever is wrong in our spiritual life (our spiritual deficiencies.) ... What we think are curses... are actually God's cures. ... Take this to heart! ... God's grace is sometimes hard to recognize... but there is blessing when we do.

Is there a hardship in your life right now... that God has... as a **cure** for you...? Do you have too much self-trust... trying to make spiritual things happen through your own strength... manipulation... or deception...? ... Does God want a stronger fellowship with you...? Is there some needed endurance of faith... for tasks God wants you to accomplish...? ... What challenges... or difficulties do you face...? ... Ask God NOT to remove it... until it cures you of whatever deficiency God is trying to fix. ... Do not discount (or ignore) the grace of God.

... ..

The next scene in our passage this morning provides us with more needed insight about God's grace.

Genesis 21:22-24

We meet up again with Abimelech... with whom Abraham had an unsavory encounter... regarding Abraham's lying about Sarah... as reported in the previous chapter of Genesis. ... But here we see that Abraham had risen from disgrace... to having a positive witness for God. ... The Philistine's observation... "*God is with you*" says it all. ... It was the recognition that the presence of God was with Abraham. ... Abimelech had been observing Abraham... and observed that Abraham was enjoying the blessings of the presence of God. ... Abimelech wanted to be on good terms with such a man.

Abraham had blown his testimony the first time with Abimelech the first time. But again... we see that God's pursuing grace will still act on our behalf... in spite of so much in us that is wrong. This does not mean that we can live with no concern about correcting what is wrong inside of us... because God's grace will still act . Paul shows us in Romans chapter six that people who think that way show that they have never known God's grace in the first place.

Romans 6:15-16 (ESV)

¹⁵ What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶ Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?

Those who cheapen grace by thinking they can keep right on sinning... have never presented themselves as obedient servants to Christ. (They are not saved.)

But as believers... when we do blow it... we can still experience the flow of God's grace. This is what Abraham shows us.

Lillie Baltrip is a good bus driver. ... In fact... according to the Fort Worth *Star-Telegram* of June 17, 1988... the Houston school district nominated her for a safe-driving award. ... Her colleagues even trusted her to drive a busload of them to an awards ceremony for safe drivers. ...

Unfortunately... (wouldn't you know it?)... on the way to the ceremony... Lillie turned a corner too sharply... and flipped the bus over... sending herself and sixteen others to the hospital for minor emergency treatment.

Did Lillie... (accident free for the whole year)... get her award anyway? ...
... No. ... Award committees rarely operate on the principle of grace. But how fortunate we are... that even when we don't maintain a spotless life-record... we can still depend on God's grace... not on our performance!

Have you mistakenly thought that you have been sidelined... that God will not use you... because you have blown your Christian walk in some way...? Do not ignore or discount God's grace.

Abraham also now had a new sense of confidence. He no longer was timid and evasive in dealing with royalty. ... So Abraham put Abimelech's nonaggression proposal to the test by charging that Abimelech's servants were stealing one of his wells.

Genesis 21:25-26

Abraham ran the risk of bad feelings arising... if he brought up the well matter. ... But if he failed to mention the seizure... it could lead to far more trouble in the future. ... There would be an unfair... dishonest... and unjust matter that was not settled.

Wells were of great value in that land of no rivers. ... Flocks were many and needed much water. ... Therefore to take a well was high crime. Abimelech's servants had not only **taken** the well... but had taken it by **violence**... which means they took it by force... and would cause harm to those who rightfully tried to use it. ... This was indeed justified reason for Abraham to reprove Abimelech. The shoe was now on the other foot. ... **BEFORE** it had been **Abimelech** giving Abraham a necessary reproof.

Abimelech... tongue in cheek... denied all knowledge of the incident... and... in the form and manner of the times... signed a contract with Abraham... confirming Abraham's right to the well. ... Probably he had no intention of honoring the contract... but at least it looked good. (The Philistines... we will see in Genesis chapter 26... will ignore this contract.)

Genesis 21:27-34

This peace between the Philistines and Abraham lasted the rest of Abraham's life... which was about 70 more years. ... It may have been the longest time of peace between the Philistines and God's chosen people in Bible times... because the Philistines were later perpetual enemies of Israel.

Both parties are more than satisfied. Abimelech and Phicol return home with the covenant they had sought... and Abraham is granted (at least a temporary) use of the well he had dug. Abraham now has (at least) a well that he can call his own - in the land of Canaan. ... Out of gratitude to the LORD for His continuing grace... he plants a tamarisk... and worships there.

Abraham was reassured about his future... and God's continuing provision for his needs.

The section about Abraham planting a tree... is designed to show that gradually Abraham is establishing roots in the land — digging wells and planting trees. ... Additionally... as relationships are established with the peoples in the land... the blessing that God promised... when Abraham was back in Ur... is taking root. ... Finally... the relationship with God is taking root... as land and family become established.

But... in a sense only this sets up a false sense of security... as the narrator gets ready to drop the bombshell of Genesis 22... (when God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac... which we will study next week.) ... Just as the elements of the covenant are beginning to look routine... a major disruption is about to occur.

Today we have been examining the grace of God. ... We have seen #1. that the times of our utter helplessness... the times when our back is against the wall... are God's opportunities to show Himself strong. #2. It often comes disguised as a hardship (something that we don't want)... and #3. we have seen that grace is not something we deserve. God gives it to us in spite of so much that is wrong in us. I will close with a reminder of the fourth thing we have observed today about grace.

#4. The massive flow of God's grace in our lives can be blocked

ONLY by cold indifference.