

MEET GRACE... **GOD'S GRACE**

KEY TERMS:

- **Grace:** Free and undeserved favor and help from God.
 - **Sin:** a deliberate offence against or choice not to love God
 - **Temptation:** a trial or test that can lead us to not choose God
 - **Hope:** One of the three theological virtues; it is a combination of the desire of something and the expectation of receiving it, specifically union with God and eternal happiness (no more suffering and pain).
 - **Redemptive Suffering:** The belief that our suffering, when offered up as unitive to Christ's suffering in His Passion and death, can act as a small compensation for our sins or those of others.
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THE WOUND

Behind every wound is a story. When we get wounded, whether it's a burn, a cut, or a skinned knee, people always ask, "What happened?" or "How did you get that?"

(What was a time when you were wounded? What was the story behind your wound?)

Sin can also be understood as a wound. It is a wound in our relationships. When we sin, we wound our relationships with God, others, and even with ourselves. When we miss Mass on Sunday or fail to pray regularly, our relationship with God is wounded. When we gossip about others, lie to others, or steal from others, our relationships with others are wounded. When we cheat on a test, talk negatively about ourselves, or don't respect our bodies, our relationship with our very self is wounded.

Just like our physical wounds, our spiritual wounds also have a story. And usually every story about sin includes some sort of temptation. Take as an example the Fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis (Gen 3). God creates this beautiful garden, that has every kind of good thing in it for them, completely free. The only thing God asks is that they do not eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

God didn't say that because he wanted to make life difficult for Adam and Eve. The stories of Creation in Genesis are meant to reveal truths about human existence. The tree represents free will, our ability to choose good and evil. For human love to be authentic, it needs to be freely chosen. And so, God gave us the ability to choose to love Him or reject Him, so that our love is real.

We know what happens next. A snake comes along and tempts them, trying to convince them that the real reason that God made this rule was because He didn't want Adam and Eve to become gods

and be better than Him. Eventually, they give in and eat the fruit. But what ends up happening is that they now know what evil and suffering is and their relationship with God is broken. In the end, the temptation was a lie.

In reality, the devil, which means divider, is trying to divide the harmony between us and God because God is the source of all that is good. God shows us who we really are, and who we are is a beloved child of God. Moreover, God gives us His grace to sustain us in life. When we sin, we turn away from God's grace. So the divider tempts us to do just that: to turn away from God; to not trust God and say "I know better than God", just like Adam and Eve.

The reality is in times of temptation all we have to do is turn to God, ask for His grace and build the habit of trusting God in order to avoid what leads us to sin.

RESPONDING TO TEMPTATION

Take as an example the Gospel Reading for the 1st Sunday of Lent. Jesus goes into the desert to prepare for 40 days to prepare for his ministry. It's for this reason that we celebrate Lent for 40 days. While Jesus is there, the devil, the divider, comes and tempts Jesus to essentially distrust God; to believe that God the Father does not love Him and does not have His best interest at heart.

The divider tries to use three age old temptations: the desire to be satisfied (turn rocks into bread to eat), the desire to be in control (test whether God will save you by jumping off this tower), and the desire to have power (bow down to me and all the kingdoms of the world will be yours). Each time, Jesus succeeds in not falling into temptation. This, in part, is because Jesus is Divine, and so He cannot deny Himself and sin. But in his rejection of temptation, Jesus shows us how to respond to temptations: trust in God's grace.

(What was a time that you experienced God's grace and trusted in God despite temptation?)

Just because something looks good (like turning stones to bread did to a very hungry Jesus), or we have great success, will it really make our lives feel full and not empty? Will it cause more harm than good?

Just because we can finally be in control of everything and have power, will that solve our problems? Should we be trying to "play God" or "play" with other people's lives?

God's grace, His life-sustaining help, helps us to know how to answer these questions. God's grace is what reminded Jesus who God the Father really was during His temptations. God's grace is what sustained Jesus during His agony in the garden. It is God's grace that, when we are faced with temptation in our own lives, gives us the strength to turn to God the Father, rather than sin, and live the life He has called us to as a child of God.

WHAT ARE YOU AFRAID OF?

We all have fears. Which one do you think is the worst? What fears do you have?

While some fears can be humorous (like the fear of pickles...seriously it's a thing...it's called tristadekaphobia), sometimes our fears can be debilitating. They can cause stress, anxiety, and seriously affect our ability to function in our day to day lives. While we can joke about say a fear of spiders or heights, we may experience other fears that hit too close to home, such as the fear of not living up to someone's expectations, of not being good enough, of wondering will I always be alone, will anyone want me, of failing or not getting something that meant the world to us.

When things like this happen we can be tempted to do things we usually wouldn't: change our character, compromise on beliefs or values we always held as important, or even stop believing in God for seeming to let this darkness happen in our lives and not just taking it away.

Sometimes we can feel like the thief, crucified next to Jesus, who challenged Jesus saying "If you really are the Son of God, save yourself and us!" or like the people looking at Jesus on the cross saying "He saved others, why doesn't He save Himself and come down from the cross."

Part of what they didn't realize was that the darkness Jesus went through, the fear that caused him to sweat drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane (which is actually medically possible in moments of extreme stress and anxiety), was ultimately what won our salvation.

There is no Easter Sunday without Good Friday.

But we can argue that Jesus chose his darkness, chose to die for us. We may not have chosen the darkness we are experiencing. If anything, we may wish we could just get rid of it. So what do we do?

SEEING IN DARKNESS

This Sunday's Gospel depicts the Transfiguration. In it, Jesus takes Peter, James and John, his inner circle within the Apostles, to a mountain. There his appearance is transfigured - His glory is revealed in dazzling light and white clothing, lighting up what was once a dark mountain.

Next to Him appear Moses, the Lawgiver, and Elijah, the great prophet who wrote of Jesus' coming. Their presence further reveals who Jesus is: the fulfillment of the Law and the promised Messiah. If that was not enough, we hear the Father's voice saying "This is my beloved Son, listen to Him."

That's as clear of a sign as it comes. Have you ever been in the middle of fear, anxiety, darkness and not known what to do and just wish something similar could happen; that God come down and say exactly what to do?

The problem is, it's not that easy. For instance, when Peter is confronted with this clear sign of who Jesus is and what to do, He freaks out and says to Jesus "should we make three tents for you, Moses, and Elijah to sleep in". LIKE REALLY???. THAT'S WHAT YOU THINK TO SAY WHEN YOU FINALLY SEE GOD?!?!? LET'S PITCH SOME TENTS??

The reality is that it's never as simple as saying "God just take this darkness away from me" or "God tell me what to do." But there are some things we can learn from both Jesus' Transfiguration and Passion that can help us deal with darkness when it comes into our lives.

1. Know God is with you in the darkness

The Apostles were never by themselves on the mountain, even when they were confused and afraid. Jesus never abandoned them. He won't abandon you.

2. God knows what it is like to suffer

If you are struggling, know that God knows what it is like to experience pain, suffering, and rejection. Judas betrayed Him. He was kicked out of His hometown. His cousin Lazarus died. Peter denied Him three times. The people who welcomed Him on Palm Sunday yelled from Him to be crucified just 5 days later. We believe in a God of empathy. When we suffer, God suffers with us.

3. Be attentive to God working in your life

The Apostles did not know how to read the signs of the Transfiguration, so they became confused and afraid. We have to know how to hear and recognize what God is telling us even in the darkness. That takes building trust in God, prayer and having a community of faith to help us see what God is doing in our lives.

This is especially true if our darkness becomes too much to bear. Do not be afraid to ask for help because of stigmas or what other people may think. Asking for help is a sign of strength. Some things are never meant to be carried by just one person. Even Jesus had Simon help carry His cross. If you or someone you know is facing any kind of darkness, say something, PLEASE. You don't have to do this alone.

4. Redemptive Suffering

God does not desire for us to suffer. Yet, we recognize that suffering is a part of the human experience; an effect of original sin. We can either remain in our suffering, or give it to God. Like with the Crucifixion, God can take any evil and make good come from it. By taking our suffering and pain and offering it up to God, joining it to His cross, God can use our darkness to make light, to refine us, and make us stronger than we were before...if we let Him.

5. Remember that we are an Easter people

We believe in a God that conquered sin and death. Darkness may be a part of our lives, but it does not need to define us. The darkness we may experience will not be forever. We live in the hope of the Resurrection; with the reassurance of an empty tomb. With Jesus' help, we can break free of our tombs and conquer our darkness too.