

## Sustaining by Grace

In order to get to run a marathon as a true competitor, you have to have three things: speed, skill and, most important of all, endurance. You can run as fast as you want, or as well as you want but let's face it: If you don't make it to the end of the race, you're not going to win any medals! Even if you just want to run the race and simply finish it - with no concern about how you place - endurance is necessary!

The Bible tells us that God finishes what God starts. *"God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished..."* That means if you've really given your life to Christ, really opened yourself to God, God will give you what you need to complete what God has given you to do. It doesn't mean God will give you what you need to complete anything YOU want to do, but God will give you what you need to complete what God gives you to do.

The thing is, it doesn't depend on your power; it depends on God's grace. The only questions are, will you continue to accept and depend on God's grace and will you hold on and finish the race well? You know as well as I do that some people give up on the race, some people finish the race poorly while others finish the race well.

As your pastor, I don't want you to just get to across the finish line. My goal is to help you finish the race of life well. I want you to experience the meaningful life God means for you to have: abundant life, joyful life; to figure out what God made you for; put you here for and I want to help you do it.

Last week we looked at God's Saving Grace; a factor of God's justifying grace. But God doesn't just want to save you. God wants to sustain you at a high level throughout life. God sustains with Grace to give you the power to keep on going when you feel like giving up; the power to do the right thing when you don't feel like it; to hang in there when others are quitting. There are many difficult stretches and rough patches and potholes in the marathon race of life - and we'll talk about them this morning - but regardless of what you go through or what you face, you can count on God sustaining you with grace. This part of grace is also known as persevering grace -it's God giving us what we need to persevere.

Peter wrote to encourage some believers. Times were tough; there was persecution going on and he said in 1 Peter 5:9 *"Remember that your family of believers all over the world is going through the same kind of suffering you are."* Then in 1 Peter 5:12 he says, *"My purpose in writing is to encourage you and assure you that the grace of God is with you no matter what happens."* Notice it's there, "no matter what happens". No matter what happens, God's grace is going to be with you to sustain you. It's going to be there.

Now, there are some things in life that can make you stumble; they can push you to the sidelines so that you won't finish well in life's race. God's Grace will help you in these situations. Let's look at the situations we face:

**1. We Face Fatigue** - God's sustaining Grace helps me keep standing when I'm worn-out. Sometimes I'm just tired. Life can be exhausting. It requires a lot of strength and energy to live life especially when you're trying to do the right thing rather than the easy thing. Lot of people don't make that effort; they just do whatever's easiest. You can coast through life, doing the easy thing. But when you coast, it only works if you're going downhill. When you coast your life goes downhill.

When you try to do the right thing and it's not the easy thing, it requires energy, effort and strength. Do you get tired, doing what's right? Sure. Because it's tough – you're moving against the current, swimming upstream. And the more you try to do what's right, the more energy it requires. The thing is Galatians 6:9 says, *"...let us not grow weary in doing right for we will reap a harvest of blessing if we do not give up."* So where do you get the power to do the right thing when you're dead tired. Sometimes I don't want to be nice, I want to be cranky. Sometimes I want that person who's standing in my way at the buffet at the Golden Corral restaurant and just staring at the food when I already know I want and it's sitting there in front of them to just get their blessed self out of my way! I don't want to be nice when someone criticizes me - I want to be grouchy. Sometimes I want to be rude back to people who are rude to me. The more tired you are, the harder it is to be strong, keep the right attitude and hang in there. Where do you get the energy to do the right thing?

2 Corinthians 1 says, *"It is God who enables us... 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 as the first installment that guarantees everything he has promised us."* The key to standing firm and not giving up on doing the right thing is in your relationship with God; in having the Holy Spirit in your heart. The reason people are drained all the time is because they're trying to live the Christian life on their own strength and that doesn't work.

They're trying to do good, to keep the Commandments, to have integrity. 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. You can't live the Christian life perfectly so what you need to do is, rather than trying to be like Jesus, let Jesus **be** Jesus in you. Let Jesus be Jesus **through you**. Stop trying and start 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 to perform. It's trust God and let Christ live through you. God will give you the power you need.

Philippians 2:13 NIV says, "...it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose." The Christian life is not a matter of your willpower, it's 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 made the sun. Well, the sun produces more power in a single second than all the power that the human race has used throughout all history and it has enough energy to burn for more than thirty billion more years. But our sun is a yellow dwarf star - a small, low-power star compared to most stars. God made trillions and trillions of suns much more powerful than ours. And all of those incredible powerhouses combined are nothing compared to the power of the One who made them. That's the kind of power God's got. God's power is unlimited, God never gets tired. When God rested on the seventh day, it wasn't because God was tired; it was because God was finished. God has enough power to sustain you.

**2. We Face Temptation** - There are two, potentially overwhelming problems we face in the world: Our own weaknesses, and the fact that we have an enemy who wants to trip us up and eat us alive. Most of us are aware of a good number of our own weaknesses, but many of us fail to take into account that there's a power working to take advantage of our weaknesses and lead us astray. 1 Peter 5:8 says, "*Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.*"

If you didn't realize it, the moment you become a believer a battle starts in your life. You're on God's team now. But the enemy doesn't like it and there's a battle for your life every single day. You're constantly faced with moral choices. Am I going to do the right thing? Am I going to be selfish or unselfish? Am I going to put God's agenda ahead of my own preferences, desires and priorities?

Everyone is tempted. You will never outgrow temptation. The Bible says even Jesus was tempted. He was tempted like we are but he never sinned. The good news is this: If Jesus was tempted it means it's not a sin to be tempted. The sin is in giving in to temptation. Some Christians, when they're tempted think, "How could I have ever thought that?!" I'm an evil person because that thought went through my mind. You can't control every thought that go through your mind. But you can chose to not dwell on them; you can choose to move your mind on to better things.

The enemy gives you all kinds of ideas. You don't have to feel intimidated, embarrassed or ashamed of that. It's when you dwell on them that they become wrong. They become sin.

Take one area of temptation - sexual temptation. God made you to be a sexual being - a man or a woman. He gave you feelings. Those feelings are not wrong or bad, they're not sin unless you use them in a wrong way. Many people confuse attraction with lust. They're not the same thing. Lust is when you pursue it in your mind and begin to imagine. That's when you cross the line. It's not a sin to be tempted. It's a sin to give in to temptation.

Larry King interviewed Billy Graham a few years ago and they were talking about the various scandals that had revolved around a lot of famous religious leaders. Larry said to Billy Graham, "You're 80 years old and you've been in the public limelight most of your life and you've never had a scandal. How have you managed to never have a scandal in your life?" Billy Graham quoted 1 Corinthians 10:13: "*The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure.*" That's God's Grace sustaining you.

That's a wonderful promise - that God will never allow more temptation than you can bear. But then if you say, "I just couldn't help myself" you're not telling the truth. God always gives you a way of escape." It may mean change the channel. It may mean run out the door. It may mean change the way you're thinking. But God will provide a way of escape.

We all have the same types of temptations. They're common to all humans. So if temptations are common to all of us, that means there are common solutions for all of us. I've heard people say, "My situation's unique so it must be ok for me to bend the rules a bit because my unique circumstances make it unavoidable." No, you don't have unique temptations. They're the same types of temptations all of us have.

**3. We Face Difficulties** - God's Grace gives me the power to keep going when I'm troubled, when I have problems and difficulties. Jesus said, *"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble.... [so we should expect it, not be surprised or blown away by difficulties] ...But take heart! I have overcome the world."* The New Living Translation of the center of that verse is, *"Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows."* You're going to have difficulties, obstacles and situations you can't handle. Jesus says he'll give you peace.

There are many kinds of trouble; many types of difficulty. There's the kind that blows you away like a hurricane; there's the kind that weighs you down like rocks; and there's the kind that feels like the rug's pulled out from under you. The most difficult kinds to handle are the ones that feel unexpected and undeserved - the ones that seem unfair. You're an innocent party. You didn't plan it. You don't feel like you deserved it. Those are hard to handle, especially when they're insistent and unrelenting. Most of us can handle problems if we can see light at the end of the tunnel. If it's going to be over in six months, two years - I can handle it for that length of time. But there are some things that you're going to live with the rest of your life - those ones are a lot harder to deal with. They're things like your childhood and your background; the losses you've had - people, situations and possessions - that can never be replaced; your health concerns and disabilities... there are some hurts that all the wishing in the world won't make go away. Those are the ones that hurt the most.

What do you do in those situations? First, stop playing the "If only..." game. "If only I had different parents... If only I hadn't lost that... If only..." That doesn't solve any problems or ease your pain - it just makes you obsess about the thing that's bothering you. Instead, focus on Christ. Focus on God's sustaining power that allows you to persevere. Remember what Psalm 46 says, *"God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble."* That's comforting all by itself, but it goes on to say, *"So we will not fear when earthquakes comes and the mountains crumble into the sea. Let the oceans roar and foam. Let the mountains tremble as the waters surge!"* It's not just in small difficulties - it's in the biggest of big problems as well.

What do you do when you have an unsolvable problem; an unsolvable riddle; when you're in circumstances you can't change; when you can't control something that hurts in life?

You have to rely on the persevering, upholding, supportive, sustaining Grace of God.

Our culture loves to glorify self reliance. We want to think that we can handle things under our own power. We've been brought up to think, "I'm the master of my fate." That's just not true. You can't control most of the major events of life. You didn't control when you were born or who your parents were. You don't know when or where you're going to die. You don't know most of the things that are going to happen between now and then. If it hasn't already happened, one day you're going to wake up and realize that there are things in your life - limitations - that you cannot control. You're not God and you can't control what happens around you. What do you do when it hurts and you can't change it?

You rely on the persevering, upholding, sustaining Grace of God.

How do you get that kind of grace to keep going in spite of temptations, trials, tension, tiredness and troubles? You do three things that lead you to the main thing - the three things that can give you direction are your GPS: Gather, Pray, Study.

**G** is that we **Gather Together to Support One Another**. We all need support from God's people. Galatians 6:2 says, *"Share each other's burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ."* So by helping each other we obey Christ's commands. Those commands are, "Love your neighbor as yourself." The great commandment. And "Love one another as I have loved you." The last thing he commanded us to do.

In this, being in a small group is a great help. If you don't have Christian friends in a small group where you can have some feedback and support, you're shortchanging yourself. If you really feel like you yourself don't need that sort of thing, then you're being selfish because you're not sharing that strength you have with others.

This is an essential element for physical, spiritual and mental health. God never meant for you to go through life on your own. The Bible says God intentionally puts weaknesses in our lives to help us realize how much we need each other. You're not made to make it on your own. You need to accept support from and contribute support to God's people.

**P** is for **Pray for God's Help**. As long as you pretend to be self sufficient you short circuit God's grace and power in your life. James 4:6-8 says God *"...gives grace generously. As the Scriptures say, 'God opposes the proud but*

*gives grace to the humble.' So humble yourselves before God... Come close to God, and God will come close to you."* Notice who gets grace: the humble. Those who admit they can't do it on their own.

Pray to God. Pray with integrity. Pray earnestly, fervently, passionately. God listens to the tone of prayers. Prayers where you just mouth words, going through the motions with your heart not in it are meaningless. God wants you to pray passionately. Read the book of Psalms if you want examples!

The **S** in GPS is **Study and Fill Your Mind with God's Word**. Let it comfort you, strengthen you, fill you, give you the energy you need to keep going. Get into it every single day of your life. Get a modern version like the New Living Translation, read it and get it into your mind.

In Psalm 119, the psalmist was at his lowest point, so he prayed, *"I lie in the dust; revive me by your word."* There's a point of view today that I am tired of hearing. It's on the talk shows and in lots of books; you see it in magazines. It's the standard answer today to any problems you have. "The answers are within you. Look inside yourself." Everyone's acting like this is the big answer to all of life's questions. But if the answer was within yourself you wouldn't have the problem in the first place! You'd already have changed things!

You need to look to God, not yourself. God's the only one who can change you. He's the only one who can help you. God's the only one with sustaining strength. You don't look within yourself except in the sense that God has put the Spirit within you if you're a believer. You need to look to the Creator who made you. Because the answers aren't in you, the answers are in God.

When you faithfully apply these three things - gathering with other believers for support, praying to God and studying God's word, you'll have what you need to be able to **Trust and Hold On**. God will provide what you need to persevere. Isaiah 40 says, *"He gives power to the weak and strength to the powerless. Even youths will become weak and tired, and young men will fall in exhaustion. But those who trust in the Lord will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles."* Keep your trust in the Lord. Focus on the hope God gives; count on God.

The people of the early church lived in very difficult times. Paul wanted to encourage them and he said *"...we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever."* In eternity there's going to be no problems; there's going to be no sorrow; there's going to be no sadness, no grief, no messed up lives. Don't forget that no matter how bad it gets here, no one can take eternity away from you.

Where in your life do you need God's Grace to sustain you today? Where are you discouraged and feel like giving up? Are you being tempted? Are you tired and saying, "I don't think I can put another foot in front of the other"? Are you living with tension, 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.

Remember Paul's reaction to the painful, discouraging problem he had to live with. It would have been easy for him to be disheartened, instead he said, *"Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me."* When you're going through a problem you can't fix; when you're feeling weak, don't give up, look up to God! Let's pray.