



GRACE IS EXPECTANT HOPE!

Who is Grace Series

Pastor Al Detter Various Texts

5:30, 9:30 & 11:00am Grace Church October 6-7, 2007

Today we launch a special series called "Who Is Grace?" Actually the series is part of the most ambitious effort in the history of our church to let the community know we're here and on the move. You'll be hearing a lot about our communication blitz in the coming weeks. It's going to be amazing. We need everyone to be involved in this effort.

Starting October 25 and into early December, the whole Erie community will be exposed to the question "Who Is Grace?" Billboards, website, yard signs, car stickers, the newspaper. There will be a sense of mystery before the community. But as the campaign goes along, they're going to find out that Grace is not the name of a lady or a boat or even a new building. Grace is a group of people that has a certain character about them. We're inviting the community to meet us and maybe even to become part of us.

Who is Grace? It's us! Each one of us who calls Grace our church home, is Grace. For the next 8 weeks, we're going to talk about some of our character traits. We can't deal with all that we are. But we're going to hit some of our key defining qualities.

The 1st great quality of Grace is our HOPE. We're a people of hope. What is hope? Hope is an expectancy that something you want to happen could or will happen. That's the basic essence of hope.

Hope is a common word in our language. We use the word a lot. "I hope I get married." "I hope my team wins." "I hope I pass." "I hope I get a nice gift for Christmas." My father-in-law has said this sentence almost every time he comes in the front door of our home over the years, "No-body home, I hope. I hope. I hope." It drove our kids nuts.

Hope is a word the Bible borrowed from common language. The biblical authors took this word and filled it with special meaning for believers. It's a beautiful and powerful word, a word that can get us through anything we face in life if we let it. So I want us 1st to understand the word "hope" as it comes to us from the Bible and then I want to apply it to our church.

There are 7 necessary factors involved in biblical hope. You have to have all these factors or you don't really have hope. So let's take a look at what's involved in hope:

Factor #1—A Preferred Future

What you hope for is not a current reality. The condition you wish for is not present. It's something that you want to happen. Hebrews 11:1 says that what we hope for is not currently seen. It doesn't yet exist in the sense you wish for it to exist. But you believe that it will.

Often hope is connected to a desire to improve or remove a difficult condition or situation. There's something causing anxiety or stress or disappointment or fear or grief. Hope is the anticipation of a reality that doesn't include those things. Hope speaks about relief from pain and an improved quality of life and relationships. So hope is very much about a better tomorrow.

Factor #2—A Plausible Reality

There must be a possible situation for which you hope. I hope I'll live to 85 is possible. I hope I'll live to 150 is not. Hope involves what is sensible. But to be honest, there are some situations that look hopeless. It looks like all evidence is to the contrary of anything possible.

For instance, who would have thought that Abraham and Sarah could have had children in their 90's? I like what Romans 4:18 says, "In hope against hope Abraham believed in order that he might become the father of many nations." We must remember that with God, all things are possible. That's what makes the impossible plausible.

Factor #3—A Powerful Object

For the Christian, hope is dependant on a person. The Scriptures constantly identify God as the object of our hope. Here's just a sample—Psalm 78:7, "That they might put their hope in God. Jer. 17:7, "Blessed is the one whose hope is in the Lord." I Timothy 1:1, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus according to the commandment of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus, who is our hope."

God is all-knowing and all-powerful. Therefore, we can trust God for a desired outcome because He Himself is our preferred future. If we got nothing else we wanted in this world or in eternity, if we got God, would that be enough? The Bible says that we will get God and a whole lot more. So frequently in the Bible we're told that our hope is God. If He doesn't come through, there is no hope.

By the way, did you know that God doesn't have hope? He doesn't need it. To Him the future is a present reality. We humans are the ones who need hope. And our hope must be in the God who gives hope (Rom. 15:13). How does God give hope?

Factor #4—A Promising Word

God speaks forth promises and prophecies in the Bible. There He tells us what the future will be like. He spoke one promise and prophecy after another. If we believe the Bible is true, it inspires hope. If we don't, we lose hope or begin to trust in the promises of others. What a shallow platform that is! How many people have let you down? How many have you let down?

The Word of God is the basis of our hope. It's hope-filled. If we believe its pages, we can believe for a better tomorrow. Even in the worst of circumstances, God told Israel that He had plans for their welfare and not for calamity to give them a future and a hope (Jer. 29:11). God would say the same thing to us today. No matter how bad it is, the Bible is our assurance that things will get better.

Factor #5—A Previous Example

One of the functions of the Bible is to show us examples of people whose hopes came to pass. The greatest chapter in the Bible about previous examples of hope is Hebrews 11. In verse 1, it says that faith is the assurance of things hoped for. There were many people in the Bible who hoped for things that seemed so unlikely. One by one, example after example, Hebrews 11 shows us real people who realized their hopes and dreams even when their current reality seemed so unlikely.

God wants us to look back at actual people who hoped for more than we'll ever hope for who saw things come to pass. He wants those examples to inspire hope in us.

Factor #6—A Persevering Wait

This is the hard part of hope. Hope involves waiting. It takes a period of time for hope to become sight. Waiting in hope requires perseverance. In I Thessalonians 1:3, we find the phrase "steadfastness of hope". It means an active fortitude to hang in there without giving up. The word for "steadfast" or "persevere" means an annoying, persistent cough. Our hope is like a cough that won't stop until we realize the dream.

The Psalmist says, "I wait for the Lord and in His Word do I hope (Ps. 130:5)." Sometimes we don't think we can wait much longer. We feel like we're going to buckle under pressure or disappointment. But hope keeps us from giving up or compromising our standards and morals.

Factor #7—A Prevailing Team

I found something amazing in the New Testament this week as I studied for this sermon. Hope has some teammates. Hope doesn't go it alone. Hope needs support. Do you know the primary teammates of hope? FAITH and LOVE. I found 11 passages in the New Testament in which we consistently find these 3 things together—faith, hope, and love (Rom. 5:2-5; I Thes. 1:3; Gal. 5:5-6; I Cor. 13:13; Eph. 4:2-5; Heb. 6:10-12; Heb. 10:22-24; Col. 1:4-5; I Thes. 5:8; I Pet. 1:3-8; I Pet. 1:21-22).

Hope will suffer if we don't have love and faith to go with it. All 3 must be functioning well together. When they do, hope will be strong and one day, hope will be realized.

Friends, that's what biblical hope is all about. The term "hope" is used in the Bible some 137 times. It's a major theme of the Bible. Hebrews 6:19 calls this kind of hope "the anchor of the soul". Hope is what keeps us from giving up. Hope is what drives us on when things are tough. Hope is the power that enables us to endure until what we wish for comes to pass. This kind of hope comes from God and His Word. Without God and the Bible, our hope would be anemic at best.

Now, let's apply hope to Grace. Grace is a group of people who practice hope. Yes, there are times we struggle with hope. But Grace is demonstrably a people of hope. I want to commend you for your hope and I thank God for your hope.

There was another church known for its hope. Let's turn to I Thessalonians 1:2-3 for a moment. Here's what Paul said about the Thessalonian church: "We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith, and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."

A little background on this church. On Paul's 2nd missionary journey, he founded this church in Thessalonica in about AD 50. Thessalonica was a thriving seaport and the capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia. It was on the Egnatian Way, the major road from Rome to the Orient. It was a great place for a church. Paul had to flee for his life because of persecution there (Acts 17:1-10). He knew these new believers needed to be grounded in their faith and he was worried about them. So he sent Timothy to check up on them and to bring him back word. When Timothy reported back in to Paul, he heard they were doing well even in the face of many questions and challenges. So in I Thessalonians 1, Paul rejoices in their progress and for the good reputation they had gained in the entire region.

As difficult as things were for the Thessalonian church, they had a good supply of hope. Paul could have gotten up and asked, "Who is Thessalonica?" And he could have answered, "Thessalonica is hope!"

Well, Grace Church is hope. Paul could have said some-thing like that about us. What characterizes our hope? What is our hope about? Here's my answer—Grace is hope in 6 vital areas.

1. Grace is hope through trouble.

A lot of you are struggling. You are in pain. You have a difficult marriage. You have wayward children. You have more bills than money. You lost a job or don't have the job you want. You're facing an illness. The list goes on. But you keep coming to church. You keep going to small group. You keep praying. You keep believing tomorrow will be different. Trouble hasn't ruined your hope.

I've seen some of you in almost impossible situations. Sometimes I see too much of it on your behalf and I struggle to keep my hope. But guess what I've seen in the last 3 weeks. I have seen 3 separate cases of what seemed

to be hopeless situations turn around. The people involved didn't lose hope even though it got wobbly at times. They kept hope! And that has recharged my hope.

Our church went through some painful times 6, 8, 10 years ago. Problems like we faced have destroyed many church-es. But we were people of hope. We believed God could bring us through. We weren't about to give up. Look what's going on today. Hope is becoming sight. Hope is paying off.

Paul talked about the groaning of the world in Romans 8. It wants to be relieved of its pain. In verses 24-25, Paul tells us that it's hope that keeps us going or we wouldn't make it through pain.

Grace is a church that experiences trouble and feels pain. But we find ways to hope. And many are seeing things turn around. If it hasn't happened to you yet, do what Grace people do—KEEP HOPING!

2. Grace is hope for church growth.

This couldn't be any more evident than in the bold step of faith we're taking as a church right now. We're moving to a couple dozen acres. We're building a 43,000 sq. ft. building including a Worship Center that will seat 800. And we're going to the new building with 3 weekend services. Sounds like hope to me.

Why would a church do that? I can only think of 2 reasons. Either we're crazy. We could have said, "We'll stay on this site and limit our ministry". Or we have incredible hope that we're going to reach many more people for Christ.

Our hope is that we're going to see something like what happened in the book of Acts. We're going to be a vibrant, Spirit-filled community of people and God is going to add to our numbers in significant ways. The story of Acts is the increase of the church. God started adding to the church in Acts 2 and by the middle of the book, God stopped adding and started multiplying the church.

Why? God was reaching lost people in the community. And it was all about the message of Jesus Christ and the amazing power of Christ being displayed in the church. We have hope that God is going to add and maybe multiply our numbers in our new facility. Our new facility is an object lesson of that kind of hope.

3. Grace is hope in salvation.

If you're a member of our church, you've professed to be a born again believer in Jesus Christ. You've entered into a state the Bible calls salvation. You've been spared the wrath of God and hell because you came to God in repentance and sought His forgiveness. That salvation is an actual accomplished fact in the eyes of God.

But we haven't realized full salvation yet. We struggle with temptation and sin. We haven't yet been delivered from the corruption of this world. Therefore salvation is still our hope. We haven't yet seen our salvation even though we believe that it's real. So the Apostle Paul talks about the hope of our salvation even after we've been saved (Rom 8:24; I Thes. 5:8).

Our church hopes for this aspect of salvation! We believe that one day we'll enter the presence of God and all sin and evil and pain and suffering will be gone forever (Rev. 21:4). This hope is what keeps us going when we get tired of the journey. Our hope is not just in a theology of salvation but an actual coming deliverance from all the stains and struggles and imperfections of this world. Our church really hopes in this!

4. Grace is hope in the resurrection.

This kind of goes along with our hope of salvation. But the New Testament makes a special point about this hope. Our hope is that when we die, because we have believed in Christ, our bodies will be raised from the dead. Our bodies are part of who we are and our hope is that our bodies will one day come out of the grave.

The Apostle Paul is the great teacher of the hope of the resurrection. When he clashed with his opponents in Acts, he declared several times that he was on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:6; 26:6-8). His big treatise on the resurrection is found in I Corinthians 15. He tells us that if there is no resurrection from the dead, our hope in Christ has been in vain (vs. 14).

The Thessalonian believers wondered whether they'd ever see their dead loved ones again. In the incredible teaching in I Thessalonians 4:13-18, Paul tells them that when Jesus returns for His church, the dead will be resurrected and we'll all be together with Him forever.

At Grace we have a strong hope in the resurrection. As a pastor for 29 years in this church, I've stood at the gravesides of over 250 people. We sorrow, yes. But not as those who have no hope. We're going to see our loved ones again.

A little footnote. This flesh and blood body will not be raised as it is—a corruptible flesh and blood body. We'll get a new body without any earthly corruption. It'll be both physical and spiritual after the pattern of Christ's resurrected body. So just in case you're wondering whether you're going to get stuck with aspects of your current body you don't like—the answer is “no”. You're going to be raised up from death in a new body you'll like a whole lot.

5. Grace is hope in Christ's return.

There's something in the New Testament called “the blessed hope (Titus 2:13)”. It's the hope that Jesus is coming again to this earth to catch away His bride, the church, and with them, usher in His eternal kingdom. The biggest hope of the church is that Jesus is coming again.

The Apostle John is clear about people who have this hope. This hope results in purity of life (I Jn. 3:3). When we have the hope that Jesus is coming again, we want to share His holiness.

Jesus said there's another result of the hope of His return.

We're going to be diligent about our mission. If we're expecting Jesus to return, we won't be asleep. We're going to be about the Master's business at the time of His coming (Matt. 24:42-46).

Of all the hopes of Grace I've talked about, this is the one that is probably the weakest in our church. We tend to go about life without an acute sense of expectancy concerning the Lord's return. And as a result, we tend to get comfort-able in this life and we're often more about our business than the Master's business. I think this is true of the church in America in general.

The compelling hope of the early church was the return of Jesus Christ. We're seeing signs of prophecy they never saw. The hope of Christ's return should grab us every day even more than in the days of the early church. We want to be ready for His return!

6. Grace is hope in eternal life.

This hope is connected to some of the other hopes I mentioned—salvation, resurrection, and rapture (the re-turn of Christ to earth). But this hope is also featured on its own merits in the New Testament. Paul tells Timothy that we have the hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago (Titus 1:2). Paul says that we are heirs according to the hope of eternal life (Titus 3:7).

The Bible teaches that to come into a personal relationship with God through Christ is get something called eternal or everlasting life. People who get that life live forever. We may die physically and lay this body down for a season. But as Jesus said at the tomb of Lazarus, “He who believes in Me shall live even if he dies and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die (Jn. 11:25-26).” This is the hope of eternal life and we believe this at Grace in a big way!

What has been the #1 desire of mankind back to the days of the ancients? To live forever. I am confident that every born again person in this church has this hope—that because they've believed in Christ, they'll live forever. Our physical death is not the end. Everlasting life is our vibrant hope at Grace.

Conclusion

Who is Grace? Grace is you. Grace is me. Grace is anyone who calls this community of believers their family. Grace is not really a building.

We're a complex group. There are many things that characterize and define us. We talked about one of them today. Grace is expectant hope. We are forward-looking and we are hope-filled.

We've faced some challenges personally and as a church. And we're going to face some more. But we keep expect-ing to emerge victorious. We're a people of resilient hope. And there's room for more "hoppers"! We're inviting hundreds more in our community to hope with us. Let's find some people who need hope and ask them to join us in hope.

Who is Grace? Grace is expectant hope. It's a great thing to be a church of hope!