



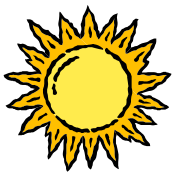
# Grace Notes



Grace Church Congregational  
1055 Williams Street  
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*Happy Spring!*



Any suggestions or submissions for next month's newsletter may be sent to [secretary.gracecc1@verizon.net](mailto:secretary.gracecc1@verizon.net), or put in the tray on the secretary's desk.



## From the Pastor's Desk

*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)*

These words by the Apostle Paul may be so familiar to us as evangelical Christians that we assume that we have a complete grasp on what Paul is seeking to convey. I have come to the conclusion over the years that this is seldom the case with any passage of Scripture, given the fact that not only are we dealing with the words of a man, but also the words of God.

Congregationalists, like Presbyterians, Dutch Reformed, and numerous others, are traditionally adherents of what we call a Reformed expression of the Christian faith. We trace our heritage back through the American and English Puritans, through John Calvin and Martin Luther during the Reformation (where the word "Reformed" comes from) through St. Augustine to the teachings of the Apostle Paul and Jesus himself. Part of what that means is that we believe that God has Sovereignly predestined those who will eventually come to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

This conviction was much more commonplace among Christians in previous centuries (e.g. Spurgeon, Whitfield, Edwards) but often elicits a reaction from both those in the faith and outside of it today. "Isn't this unfair of God?" "What about man's free will?" "Doesn't it negate the call to evangelism?"

None of us would deny that human beings have a will and exercise that will every day of the week- which socks to put on in the morning, what school to attend, who to marry, what job to take. But it begs the question, what is it that motivates us to make the choices we make? And, why do some joyfully accept the gospel (good news) of Jesus and others want nothing to do with it? To say that our will is entirely free from outside influences is not possible. Many things influence the decisions we make. Biblically speaking, it seems to me that what people are really talking about when we use the words "free will" is really autonomy; that is, that we as humans have the ability to think thoughts or make decisions apart from any influence, and especially God.

Now, this is where Paul's words in Ephesians 2 apply to what we are saying here. Paul had previously written a few verses earlier, "...you were dead in your trespasses and sins.... But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loves us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved-.... (Ephesians 2:1, 4-5) What this says to us is that we cannot divorce the teachings of God's Sovereignty from the message of his grace. His grace was of course manifested to us on Calvary, but it is also applied to us individually by his Holy Spirit in the immediate context of our lives. How is it that a person decides to repent and believe the gospel? How is it that a person chooses to follow Christ? It is by the inner working of the Holy Spirit.

You see, for us to say that a person needs to accept Jesus apart from the gracious work of God is to say that we accept Jesus because of some lurking moral character in our heart, and that God extends his grace to us because of that moral character. Thus "grace" is spelled with small letters and faith really becomes a "work". That will lead us to a moralistic approach to the gospel – "pull yourself up by your bootstraps and just accept Jesus. If you don't then there is something wrong with you (i.e. a moral deficiency)." Well, I hate to say it, but there is a moral deficiency in all of us. Paul tells us that we were "dead" in our sins. To tell someone to "just believe in Jesus" when he is spiritually dead is like asking a corpse to get out of his coffin and drive his car. It takes a work of God's GRACE in capital letters. Thus "grace" really becomes the operative word for us.

Now, lest I be accused of preaching to the choir, I have to say that there is a challenge for all of us here. Paul, remember, was a converted Pharisee. He knew what it was like to focus all his energy on working for salvation. I have found that it is possible to reach Phariseeism by traveling around both sides of the circle- in the moralistic direction or in the presumptuous direction- "I'm of the elect, therefore there is no moral deficiency in me." ( It's too easy to translate that into, "I'm of the elect because there is no moral deficiency in me.") Both diminish God's Grace, and that is not good.

Pastor Tom Bridgman





# Missions Corner

**Schmidts' Prayer Letter- Sapporo, Japan  
March 2014**

*Dear Friends and Prayer Partners,*

Snowfall upon snowfall is making this year's winter a heavy one, having to shovel almost daily. Shelley left Hokkaido's winter for Tennessee in January and entered a season of grief with the loss of her mother, Ardy Soules. On January 5th Shelley and her siblings were shocked when they heard their fairly healthy mother's time on earth was done. God was so gracious in His provision and working out all the details for all 6 siblings and other family members to get together for 4 days! They had a deeply moving memorial service at Ardy's church. Shelley stayed and helped Randall and Linda with the sorting and moving out of her mom's apartment. Many precious memories surfaced. Praise the Lord for his great mercies.

Since January, the Guest Home has been filled with long-term guests, which has freed us up to do other things-like car hunting! Our 17 year old van came up for inspection. We decided rather than to fix it, to invest in a younger model. We found an 8-passenger van, which will give us better mileage, and will serve us well as we cart around guests and the internationals we work with. We praise the Lord for his provision.

Presently Shelley is attending a Women's Conference for missionaries from all over Japan. Taking a few extra days, she took a personal spiritual retreat, visited friends in the Tokyo area, and went to a writer's workshop. On her return she will be busy saying goodbye to all the long-term guests of the last couple of months. Since their language refresher course is finished, they are all moving on to their designated work places. Empty rooms means new guests to come and getting ready for that.

We are thankful our pastor has returned from a six-month Home Assignment in Korea. He has been refreshed, though some family issues remain unresolved. Please pray for his family, and also for the Annual Meeting on March 16. May God grant the church unity and a clear vision forward. In the past months some Japanese long-term members left the church. Yet at the same time our church, together with many area churches, is quite involved with the upcoming "Festival of Hope," May 9-11, with the Franklin Graham organization. Pray with us for God's outpouring of His Spirit on this evangelistic event. May Japanese Christians want to get involved, and may many come to know Jesus as their Savior and Lord.

March is the end of the Japanese school year. Our English Speaker's group will go through changes as students graduate and leave. One is Bongani, a servant leader in the group, who will return to his native Malawi. We are praying for someone to emerge to fill the gap he will leave behind. Pray also for the preparations for the upcoming International Welcome Party in April, where we hope new people will again join the group.

## **Prayer Points:**

### **Praise for:**

- God's blessing on Shelley's mom's memorial service and for all the siblings presence
- Provision for a newer car for ministry and safety on the slippery roads

### **Pray for:**

- God's blessing on the Women's Retreat and renewed fervor to serve the Lord
- March 11: Three year anniversary of the triple disaster in Tohoku. Continue to pray for many who are still in temporary housing.
- The new church planting efforts by OMF in the area!
- Shelley's brother Dale, whose kidney cancer has spread to his lymph nodes. Pray for God's mercy on him and for him to trust the Lord.
- Good preparation for the International Welcome Party in April

Appreciating your partnership in Christ,

*Dieter and Shelley*



# GRACE CHURCH NEWS

## Monthly Prayer Gathering

We had a very special time of corporate prayer **Sunday evening, March 2nd from 5:00-6:00 p.m.** It was encouraging to see the number of people who joined together to seek God's face, acknowledge our dependence on Him in all things, and thank Him for the many blessings we receive.



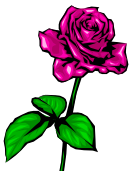
## Men's Prayer Fellowship

All men are invited to join together at the home of Doug Rose, **Saturday, March 15th, from 7:00-8:30 a.m.** for a study in Psalm 51, a time of prayer, and light refreshments.



## Christianity Explored

The elders are working on the implementation of *Christianity Explored*, a course designed to introduce people to Christ through the Gospel of Mark. 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 outreach ministry, that God would use it to draw people to himself, and that we, as a church, might be strengthened in our witness for Christ. Updates will follow as the plans take shape.



## Congratulations!

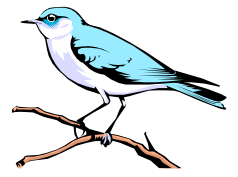
Congratulations to Cynthia Dua who has been studying nursing at Berkshire Community College and recently passed her licensing exam!

## Women's Retreats

- ◆ **The Evangelical Free Church's Faithlift 2014** (held at Hope Church in Lenox) will be held on **Saturday, March 29** with the morning session beginning at 9 a.m. Theme: "**Personal Design by Love Divine**" with speaker Darcie Gill. Cost is \$30. Registration forms are available on the table in the sanctuary. Go to [www.pittsfieldefc.org/faithlift.htm](http://www.pittsfieldefc.org/faithlift.htm) for online registration. Registration deadline is Saturday, March 19th.
- ◆ **OPC Women's Retreat** at Lakeside Conference Center in Pittsfield, **Fri & Sat, April 11th & 12th**. Theme: "**Generation to Generation**," on mentoring. The retreat includes a speaker, workshops, lunch and dinner on Friday, and breakfast and lunch on Saturday. Cost including meals is \$65. **Registration deadline: April 1st postmark.** Brochures are available on the table in the sanctuary.



# March 2014



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<b>2</b> 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship <b>5:00 Prayer Gathering</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b> 1:15 p.m. Ladies' Bible Class	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b> 7:00 Addictions Victorious	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b> Change your clocks tonight! 
<b>9</b> <b>Daylight Savings Begins</b> 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b> 1:15 p.m. Ladies' Bible Class	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b> 7:00 Addictions Victorious	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b> <b>Men's Prayer Fellowship</b> 7-8:30 a.m.
<b>16</b> 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	<b>17</b>	<b>18</b> 1:15 p.m. Ladies' Bible Class	<b>19</b>	<b>20</b> 7:00 Addictions Victorious	<b>21</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>23</b> 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	<b>24</b>	<b>25</b> 1:15 p.m. Ladies' Bible Class	<b>26</b>	<b>27</b> 7:00 Addictions Victorious	<b>28</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>30</b> 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	<b>31</b>					

## **A Boy's Grave...Now Far Away**

*"Facts are stubborn things"* John Adams

It has been a month since I returned from South Sudan. I have adapted, once again, to the rhythms and routines of life in the First World – morning coffee, emails, appointments and fund raising activities - becoming reimmersed in family and church life, and struggling with relationship concerns and getting financially re-established...the stuff of life here.

The other day, as I was waiting at a red light - late for an appointment and worried about whether the gas gauge was accurate...I saw Wani Michael's face.

Wani was 9 or 10 years old. He was an energetic little boy with a impish smile. He was good natured, sang too loudly in the church choir, and had a penchant for mischief. He was an excellent soccer player. Every day after school he would wander through the compound with a tightly bound knot of rags that served as his soccer ball. He constantly challenged my young co-worker, Jonathan, to a one on one match. Jonathan, who also loves soccer, would always oblige. Wani would dribble circles around him – taking great delight in watching him twist and trip on his own feet as he ran past him to score. I once had to sternly reprimand him as he was entertaining the younger children in the compound by trying to knock a birds' nest out of a tree with his handmade slingshot. He was all boy.

The fact is that Wani Michael is dead. A week before Christmas he came home from school complaining of a headache and diarrhea. He felt better the next day, and went back to school. He left school early again with a headache, and by evening he was comatose. An IV was started and he was taken to the regional hospital 50 miles away. He was gone the next morning. He died of Yellow Fever. Yellow Fever kills about 50% of the children who contract it. Early diagnosis can improve the chance for survival, but Yellow Fever is pernicious. It's symptoms tend to masquerade as other, less fatal, ailments. We didn't diagnose it soon enough for Michael Wani. The fact is, that we had run out of Rapid Diagnostic Test kits.

Wani's grave is set in front of the door to his parents' hut. It has a simple cross on it. In South Sudan graves are placed just outside the entrance to family homes. This is so that "their hearts will not wander away from those that they care about.

The fact is that it is easy to become emotionally detached in the busyness and stress of the activities of daily life here, on top of trying to raise support for medical supplies and equipment – including Rapid Diagnostic Kits. But then there is an occasional red light that might serve to bring Michael Wani's smiling face to mind, and his grave in front of his parents' door.

I am glad that some facts, and red lights, are stubborn things.

*"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these."* Mark 10:14

Bob Kirkman