



Grace Notes



Grace Church Congregational
1055 Williams Street
Pittsfield, MA 01201

Volume XIII, Issue 3

April 2014

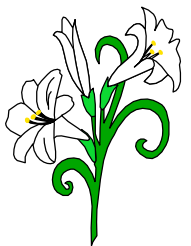


Happy Easter!

I am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.

John 11:25,26

Any submissions or suggestions for the next edition of this newsletter may be sent to secretary.gracecc1@verizon.net





From the Pastor's Desk

And [Jacob] dreamed and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and your offspring." (Genesis

For those of us who grew up in Sunday school, we remember with great affection the many Bible stories of the Bible, especially those of the Old Testament. I can remember the flannelgraph stories about the lives of men like Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. We look to see in them models of godly virtue. Certainly there is much in their lives that is commendable such as their faith. But as we look closely we also realize that they also had their feet of clay. The Bible is not hesitant about representing them as such and if we minimize that, then we are in danger of misrepresenting what the Bible is really seeking to portray.

Jacob was certainly such a person. Yes, Esau sold his birthright for a quick meal. How many of us have not been guilty of making rash decisions? But Jacob, Esau's twin (albeit younger) brother is not painted in a very favorable light in the Bible. Just think about what the name that was given to him- Jacob means- "cheater", "deceiver", "supplanter", "one who grasps the heel". His very name itself was meant to convey something important to us. It's only against the backdrop of the meaning of the name "Jacob" that we can really appreciate the new name given to him later by God. "Israel" means "he strives or contends with God". When push comes to shove, it is not Esau or Laban, or Isaac that Jacob ultimately had to contend with, but with God.

You see, written in subtle ink between the lines of the text of Genesis is the message of the gospel and God's grace. The fact is Jacob did not deserve God's blessing any more than Esau did. This is brought home to us by several key events in Jacob's life, one of which takes place on the night after Jacob first fled his home and his brother's wrath for the home of his ancestors in Haran. There God revealed himself to Jacob in a dream in which Jacob witnessed a staircase between heaven and earth, on which the angels of God were ascending and descending. There at that time God reiterates to Jacob the same promise that he had given both to his father and grandfather before him, the promise that a nation would come from his loins and that all nations would be blessed through him. Given Jacob's immediate circumstances this must have seemed pretty far-fetched.

The staircase almost certainly would have reminded Jacob of another staircase generations earlier in which the inhabitants of Babel had sought to reach God by their own ingenuity. (Babel means "gate of God") God prevented it from happening by confusing their language and dispersing the people throughout the world. But now God now takes the initiative to provide the staircase in spite of Jacob's failures and then allows Jacob to name that spot "Bethel" ("house of God"). Two Thousand years later, Jesus said to Nathanael, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (John 1:51). Jesus, of course, equates himself with the staircase revealed to Jacob in a dream.

The imagery is pretty powerful. But again, it is all about the gospel. It's all about God's grace. Human nature is to erect our towers of Babel to attain God by our own ingenuity and initiative. Human nature is to seek the blessings of God and everyone else by our own efforts, however legitimate or illegitimate they may be. But it is only as we come to an awareness of the limits of our own resources and are cast onto God's graces, seeking his provision for our ultimate need where ours fall drastically short, that we have access to God's presence and can truly experience his blessing.

All the Bible stories are great, but only as they lead us to Christ. Yes, there are many things in the lives of the various figures of the Old Testament that commend them as models of behavior, but there is much in their lives that is not favorable for emulation. It is only in God's dealings with them in a way that leads us to his Son that their stories have any real value.

Pastor Tom Bridgman



Punishment, Preservation and a Promise

by Ian Bridgman

I recently finished reading through the book of Judges. It is really a cool book. Full of fascinating accounts of superman-like warriors who could slay a thousand men with a donkey's jawbone (Samson), and slick assassinations of morbidly obese tyrants (Ehud & Eglon). Judges, of course, refers to the men, and woman, that God raised up to lead the nation out of apostasy and the resulting oppression from their neighbors, whose sinful practices the Israelites loved to adopt. These judges would bring temporary peace and relief until Israel again would again turn unfaithful and fall back into sin, and the process would be repeated. It's easy to look at this book as kind of biblical broken record, where Israel sins, and God whacks them for it, again and again, with the moral of the story being something like 'don't be like those stupid people'. We know, though, that while Judges was written about ancient Israel, it was written, like the rest of the Bible, for all peoples. I also believe that the Israelites were more similar to us than we would like to admit.

When I was younger, I used to shake my head at the long list of Israel's sordid stories. What foolish people. What were they thinking?? Why would they make these choices, especially given what they already knew about God, his character, his commands, and his promises? Good question.

Take a look at Romans chapter 1, where Paul describes people turning their backs on God and creating their own idols, trading truth for lies, dumping God's design for sexual purity for anything and everything else, and inventing "every kind of wickedness." Now, compare that with what we see described in Judges. Then compare it with human history. Then compare it with our own culture right now. Then compare it with our own personal lives. Paul isn't just describing ancient Israel, he's talking about people in general, every nation and culture. So instead of just being shocked by what we see in Judges, we should consider a few things.

One is that human culture and society, apart from God's direct intervention, is actually self-destructive. And that destructive behavior or tradition is almost always disguised as something positive. Take, for example, the former practice of foot binding in China, or the current practice of force-feeding in parts of West Africa, crippling girls for life in the name of beauty. The ancient Canaanites, Mayans, Aztecs, and countless other civilizations practiced child sacrifice to appease their false gods, while today, in the United States, we still practice child sacrifice to appease a different set of false gods. We just pretend it's all good as long as they're not entirely born yet. Anyone who even less than celebrates a sexual free-for-all is now an enemy of progress and personal freedom. We have a justice system that dispenses different versions of justice, based on skin color and economic status. We call good evil and evil good, just as described in Romans 1, just like the Israelites in Judges.

Another thing we should consider is that Judges relates to us all not just on a societal level, but on a personal level as well. The most repeated line in the book seems to be "and again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD." What if someone were to write a history of our lives? Of my own life? That same line would probably be an accurate description. We might have not murdered anybody or made dinner out of our neighbors, but sin is sin, and we are all guilty of it. Think about Israel's place in the ancient Near East. Here they were, a people called apart to live lives radically different from the anything goes culture they were surrounded by. It's easy to imagine the young Israelite men and women, and maybe the older ones as well, turning their gaze towards the Canaanite cities and the highly sexualized lifestyles found within. Canaanite culture promised excitement and freedom from restraint. Maybe the Israelites became worn down from having to be so different, or became blinded by the deception around them, exchanging real freedom for a false version of bondage and disobedience. It actually doesn't sound foreign or far away at all. We see the same thing all around us here and now.

continued on the following page

Punishment, Preservation, and a Promise continued

So then, what is the good news? The good news is the other side of the Judges story. The story of God's faithfulness and the preservation of his people. Although the Israelites suffered brutal consequences for their disobedience, God never let them go, his love was never exhausted, and his promises of preservation were never broken. God was under no obligation to raise up the judges and deliver his people time and time again. He did, though, because his love for his chosen people was so great.

Each judge, of course, is a temporary imperfect model of the final judge who would come and be a permanent and perfect savior, not just for the Israelites, but for the whole world. That would be Jesus. Thanks to him, God's promise of faithfulness applies to us too, as believers in Jesus Christ, and our preservation and salvation are assured. We do still sin, and our sins carry consequences in this life, sometimes very serious ones. When we stumble and find ourselves frustrated by our own disobedient tendencies, we can consider the promise found in Philippians 1:6, which tells us to "be confident in this. That he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." As for our culture as a whole, the Bible makes no promises. Nations rise and fall, the United States and Western culture included. What the Bible does promise is that the Church, as the body of Christ, is here to stay, and we can look forward to that last day knowing that the eternal punishment we deserve has been already paid and removed forever. And that is good news indeed.



World Cup Witness



The World Cup (soccer), held every four years, will be in Brazil from June 12th-July 13th. Many Christian organizations are preparing outreach ministries during this time when people from all over the world will be converging in Brazil. **Ian Bridgman** will be one of those people. He will also be working with one of the organizations, **Operation Mobilization, from June 30th-July 14th**. Ian will be in the city of Sao Paulo while serving with OM. Pray for those involved in ministry that they would have physical and spiritual protection, for financial provision for those desiring to share Christ, and for prepared hearts among the hearers that many would become disciples of Christ.



LEARNING & ARRIVING: How Is It Possible?

by Doug Rose

Daniel Defoe was a nonconformist Dissenter who lived and wrote political essays and social commentary in late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century England. He published his first novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, when he was almost sixty years old. While many of us harbor adolescent recollections of this book as an adventure story involving a sailor shipwrecked on a desert island, a fair reading of the unabridged version demonstrates that this novel served as a vehicle for a careful exposition of Defoe's orthodox Calvinism, targeted at an audience mature in its Reformed Christian faith. The tale of the castaway resonates with Defoe's message of unmerited grace bestowed upon an undeserving mankind, and the hand of God's providence touching even the most profound sinner into faith in Christ and repentance to salvation.

Just as we marvel at God's grace in redeeming us from our sin and spiritual death, upon his first footfall as he arrives at the island, storm-beaten, nearly drowned, and exhausted, Crusoe remarks, "Lord, how was it possible I could get on shore?"¹ In one short passage, found at a considerably later chapter in which the shipwrecked Crusoe endeavors to carve a boat from a large tree (but finds he has completed his vessel too far away from the water to ever launch it), the author expounds in fairly short order the five points of Reformed theology, as his hero reflects on "the good providence of God":²

I had terrible reflections upon my mind for many months, as I have already observed, on account of my wicked and hardened life past ... Here Crusoe considers the "Total Depravity" of mankind evinced in the hero's dissipated subsistence.

... and when I looked about me, and considered what particular providences had attended me since my coming into this place, and how God had dealt bountifully with me-had not only punished me less than my iniquity had deserved, but had so plentifully provided for me ... Defoe then notes the dispensation of the providence of God in "Unconditional Election" of the previously impenitent Crusoe.

... this gave me great hopes that my repentance was accepted, and that God had yet mercy in store for me. Here the author describes the castaway's realization of "Limited Atonement" for the faithful elect.

With these reflections I worked my mind up, not only to a resignation to the will of God in the present disposition of my circumstances, but even to a sincere thankfulness for my condition; and that I, who was yet a living man, ought not to complain, seeing I had not the due punishment of my sins; that I enjoyed so many mercies which I had no reason to have expected in that place; that I ought never more to repine at my condition, but to rejoice, and to give daily thanks for that daily bread ... Crusoe gives praise for "Irresistible Grace".

In a word, as my life was a life of sorrow one way, so it was a life of mercy another; and I wanted nothing to make it a life of comfort but to be able to make my sense of God's goodness to me, and care over me in this condition, be my daily consolation ... Finally, Defoe relishes in the grace and wisdom of God to give his protagonist "Perseverance" to survive on this desperate planet.

¹ Defoe, Daniel, *Robinson Crusoe* (New York, N.Y.: Barnes & Noble Books; 2003), p.41.

² *Id.*, p.112.



GRACE CHURCH NEWS



Prayer Gathering

All are encouraged to join together for a special times of corporate prayer **Sunday, April 6th from 5:00-6:00 p.m.**, as we acknowledge our dependence on God, seek His direction for our church and our ministry in the community, and pray for His glory to be made known.

"Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." Psalm 127:1



Maundy Thursday Dinner and Communion Thursday, April 17th, we will share a potluck supper at 6:00 p.m., followed by a communion service at 7:00. Please bring a dish to share. Beverages and dessert will be provided.



Men's Prayer Fellowship

All men of the church are invited to join together for a time of devotional, prayer and light refreshments, **Saturday morning, April 19th, from 7:00-8:30 a.m., at the home of Doug Rose.**



Christianity Explored

Christianity Explored, an 8 session course designed for people who have questions about Christianity, will begin on **Tuesday evening, April 29th**. Those who come are encouraged to ask whatever questions they may have. It explores three key questions: Who do you think Jesus is? Why did he come? What does it mean to follow him? Please be praying for this course, that God would use it to answer people's real questions. The meetings will include a meal and will meet in a home. If you know someone you would like to invite, invitation cards are available at the church. For more information or to sign up contact Pastor Tom at 499-3040. You can find out more about the course at www.christianityexplored.org

4C's Annual Family Conference

This year the 4C's Annual Conference will be in Providence, Rhode Island, from **Monday - Thursday, July 21-24**. The theme is "For Every Generation," and the conference includes speakers, workshops, and worship. There are also comprehensive programs for youth and children. If you can't come for the whole time, a daily rate which includes lunch is also available. So mark your calendars, and consider attending. For more information and online registration go to www.cccusa.com, or see Charleen for a brochure.

"The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of His heart for every generation." Psalm 33:11



April 2014



S

M


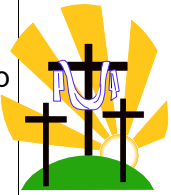
T

W

T

F

S

		1 1:15 Ladies' Bible Class	2	3 7:00 p.m. Addictions Victorious	4	5
6 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship 5:00 Prayer Gathering	7	8 1:15 Ladies' Bible Class	9	10 7:00 p.m. Addictions Victorious	11	12
13 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	14	15 1:15 Ladies' Bible Class	16	17 6:00 Maundy Thursday dinner and service	18 Good Friday 	19 7:00-8:30 am Men's Prayer Fellowship
20 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	21 	22 1:15 Ladies' Bible Class	23	24 7:00 p.m. Addictions Victorious	25	26
27 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	28	29 1:15 Ladies' Bible Class	30			