

Segment Two: Experiencing God's Love and Grace

With Pastors Fred Miller, Jeremy Tyrell, Brian Lofthouse, Jim Spurrier, and Cedra Washington
Book chapter by Luke L. Keefer, Jr.

We value the free gift of salvation in Christ Jesus and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.



Distribute the lesson sheets to participants.

Because the Brethren in Christ were born in a revival movement that emphasized genuine Christian conversion, experiencing God has always been a part of our church's identity. We value each person's story of how Jesus found them and brought new meaning to their lives. We believe everyone needs to acknowledge the living Christ, believe His promises, accept His call to follow Him, and receive His transforming power. Salvation is a Person-to-person encounter!

In the encounter, however, the Bible specifically portrays God as the one who actively engages us in the drama of salvation. This is the theme that runs through Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation. Again and again, God lovingly and graciously reaches out to ordinary human beings.



SCRIPTURE FOCUS

Exodus 3:1-15 and John 20: 19-31

Focusing Our Faith: Perspectives on today's core value

Luke Keefer begins the chapter on experiencing God's love and grace with a quote from the well-known Christian writer Philip Yancey. It reads:

Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more . . . and . . . there is nothing we can do to make God love us less . . . Grace means that God already loves us as much as an infinite God can possibly love.

Keefer then goes on to build on the idea of God's amazing love and grace, stressing that:

- **God is active.** From the creation of the world to the glory of heaven, God is the primary actor in the universe. He takes center stage and announces His presence. He is not resting offstage while the cast of human characters wear themselves out in a frantic search to find Him, nor is He listening in the wings until some person finally figures out the mystery of God or develops the perfect doctrinal formula. Rather, God is the leading character in redemption, and His role gives meaning to the drama (17).

Advance preparation

- Reserve a DVD player and television set.
- Fill in the survey numbers on this week's lesson sheet and make copies of the lesson sheet for each participant.
- Read the first chapter in *Focusing Our Faith*, "Experiencing God's Love and Grace."
- Read the Scripture passages identified for this week.
- Preview the video segments for this week's lesson. As you listen, jot down comments by the speakers that stand out to you and listen for points of commonality or difference in what the speakers have to say.
- Read through the discussion questions and identify those that you most want your group to discuss.
- *Optional:* Select a song from the "Singing our Core Values" list and locate the music and words.

In-class activities

The New International Version (NIV) is the preferred translation of the Bible for use in Brethren in Christ churches. Encourage the persons who have been asked to read today's Scripture passages to use this translation.

Focused and Faithful

- **God is relational.** Salvation is not an award given to people who can pass a stiff test on the Bible. Many in Jesus' day could surely have done so, but they still missed the Messiah. Instead, Jesus blesses those who come to know Him by a chosen relationship of trust and obedience. Their experience with Christ gives meaning and perspective to everything else in life. This is the true knowledge of God which Scripture intends us to enjoy (17-18).
- **God's greatest act of love is the free gift of salvation in Christ Jesus.** To know God, to enter into a Person-to-person relationship with Him, and to become a member of His family is what the Bible means by salvation. Although we are sinners and undeserving of his favor, God loves us. Although we are sick and weak, God heals us. Rather than being an unpleasable tyrant, God is a parent who gives freely to his children the gifts of love that they need. Believing in Jesus and accepting the power of His death and resurrection opens the very doors of heaven (18-19).
- **Free gifts might very well have conditions attached.** God does not save those who refuse His mercy and have no intention of recognizing His authority over the conduct of their lives. That is why the Bible requires repentance and faith of those who would be saved (19).
- **Experiencing God's love and grace is not a once-and-done thing.** Many of us can remember our spiritual birthday, when we decided to live no more without God and entered into a life of peace. Salvation had a point of beginning that we can date. But since salvation is a relationship with God, we continue to experience it every day of our lives. Salvation is both an event and a process (20).
- **Experiencing God's love and grace should be transformational.** The testimony of all God's people through the ages is that coming to know God in a real relationship is a transforming event. God is a transforming agent: mud becomes a person; sinners become saints; cowards become people of courageous conviction; the mute burst forth with praise; and the indolent find a mission that launches them into a life of active service for the kingdom of God (22).

Pastoral perspectives on today's core value

Let's listen to what some of our church leaders have to say about this core value, and as we do, keep in mind what we've just reviewed from Luke Keefer's chapter on experiencing God's love and grace. Also, listen for points of commonality among the speakers, as well as points of difference in what they have to say about the core value.

Today we will hear from:

- Fred Miller, *senior pastor*
Cumberland Valley Brethren in Christ Church (Dillsburg, Pa.)

Singing Our Core Values

The following hymns and praise choruses reflect today's core value. If you wish to include a song in your lesson plan, the following are good choices.

Amazing Grace BIC 62

And Can It Be BIC 115

Fill All My Vision BIC 381

*Love Divine, All Love's
Excelling* BIC 113

What a Wonderful Change BIC 484

How Deep the Father's Love for Us by
Stuart Townsend © 1995 King-
sway's Thankyou Music.

Grace like Rain by Chris Collins,
Edwin O. Excell, John Newton,
Todd Agnew © 2003 Ardent/
Koala Music.

If time allows, ask class members to share what struck them most or touched them in a new way as they read today's chapter.

Living our Core Values - Segment Two

- Jeremy Tyrell, *lead pastor*
The Well Brethren in Christ Church (Fort Erie, ON)
- Brian Lofthouse, *senior pastor*
Port Colborne Brethren in Christ Church (Port Colborne, ON)
- Jim Spurrier, *senior pastor*
Dillsburg Brethren in Christ Church (Dillsburg, Pa.)
- Cedra Washington, *associate pastor*
Harrisburg Brethren in Christ Church (Harrisburg, Pa.)



Play the video segment on experiencing God's love and grace.



Title 02, Chapter 01-05
Length: 8:11

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Q.** Fred Miller stresses that we don't have to earn God's love and that it comes to us by our simple loving and needy response to Him. Jeremy Tyrell and Brian Lofthouse put greater emphasis on human action. Where do you come down in the faith/works debate?
- Q.** How do you respond to Jim Spurrier's hypothesis that many people find it hard to accept the unconditional nature of God's love because they have only ever experienced conditional love? What do Jesus' words to Thomas as recorded in John 20 add to the discussion?
- Q.** Brian Lofthouse describes the amazing life transformation of a young man in the Port Colborne congregation as a result of experiencing God's love and grace. But what about people for whom the transformation is less dramatic? How might an "average" person's life reflect the experience of God's love and grace?
- Q.** What's your response to Cedra Washington's assertion that "the Holy Spirit has the right and is sovereign to do whatever He wants to do whenever He wants to do it"? Give an example of how you have seen the Holy Spirit work in your own life and in the life of this congregation.

Depending upon the size of your class, you may want to break into smaller groups to work through the discussion questions.

In addition to the suggested discussion questions, encourage class members to raise their own questions in response to the videotaped comments or about today's core value in general.

Lay perspectives on today's core value

Now let's review the findings from the Church Member Profile (CMP) as related to today's core value. (If your class completed the CMP, reference your group's responses, noting points of agreement and divergence from the larger group.)

Focused and Faithful

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Q.** Does anything surprise you about the way participants from the wider church responded to the statements from the Church Member Profile (CMP)? What about the responses from our class?
- Q.** Today's core value states that we believe salvation is a free gift from Christ Jesus. Yet 62.7 percent of BIC respondents to the CMP said they believe their salvation depends upon what they believe and how they live. Discuss the seeming contradiction. Does this mean we do not believe Christ's gift is free but rather depends upon us (actions and/or beliefs)?
- Q.** What do you make of the high percentage of people who say they seek the Holy Spirit's guidance daily, or at least weekly? Do you feel our church encourages people in this direction?

In addition to the suggested discussion questions, encourage class members to raise their own questions in response to the survey findings.

Closing the session

Encourage participants to read the second chapter in *Focusing Our Faith*, "Believing the Bible," during the upcoming week.

Direct the class's attention to the "Living focused and faithful" activity for the week.

End with prayer.