

SUSTAINING GRACE
Good News About Grace - Part 3 of 10
Phil. 1:6; 1 Peter 5:12
Rick Warren

"God, who began the good work within you, will continue His work until it is finally finished..."
Phil. 1:6 (NLT)

*"My purpose in writing is to encourage you and assure you
that the grace of God is with you no matter what happens." 1 Peter 5:11 (NLT)*

GOD'S SUSTAINING GRACE...

1. HELPS ME KEEP STANDING _____

"Watch out for attacks from the Devil, your great enemy. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for some victim to devour. Take a firm stand against him, and be strong in your faith." 1 Pet. 5:8

"The temptations that you have are the same ones that all people have. But you can trust God. He will not let you be tempted more than you can stand. When you are tempted, God will also give you a way to escape. Then you will be able to stand it." 1 Cor. 10:13 (ICB)

2. IT HELPS ME KEEP STANDING _____

"It is God who gives us ... the ability to stand firm for Christ. He has commissioned us, and He has identified us as His own by placing the Holy Spirit in our hearts..." 2 Cor. 1:21-22 (NLT)

"For God is at work within you, giving you the will and the power to achieve His purpose."
Phil. 2:13 (Ph)

3. IT HELPS ME KEEP STANDING _____

"So don't worry, because I am with you. Don't be afraid, because I am your God. I will make you strong and will help you: I will support you with My right hand that saves you."
Isa. 41:10 (NCV)

"God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble." Ps. 46:1 (NLT)

II. HOW TO RECEIVE GOD'S SUSTAINING GRACE

1. CALL OUT FOR _____

"God gives grace to the humble. So give yourselves completely to God ... Draw close to God, and God will draw close to you." James 4:6-8 (NCV/NLT)

2. FILL YOUR MIND _____

"I am ... completely discouraged; revive me by Your Word." Ps 119:25 (NLT)

3. ACCEPT SUPPORT _____

"By helping each other with your troubles, you truly obey the law of Christ." Gal. 6:2 (NCV)

4. HOLD ON _____

"He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired ... but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint." Isa. 40:29-31 (NIV)

"So we don't look at the troubles we can see right now; rather, we look forward to what we have not yet seen. For the troubles we see will soon be over, but the joys to come will last forever." 2 Cor. 4:18 (NLT)

"I begged the Lord three times to take this problem away from me. But He said to me, "My grace is enough for you. When you are weak, then My power is made perfect in you." 2 Cor. 12:8-9 (ICB)

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During the next two weeks the eyes of the world are going to be Japan and the Olympics. In order to get to the Olympics, you have to have three things: speed, skill and, most important of all, you have to have endurance. If you don't make it to the end of the race, you're not going to win in any medal.

The Bible tells us that God always finishes what He starts. Always. *"God, who began the good work within you, will continue His work until it is finally finished..."* Circle "will". It doesn't say, God might finish it, it doesn't say, God hopes to finish it. It says God will finish it. What does that mean?

It means if you have really given your life to Jesus Christ, if you've opened yourself up to God and said, "Christ, be number one in my life," you are going to make it to heaven. There's no doubt about it. Case closed. Done deal. Finished product. You are going to make it across the finish line. Because it doesn't depend upon your performance; it depends upon God's sustaining grace. The only question is how you finish the race. You know as well as I do that some people finish a race poorly while other people finish a race well.

As your pastor, I don't want to just get you into heaven. I don't want to just get to across the finish line. My goal is to help you finish the race of life well. I want you to enjoy life, the abundant life, to figure out what God made you for and put you here for and do it. God says, "I will help you finish the race."

How can we be sure we're going to finish? Because of God's Sustaining Grace. Two weeks ago we looked at God's Saving Grace. But God doesn't want to just save you. He wants to sustain you through life. He wants you to make it.

What is Sustaining Grace?

Sustaining Grace is the power to keep on going when I feel like giving up. Do you ever need that? Sustaining Grace is the power to do the right thing when you don't feel like doing the right thing.

There are many pitfalls in the marathon race of life. We're going to talk about them this morning. But regardless of what you go through, no matter what you face this next year, you can count on God's Sustaining Grace being there.

1 Peter 5:11 *"My purpose in writing is to encourage you and assure you that the grace of God is with you no matter what happens."* Circle "no matter what happens". No matter what happens, God's Sustaining Grace is going to be with you. It's going to be there.

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There are three things in life that can cause you to stumble, that can cause you to get cast off to the side of the race, that can cause you to not finish well in life. God's Sustaining Grace says I will help you in each of those three situations.

1. I can count on God's Sustaining Grace to help me keep on standing when I'm tempted.

Temptation is the first thing that causes us to stumble. The Bible says in 1 Peter 5:8 *"Watch out for attacks from the devil, your great enemy. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for some victim to devour. [In other words, Satan wants to eat your lunch.] Take a firm stand against him. [Circle "firm stand"] and so be strong in the faith."*

You may not realize this but the moment you become a believer a battle starts in your life. You're no longer Satan's property. He's taken his hand off you and now you're in God's hands. But he doesn't like that and there's a battle for your life every single day of your life. You are faced with moral choices. Am I going to do right or wrong? good or bad? Am I going to be selfish or am I going to be unselfish? Those moral choices are called temptations.

The Bible says we are all tempted. Everybody is tempted. You will never outgrow temptation. The Bible says even Jesus was tempted. It says He was tempted in all points like we are but he never sinned. The good news is this: If Jesus was tempted and He never sinned it means it's not a sin to be tempted. It's a sin to give in to temptation. Some Christians, when they're tempted, "Oh, no! How could I have ever thought that one!" Like I'm some evil, wicked, mean, bad and nasty person because a thought went through my mind. You cannot control all the thoughts that go through your mind. But you can control and you can chose to not dwell on them. You can't stop the birds from going over your head but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.

Satan gives you all kinds of ideas. You don't have to feel intimidated or embarrassed or ashamed of that. He just puts those ideas in your mind. It's when you dwell on them when they become wrong. They become sin.

Take one area of temptation -- sexual temptation. God made you to be a sexual person, a sexual being -- a man or a woman. He gave you sexual feelings. Those feelings are not wrong, they're not bad, they're not even sin unless you use them in a wrong way or apply them to a wrong person. Many people misunderstand and confuse attraction with lust. They're not the same thing. Or they even confuse arousal with lust. They're not the same thing. If a man is sitting outside and a good looking woman walks by and thinks, "Wow! That is one good looking woman", that's not lust. That's attraction, arousal. He's saying, "Look at what God's made there!" That's not lust. If you're a man, be grateful you've got that feeling. If you don't have that feeling we need to have a little talk! If you're a woman and you see a good looking hunk of a man and you're attracted to him, you may even be aroused, "Look at that good looking man!" that certainly is not sin.

What is lust? Lust is not arousal. Lust is not attraction. Lust is when you take a thought and begin to dwell on it in your mind, and you begin to mentally have an affair with that person, you begin to fantasize with that person and to imagine "What would it be like with that person?" That's when you've crossed the line. But it is not a sin to be tempted. It's a sin to give in to temptation.

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Thursday night Larry King interviewed Billy Graham. They were talking about the Clinton scandals. Finally he says to Billy Graham, "You're 80 years old and you've been in the public limelight your entire life and you've never had a scandal. You have a history of integrity. How have you managed to never have a scandal in your life?" Billy Graham quoted the next verse, 1 Corinthians 10:13 *"The temptations that you have are the same ones that all people have. But you can trust God. He will not let you be tempted more than you can stand. When you are tempted, God will also give you a way to escape. Then you will be able to stand it."* This is God's Sustaining Grace.

This is a terrific, fantastic promise. It says here that God will never allow more temptation on you than He puts in you to bear it up. When you say, "I just couldn't help myself" you're not telling the truth. God says "I will provide the Sustaining Grace to always give you a way of escape." It may mean turn the channel. It may mean run out the door. It may mean change the way you're thinking. But He will provide a way of escape.

I know this verse says that God gives us the ability to handle temptation and He says they're the same ones that everybody has. We all have the exact same temptation. They're common to human beings. The good news is if temptations are common to man that means there are common solutions. I've heard people say, "My situation was unique. And because it was a unique circumstance it must be ok for me to bend the rules a little bit and kind of ignore what God says because God would understand that in my situation this is a very unique pressure." God says, no, it's not. You don't have any unique temptations. They're the same common temptations all of us have. Don't use that excuse. He says, "God will make a way of escape." God's sustaining grace helps me stand firm when I'm tempted.

2. God's sustaining Grace helps me keep standing when I'm tired.

Sometimes I'm not tempted. Sometimes I'm just tired. Life is often exhausting. It requires a lot of strength, a lot of energy to live life especially when you're trying to do the right thing rather than the easiest thing. There are a lot of people in life that don't try to do the right thing; they just want to do whatever's the easiest thing. That's no problem at all. You can coast through life if you always do the easiest thing. But when you're coasting, you're always going downhill. You're always headed down when you coast.

On the other hand, when you try to do the right thing even though it's not the easiest thing, that requires energy. That requires effort, strength. Many of you are the only believer where you work. It's tough. Do you ever get tired of doing what's right? Sure. Because it's tough moving against the flow, swimming upstream. When all the culture is going one way and you're trying to do the right thing, it's tough. It's tough being the only person in the office when someone starts some dirty jokes and you don't want to be a part. The more you try to do what's right, the more energy it's going to require. Yet God says, *"Let us not grow weary in doing right for we will reap a harvest of blessing if we do not give up."* But where do you get the power to do the right thing and you don't feel like doing it and you're dead tired. Sometimes I don't want to be nice to my family, I want to be cranky. Sometimes I don't want to be nice to a clerk I want to be grouchy.

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Sometimes I want to be rude back to people who are rude to me. Where do you get the energy to do the right thing?

2 Corinthians 1 *"It is God who gives us the ability to stand firm for Christ. He has commissioned us and He has identified us as His own by placing the Holy Spirit in our hearts."* Circle "Holy Spirit" and "stand firm" and draw a line between them. Those two go together. The key to the ability to not getting tired and giving up and doing the right thing when you know it's the right thing to do is having the Holy Spirit in your heart. It's He who energizes you, not you in your own power.

The reason why some of you are tired all the time is because you are trying to live the Christian life and that doesn't work. You're trying to be like Jesus. You're trying to do good. You're trying to keep the Ten Commandments. You're trying to be a person of integrity. You're trying, trying... And you get tired.

People say "It's so hard to be a Christian today!" It's not hard. It's impossible. The only perfect person who ever lived was Jesus Christ. He's the only one who ever lived the Christian life perfectly. What you need to do, rather than try to be like Jesus, let Jesus be Jesus in you. Let Jesus be Jesus through you. Stop trying and trying and just start trusting and trusting. The key to the Christian life is not trying, it's trusting. It's not psych yourself up, work real hard, try to do your best and perform so God will smile at you. It's relax, trust and let Christ live through you. And He will give you the power you need.

This last Thursday I was up at Dreamworks in Hollywood, the studio. For the last year I've been consulting with the Spielberg-Kattenburg company. They're making a movie on the life of Moses. It's going to be a ninety minute animated film. The guy who made "The Lion King", Jeffery Kattenburg who used to be with Disney, and Stephen Spielberg are putting together the movie. They've worked on it three and a half years, two hundred animators. It's going to come out this next December. They called me up and asked me to come and make sure that the movie is Biblically accurate. I've seen it a couple of times.

It hit me after I saw the most recent version that probably the man who was the most persistent man ever in the Bible was Moses. He had incredible endurance. How did he keep on keeping on, in spite of the fact that he spent forty years waiting in the wilderness and then forty years wandering in the wilderness, leading a bunch of spiritual babies around the desert. How did he not give up, how did he not get tired and quit. The Bible says he had God's Sustaining Grace in his life. That's how you keep on going when you're tired.

Do you know how many years it took Noah to build the ark? The Bible says 120 years. Can you imagine waiting 120 years for anything? In those days they lived a whole lot longer. But the point is, Noah waited 120 years. How did he have the ability to keep on keeping on when he was tired? Surely he must have gotten tired building the ark. The Bible tells us in Genesis 6, *"Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord."*

God wants to give you His power to do it. To do what you need to do.

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Philippians 2:13 *"For God is at work within you, giving you the will and the power to achieve His purpose."* Will and power. The Christian life is not a matter of willpower -- your willpower. But a matter of God's will and God's power in your life. When God gives you the will and the power to do something, you'll be able to do it. God never asks you to do something He doesn't give you the power to do. Would you agree that God has more power than you? Obviously.

God made the sun. The sun produces more power in one single second than all the human race has used throughout all of history. More energy is produced in one second than we've used throughout history. The sun has enough energy to burn for thirty billion more years. Yet God made the sun. That's the kind of power He's got. Then He comes to you and says, "You need some power? I'll give you the will and the power to handle it." Because God's power is unlimited, He never gets tired. When it says about creation that on the seventh day, God rested, it wasn't because He was tired; it was because He was finished. He had finished with creation.

God says, "I will energize those of you who trust Me."

There's another way God gives us His sustaining grace. Not just when I'm tempted and not just when I'm tired,

3. God's Sustaining Grace gives me the power to keep going when I'm troubled.

In other words, when I have problems, when I have difficulties. Jesus said, *"In the world you will have trouble."* He said expect it, don't be surprised, don't be blown away by it. You're going to have difficulties, you're going to have obstacles. You will have situations that you cannot handle. He says, "I will give you the power."

There are three kinds of trouble. There's the kind of trouble that kind of blows you away like a wind. There's the kind of trouble that weighs you down like a sack of potatoes. There's the kind of trouble like the rug's pulled out from beneath you.

But the most difficult kinds of trouble to handle are the troubles, the problems in life, that are unplanned, unrelenting, and undeserved. There are some things I bring on myself. I figure, "I made the mess. I've got to clean it up." I don't mind handling problems I created. I figure that's par for the course. I did it. I have to clean it up.

But the most difficult problems in life to handle are the unfair ones. You are an innocent party. What happened? You didn't plan it. You don't feel like you deserved it. You didn't ask for it or cause it. Those are the ones that are hard to handle.

They're especially hard to handle when they're not only undeserved but they are unrelenting. Most of us can handle problems if we can see an end in sight, light at the end of the tunnel. If I can see the problem is going to be over in six months, eight months -- I can handle anything for that length of time or year or whatever. But there are some things in your life that hurt you, harm you, that are unsolvable, that you're going to live with the rest of your life. And nothing's ever going to change that. There are some situations in life. There are some handicaps, or disabilities,

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some background -- you're never going to be able to change your background -- you grew up in that background. There are some hurts that all the wishing in the world is not going to make them go away. There are some things in life that are unplanned, unrelenting, and undeserved. And they hurt the most.

What do you do in those situations? You first stop doing the "If only..." game. "If only I had different parents... If only I had married somebody else... If only..." That doesn't work. That doesn't solve your problems and it doesn't ease your pain.

Instead you need to focus on Christ. Focus on His sustaining power. The Bible says this in Isaiah 41 *"Don't worry, because I am with you. Don't be afraid because I am your God. I will make you strong. I will help you. I will support you with My right hand that saves you."* Circle all the things that God has promised to do for you: He says "I'm going to be with you... I'm going to make you strong ... I will help you ... I will support you ... I will save you." That pretty much covers it all. *"God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble."*

That's how you get Sustaining Grace.

Five years ago Bret and Dee Eastman had triplets. It was a wonderful day. But a few months later they heard the dreaded words cerebral palsy. Cerebral palsy is not a problem you solve overnight. It is something you live with the rest of your life. I want you to hear their story of Sustaining Grace today.

First a video filmed about three years ago when the girls were much younger and then we're going to give you a life update on how God has helped them handle the daily, daily pain and problems of dealing with children with cerebral palsy.

Video:

Dee:

Over a six or eight month process we found out one of the other triplets had cerebral palsy also. Megan's is a severe form. Michelle's is a more moderate form. Melody is fine. But that has been a handful. Megan is now two and a half and she's at about a three month mark as far as her development which means she has a hard time even having head control. She can't sit up. She occasionally can roll over and scoot a little but she can't crawl at all. That's a big one to bite off. She already has her first wheel chair. What do you do? A family of five kids and two with severe limitations.

Bret:

We just didn't want to believe that something was up. But I thought there had to be a solution, there had to be a fix. And that's kind of my natural modus operandi -- figure out the problem, figure out the solution then we'll work it through and it will be much better than it is. Yet it became clearer and clearer that wasn't the case. From the beginning up until, frankly, more recently, I just didn't let the whole news hit me. I don't mean just understand that we have children with special needs but I just didn't feel it. As I look across the table I

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see I have a daughter that can't look me in the eye. With Michelle, she's just crawling around in the floor still. While the rest of them are running around.

As a father, it's really hard. Megan is really hard for me. Yet she's the one that impacts me most deeply. When I'm sitting in a service and someone's singing a song ... I just break down. It's the softest spot in my life. There's tragic thoughts that go through my mind. I was telling Dee last night, sometimes I think I'd be ok if the Lord chose to take her. It's sad for me to say that, as her father. Sad to admit. But I feel that sometimes.

Megan is very stiff and Michelle is the exact opposite, very loose. As I try to help her walk with her little baby stroller, I'll look in her in the face and say, "Michelle! What are you doing?" and she'll say, "I'm walking." I say, "You're going to walk someday. Like who?" She'll say, "Like Mel" -- the one triplet that does walk. I pick her up and hold in my arms and tell her, "That's going to be a great day!"

[end of video]

Bret:

I ended the video by saying as I was talking to little Michelle, "Oh, what a day it will be when you walk!" She's such a tough little chick! After months and months of her using her little walker and falling all the time, she finally pushed away from that little walker and she came running into my arms for the very first time. And now she walks.

Dee:

And then there's our daughter Megan. She's my little ray of sunshine. She's our daughter in the wheelchair. Her story is much different than Michelle's. On the video I mentioned that she was at the three month mark in her physical development. After three years and lots of hard work, weekly physical therapy and all the things we've tried to get her to progress, she's only made it to about the four to six month mark developmentally. Which means she's still in her wheel chair. She cannot sit unassisted. She's not crawling. She can eat a little bit with her left hand but she can't use utensils and she can't drink out of a cup. She's my little girl! And that is hard and it continues to be hard.

So how do we deal with that? The truth is, it's up and down. I have my good days and I have my bad days. But one theme that has grown strong throughout all the struggle and chaos is that God is seeing us through. And that His grace is a very real part of our day to day life.

When I think of all the things that have helped get me through the last five years I say one of the biggest areas is God helping me have the growing ability to be honest. It's really easy to be honest when all is going well. But it's a whole different story when we're struggling. I have found the biggest thing to get me through is to face the truth head on -- the truth about me, my life, and the problems that are before me. I've needed to be willing to face my fears, my anger, my weaknesses and some of my doubts and confusions. I've needed to honor what's true about me and I've needed to begin to work those areas through and not push them down, which was what I'd done all my life. I've needed to honor that there is a process

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involved in that. I've needed to be gracious with myself with that because there is a process. That process for me has been slow. It's been messy. There's been no fast fixes or easy answers. I'm needing that to be ok. I've needed to bring the dark side into the light -- into the light of God's love and into the light of sharing that with other people in the body of Christ. I have found that that is where He works. When I stuff it down and try to grab hold of trying to do it myself and then muster up what I think a perfect Christian is, I just get stuck. But when I can take what is dark and bring it out into the light -- to a few friends, a small group, when I can live life there, I find God meets me there. He meets me, He accepts me, He forgives me and He works, then, through my life.

The ultimate expression of honesty for me happened when I was living in Chicago. It happened at a five day retreat that I was at. It was a time where I poured out my heart to God through tears, through journaling, through some of the group meetings we had there. I began unloading the anger and the pain and the disappointment that I had and such a huge amount of uncertainty about God's roll in my life. There were so many pent up emotions that I had. It went back to when God allowed our first daughter Kristen to die when she was four months old and I had never really worked through that at the time. I didn't know how. I didn't have the things in place in my life and the people to help point me to be honest, to pour my heart out before God. I kind of let it rip there and it all came out. From Kristen all the way through the things in my life to when the triplets were born and all the medical mishaps that happened around the triplet delivery. The leader said it was my ultimate expression of faith to God, that I was learning how to bring all that I was to God. I really did want to have faith in the midst of my pain. I really did want to learn how to draw strength from God where I needed it most. I want you to know that of every thing I say that that week end was one of the most pivotal points of my Christian life, because I felt that a leader there helped me learn how to walk with God in a new way, that he helped me learn how to walk with God through hardships when God chooses not to remove the hardship. He began to teach me how to have a little girl like Megan and how to be her mom and how to walk with God and not push God and the pain away but how to do that together. I will be forever thankful for him and how God used him in my life.

I was so moved by that weekend I decided to join a support group. It was similar to the support groups we have here at Saddleback, called Celebrate Recover. That was like a breath of fresh air. It continued to help me work through all the bitterness and resentment that I had in my life towards the doctors and ultimately toward God for allowing all that to happen. The process was slow. I'd still would say I'm in process. But the result of those years in Chicago and the groups I attended was that there was real forgiveness that happened in my heart and a real work of healing in my life. About three years after the triplets were born, I was able to go and meet with the doctor that delivered the girls. We had a two hour meeting over tears and I was able to look him in face across the desk eye to eye and not have all that bitterness that was really only holding me back in my life. I'm forever thankful. It was really honesty as my starting point that helped me get there.

The second area that I really see God's Sustaining Grace is that He's helping me learn how to trust Him. When I can pour out my heart before Him and call a spade a spade, and He shows up, meets me, I'm able to take that little step of trust. It's all about little steps for me. There's

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a prayer that sums it up in a nutshell and it's the serenity prayer. "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference." This continues to be the cry of my heart. It's clear that God wants to teach me to trust Him more to lean on Him in ways that I haven't before and it's clear that I need Him more in my life than I've ever realized.

This is an ongoing thing in my life, day to day. It's not just about Megan. It's really about how I handle my life period! With the five kids, with all the chaos in my life, with the struggles of life that come our way, with marriage, with finances, with busy schedules, with plain old life. I try and continue to try to let go of my expectations and it's hard sometimes to let some of those dreams die. But I pick them up and lay them down before Him and I try to let them go.

About two weeks ago, I had a difficult thing come my way. Nothing related to Megan, just one of the day to things that come up. I went out for an early morning walk down at Dana Point. I was out there walking along and felt like God met me there right there. As I'm praying to Him, there was a boat -- Letting Go. It was a gentle way for Him to remind me again, "Dee, bring it before Me. Be honest. Pour out your heart and let it go." As I'm learning to trust little by little I'm also learning I'm able to come and I can rest in Him. I don't have to be the strong one, the one in control, the one trying to make this life come all together. But there can be a resting, a hiding in the shadow of His wings. He reminds in the place that He's my rock, that He's my fortress, that He's my refuge. Although He doesn't change some of the hardships along my path, He promises to be a God of comfort and a God of love, that He will walk me through anything that comes my way and that He will carry me when I need it the most.

My last theory is on a little lighter note. I can find joy in the journey. He's teaching me that if I wait until everything's perfect and calm and sane around my house to find joy then I'm never going to find it. I can find joy right in the middle. Amidst the challenges and chaos that my life holds there is tremendous joy. I'm realizing that my life holds so much richness and love. There are so many simple joys to find along the way if I can just slow down and notice them. Slowing down, enjoying more of what I have, taking great delight in the ordinary moments of life. Isn't that where most of life is lived anyway? There's a song by Amy Grant. I love one line in it. I sing it to my kids all the time. It says, "Don't you know the way it goes, that you don't know what you've got, til it's gone." I don't want to wait until it's gone. There are simple joys in my house of just having the love that five kids bring, that having a husband that's tremendously committed to me, of watching the sunsets together, of building tents in our house, of being silly with our dog, of doing what we call "tickle trouble" in our house, of baking cookies together, of long hugs, silly jokes, moments sharing life together. These days I'm slowing down enough to grab those moments, take them in and really find true joy there.

Of course, my biggest teacher of all in the middle of that is Megan. The little angel in my life, who, because her life is slow, she notices more. She takes in those simple joys. She teaches me about them. We call her in our house the Love Radar. No matter who's hugging, who's doing something friendly in the house, there is Megan. She can't move her head all that much but she'll be in her wheelchair and put her eye over and she'll see that I'm hugging Bret or that

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Josh and Bree are hugging and something neat's going on and she just starts beaming with delight. I take hope in that. There is so much love right before me that God has put in my path.

There it is. Life in the middle. Joy in the midst. And the joy of God's Sustaining Grace in my life.

Bret:

This is exhausting. I'm glad this is the fourth service, I have to admit. You have just met the number one factor of Sustaining Grace in my life in this woman. I don't know how I'd do it without her. She may be tiny but she's like Rambo in my home. She's so tough.

For me there are several primary factors that have helped provide Sustaining Grace. The first one is the new dimensions of my walk with God that He has given me as a gift. It's so easy to see God one dimensionally, I think in life, and then stuff happens. It's been said that God whispers in our pleasure but He shouts in our pain. For me, as I've known God, and then experienced God, it has broadened by breadth of who He is -- the breadth of His shoulders and the size of His heart towards me.

Dee was in the hospital a couple of months. I was with the kids an hour a way. The two that I had still were just tiny. We didn't know if the triplets were going to live or die. There was a woman in a bed next to Dee who also had multiples who lost their three children and we didn't know if our's were going to make it. When they were born way premature, they were like one and two pounds. Melonie went down to 1.2 pounds. I was able to take my ring and slide it up over her ankle and up over her knee, she was so small. Incredible.

I was scared. I was confused. I was just trying to survive. Then I began to get angry. This wasn't my picture. I began writing my thoughts in a journal that became such a treasure to me, where I just said everything to God. I was gut honest with Him. It wasn't pretty. In fact, it was pretty ugly at times. Needless to say, it wasn't anything like your typical Sunday morning pastoral prayer. But the thing that was so neat was that it didn't seem to scare Him off. It wasn't anything that He hadn't heard before. It was the reason that He gave His only son that I might be able to know Him in a soft place like this.

Through it all, I've just embraced the greater mystery of it all. I've been to seminary and in the ministry for years. But I have many unanswered questions. One day I'd love to talk with Him about. But I've learned in this life that His ways are not my ways and His thoughts are not my thoughts. I didn't know why He allows the wounds and the weaknesses of one to minister to the needs of another. Yesterday, I was with someone who had gone through similar life struggles. I gave them a hug and said, "You understand." I didn't need to say anything else. They did. You can always tell if someone "gets it" and understands or if they don't. Those that don't, they just talk too much. They try to make complex things very simple....

Rick says I'm a crybaby. I eat quiche too. The sad thing is that five years ago I never cried. You could count on one hand the number of times I cried up until then. I was too cool.

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Now someone -- Rick's father -- was joking: Seems like my eyes are connected to my bladder. The mystery of how God uses the brokenness of one and has it be a blessing to another is beyond me. But it happens. It's happened too many times for me and then through me. The one thing that I've learned that I do know is that He loves me. He wants to know me more and more every day. That's as real as I'm standing here right now!

The second fact that His help provides Sustaining Grace is my new ways of relating with people in my life: I'm a very self sufficient, optimistic, can do, kind of a cry baby person. But I couldn't do this one alone. The church just showed up. People came over and coordinated around the clock -- babysitting, meals, prayer support. It was incredible. After the first year we thought about a "We Made It" party. We made a list of all the people who made significant investments in our life and the list was over 100 people. We decided we hadn't made it that far to throw a party like that. But we had five kids under five and four of them were still in diapers. We were ripping through over 100 diapers a week. It wasn't a pretty picture. Brianna was still in diapers at the time. Every once in a while, frankly, I needed my own diaper changed. I went from the guy who met everybody else's needs to the neediest guy on the block. That wasn't a very comfortable place for me. It was new.

As I began to show that need to people, they met me. I learned and am learning it's one of the deepest longings of my heart as is for many, that someone would take care of me at times and love on me. It's still very risky and I feel very extended with it. But it is the path to health that I've come to find. It's a tremendous means of God's sustaining grace in my life.

In the last five years of my life might be characterized best by doing life together. Dee and I are in a small group that was an incredible picture of the body of Christ. They became a family to us. We laughed. We cried. We celebrated life's precious moments together. We even attended church week in, week out the 7:00 service together. After we had been with them for about four years the scene in leaving was like a scene from Jimmy Stewart's *It's a Wonderful Life*. It was one of the most blessed moments that we'll never forget. It's why we're so committed helping others get connected into a small group community because our lives will never be the same. It wasn't perfect, but what we did was fully show up and make it a safe community by bringing our truth into the picture.

I remember one time I was really hurting and one of the guys showed up a little too strong and a little too fast with a couple of Bible verses to what felt like a very complex problem and moment for me. I just looked back at him and said, "Ouch! I feel like you missed me. You don't understand where I'm at. Maybe that's not a surprise but I just wanted to be heard, listened to. I don't want to be fixed. In this moment anyway I just want you to love on me. I want you to hear me. I want you to embrace me." And it took us to a whole other level. As a result of me showing up with both my needy parts and being more truthful and honest with the relationships I had in my life.

My son asked me one time, "Dad, if you could have any wish you wanted, what would it be?" I said, Easy. I don't want to win the lotto. I don't need a million bucks although it would be fun for a day or two. I don't want a mansion someplace in the hills. What I want is I want this dreadful condition to be removed from the limbs of my little girls. It's what I want. Yet, I

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cannot deny the reality and the ultimate blessing that Megan and Micelle are to me in my life and to everyone who comes into contact with them. They are both angelic. A beacon of life. A testimony of the greater purposes of God that aren't His fault but that are a result of sin in a lost and broken world of which I am a major player in as well. Now I want to say that to me is Sustaining Grace.

What do you do when you can't fix an unfixable problem? What do you do when you can't solve an unsolvable riddle? What do you do when you can't change an unchangeable circumstance? What do you do when you can't control something that hurts deeply in your life?

You throw yourself on the sustaining Grace of God.

Our culture loves to teach us self reliance. We think that we can handle anything. I know that all around you, you're brought up to think, "I am the master of my fate." That's a bunch of hooley. It's just not true. You cannot control the major events of your life. You didn't control when you were born. You didn't control where you were born. You didn't chose your parents. You don't know where you're going to die. You don't know most of the things that are going to happen between now and then. One day you're going to wake up to the realization of the fact that there are limitations in your life that you cannot control. That's called mid life crisis. One day you wake up and you realize you are not God. And you cannot control everything that happens around you. What do you do when it hurts so bad and you can't change it?

You rely on the Sustaining Grace of God.

How do I get it? How do get that kind of grace to keep going in spite of temptations, trials, tension, tiredness and troubles? You do four things:

1. Call out. Cry out to God. Cry out for God's help. As long as you pretend to be self sufficient you short circuit God's power in your life. You need to admit your inadequacy and say, "God, I can't handle this!" and you cry out for God's help. The Bible says *"God gives grace to the humble."* Circle "humble" *"So give yourselves completely to God. "Draw close to God and God will draw close to you."* Notice who gets grace. The humble. Those who admit they can't do it on their own.

You draw near to God and you cry out to God.

Pray to God. Pray earnestly. Pray fervently. Pray passionately. Pray with integrity. Pray with emotion. Say, "God, it hurts! Help." God listens to the tone of your prayers. He knows that you don't really want everything you ask for. When I ask my kids at Christian, "What do you want?" They say "this" or "that" -- I don't write those down. But when they say, "Dad, I really, really want this," that's the one I write down. God does not answer perfunctory prayers where you just mouthing the words, going through the motion, your heart's not in it. He wants you to pray passionately, fervently, to Him. If you want a good example, go read the book of Psalms. David did. Call out for God's help.

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2. Fill your mind with God's word. This book, let it comfort you, let it strengthen you, let it fill you, let it soothe you, let it give you the energy you need to keep going. Get into this book, every single day of your life. Get a modern translation -- New Living Version or something and begin to read it and get it into your mind.

David prays, *"I am completely discouraged. Revive me..."* by watching TV? *"Revive me by Your word."* There is some advise going around today that I am so tired of hearing. It is in every movie, every talk show, every book. It is the standard New Age answer to your problems. It started in the movie *Star Wars* about 25 years ago, where that great theologian Obie-one-kanobi says to young Luke Skywalker when he's going through his crisis, "The answers are within you, Luke. Look inside yourself." Everybody's been spouting that for 25 years like that's the big answer. There's nothing new about the New Age. All New Age is, is old packaging of old lies. They didn't work a thousand years ago, they don't work today. This one here -- "Look within yourself when you're in trouble." That's the problem! I looked within myself and went Yuk! I didn't like what I saw. I got depressed when I looked. I don't need to look within myself. The answer is not look within yourself. If it was, you'd already be changed. It doesn't work.

You need to look to God. He's the only one who can change you. He's the only one who can help you. He's the only one with sustaining strength. You need to look, not within you. You need to look outside of yourself to the creator who made you. Because the answers are not in you. The answers are in God. It doesn't work the other way.

From the business section of the *Register*: "The psychic friends network file for bankruptcy. Their lawyer says, `They apparently made some bad decisions due to some unforeseen circumstances.'" Perhaps they should have seen it coming? People are paying big money for that kind of hooley. You need to get into a book that's been around for thousands of years -- the word of God.

Call out for God's help. Fill your mind with God's word.

3. Accept support from God's people. Did you hear how important a small group was to Bret and to Dee in their crisis? They both said, "We wouldn't have made it without Christian friends." The Bible says by helping each other with your troubles you truly obey the law of Christ. What is that law, *"Love your neighbor as yourself."* The great commandment. If you don't have some strong Christian friends, mature believers, and you're not in some small group where you can have some feedback and support when the crisis is on, I feel pity for you. We don't continually harp on this issue week after week "Get in a small group" just because it's an idea. It is essential for your physical, spiritual and mental health. You need a support group. God never meant for you to go through life on your own. You're not a Lone Ranger. God intentionally, the Bible says, puts weaknesses in our lives so we realize how much we need each other. You're not going to make it on your own. You need to accept support from God's people.

4. Hold on to God's promises. There are over 7000 of them in the Bible waiting to be claimed, waiting for you to grab onto like blank checks. Here's one of them, Isaiah 40 *"He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youth grow tired. But those who hope in the Lord [circle this] will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run*

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and not grow weary; they will walk and not faint." Keep your hope in the Lord. Even more than that, keep your eyes focused on the hope of heaven, not just on the here and now. Focus on the hope of heaven.

"So we don't look at the troubles we can see right now; rather we look forward to what we have not yet seen. For the troubles we see will soon be over, but the joys to come will last forever." In heaven there's going to be no problems. In heaven there's going to be no sorrow. In heaven there's going to be no sadness, no grief, no messed up lives. In heaven little girls like Michelle and Megan are going to have whole bodies. Don't ever forget that.

During "Building For Life" the one scene I will never forget is the day we gave our offering, the going to phase two of building this campus, to reach this county and the world for Jesus Christ and the children came in and gave their offerings. At the very end of the line, you could see on the monitor, there's Michelle giving her offering and the last one was little Megan. She brought her gifts to Jesus. I will never forget that. Here these lovely little girls were giving their part to spread the good news of Jesus Christ and to build the church facility, that long after they're dead and in heaven with whole bodies, will still be sharing the good news of God's saving and sustaining grace. There is nothing in life more important than that message.

Where do you need God's Sustaining Grace today? Where are you discouraged and you feel like giving up? Are you being tempted? Being pounded and can't get rid of a temptation? Or are you tired and you say, "I don't think I can put another foot in front of the other." Or are you under tension, in trials and troubles that you can't fix? No matter what you're going through, God's grace will sustain you if you'll let it.

"I begged the Lord three times to take this problem away from me. But He said to me, 'My grace is enough for you. When you are weak, then My power is made perfect in you.'" When you're going through a problem you can't fix, don't give up, look up!

Prayer:

I'd like to close with a special prayer for those of you who are discouraged. You may be struggling with worry. He can fix that. You may be struggling with guilt and shame. He can handle that. You may be dealing with depression or financial conflict or conflict in your home. Or you maybe dealing with unemployment or infertility or something you cannot control. He can handle it.

So tell Him right now what is discouraging you. Tell Him passionately. It's ok to shed a tear. Tell Him what is discouraging you. "Jesus Christ, You know every single need represented here today. You know what we need even before we ask. You know our hurts and you know our fears. You know our struggles and you know our sins. You know our loneliness. You know our grief. For those who are hurting here this morning, may they find relief. For those who are discouraged, may they experience Your Sustaining Grace. May they sense Your arms of love wrapping around them today. For those who are carrying a heavy load may they understand Your power and Your peace is available. For those who are tempted, for those who are addicted, for those who can't stop what they don't want to do,

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may they find release in Christ. For those who are depressed, would You restore their joy. For those who are separated from a loved one, for those who are in conflict with a husband or wife, may they find restoration or reconciliation. For those who are guilty and ashamed, help them to sense the freedom of Your forgiveness You so graciously give. For those who lack purpose and meaning and salvation, may they find You.

Now it's your turn to pray. Pray what's in your mind. "Jesus Christ, I need Your Sustaining Grace in my life." If you've never asked Him for His Saving Grace, say, "I need You to save me and then to sustain me. I'm giving myself to You. Help me to cry out to You for help and not try to do it all myself. Help me to fill my mind with Your word. Help me to accept help and support from Your people and help me to hold on to Your promises. Thank You that I'm going to make it to the finish line in heaven. Not because of my performance but because of Your sustaining grace. I love You and I want to trust in You. In Jesus' name. Amen."