

SERIES: God's Grace: Have You Heard the Story? (Slide #1)

TITLE: "Salvation's First Significant Barrier: The Valley of Frustration"

TEXT: Romans 7:14-24; 8:1-4,

DATE: February 24, 2008

I. INTRODUCTION.

- A. Well, we continue our discussion on the theme of salvation. Our hope is to come to fully understand the wonder of God's salvation plan and to establish common ground – common biblical truth – about the full scope of God's saving work. I want to begin this morning with one of my favorite stories that gives you an idea of why we are doing what we are doing. Listen. . . .
- B. **Illustration: "The Great Debate" (Slide #2)**
 about a century or two ago, the Pope decided that all the Jews had to leave the Vatican. Naturally there was a big uproar from the Jewish community. So the Pope made a deal. He would have a religious debate with a member of the Jewish community; if the Jews won, the Jews could stay; if the Pope won, the Jews would leave. The Jews realized that they had no choice. So they picked a middle-aged man named Moshe to represent them. Moshe asked for one addition to the debate. To make it more interesting, neither side would be allowed to talk. The Pope agreed. The day of the great debate came. Moshe and the Pope sat opposite each other for a full minute before the Pope raised his hand and showed three fingers. Moshe looked back at him and raised one finger. The Pope waved his fingers in a circle around his head. Moshe pointed to the ground where he sat. The Pope pulled out a wafer and a glass of wine. Moshe pulled out an apple. The Pope stood up and said, "I give up. This man is too good. The Jews can stay." An hour later, the cardinals were all around the Pope asking him what happened. The Pope said, "First I held up three fingers to represent the Trinity. He responded by holding up one finger to remind me that there was still one God common to both religions. Then I waved my finger around me to show him that God was all around us. He responded by pointing to the ground and showing that God was also right here with us. I pulled out the wine and the wafer to show that God absolves us from our sins. He pulled out an apple to remind me of original sin. He had an answer for everything! What could I do?" Meanwhile, the Jewish community had crowded around Moshe. "What happened?" they asked. "Well," said Moshe, "first he said to me that the Jews had three days to get out of here. I told him that not one of us was leaving. Then he told me that this whole city would be cleared of Jews. I told him we were staying right here." "And then?" asked a woman. "I don't know," said Moshe. "He took out his lunch and I took out mine."
- C. I read accounts such as this and I react in several ways.
1. My obvious first reaction is laughter.
 2. My second reaction, though, is one of contemplation concerning how it is that we can so easily fail to communicate due to a lack of common ground.
 3. It is my sense, that in many cases, the reason a gathering of people may fail to understand properly what is to be done is because every person is coming with a different agenda.
- D. The same is often true of churches:
1. We come from different weeks with different pressures or successes.
 2. We come from different backgrounds with differing family networks and community influence.
 3. We come seeking different things.
 4. And the result is that even though we are together, we somehow can fail to grow together because of a lack of common ground.
- E. This sermon or series - entitled GOD'S GRACE: HAVE YOU HEARD THE STORY? – has as one of its purposes the establishing of common ground.
1. The goal of this morning is to continue outlining the steps of progression that every person takes

in their movement towards God.

2. The hope is that as we define these common steps, that each of us will discover ourselves and discover where we are in the process and move one step closer to God.

F. Quickly let us review the three truths already considered and then move to a fourth truth – each of these truths may also be called “steps in the continuing story of salvation.” **(Slide #3)**

1. **Truth #1: God Moved first.**

- a. Three weeks ago we shared with Paul our joy over the fact that salvation is possible because God moved first – He reached out to us when we were still ungodly/still God’s enemies (Rom. 5). In fact, Paul declares that before the world was even created God chose us – God reached toward us to offer us His salvation.

b. WE CALL THIS FIRST MOVE THE PREVENIENT GRACE OF GOD.

2. **(Slide #4) Truth #2 – When God moved, He moved decisively OR There’s nothing cheap about salvation.**

- a. Two weeks we celebrated the wonder of the moment we respond to God’s grace and ask Him into our hearts. In that one moment we are: redeemed, forgiven, adopted into God’s family as a son/daughter, booked for eternal life in heaven, and inhabited by the Holy Spirit who is a seal and a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance in heaven.

b. WE CALL THIS SECOND EVENT SALVATION, JUSTIFICATION, REDEMPTION, FORGIVENESS, INITIAL SANCTIFICATION.

3. **(Slide #5) Truth #3: When we are saved, it marks the time of transition from life in the flesh and the beginning of life in the Spirit. This is in keeping with God’s eternal plan.**

G. As we continue to look at the full development of God’s saving plan, I want us to turn our attention to another passage offered to us by Paul in the book of Romans, specifically chapters 6, 7, and 8.

1. If one wanted to get a well developed presentation of salvation, a great place to read would be Romans 5-8. One might say that Ephesians 1:3-14 is a fast break summary of what Paul develops in much greater detail in Romans 5-8.

2. This morning I want to begin our look at a fourth truth with this question as its foundation: If God moved so decisively to save us from sins, and if God in a moment in time in response to our prayers so miraculously saved us, redeemed us, justified us, adopted us, and placed within us the Holy Spirit who leads us into all truth. . . . **(Slide #6) WHY IS IT THAT SO MANY SEEM TO FALL PRAY TO DEFEAT WHEN IT COMES TO LIVING A HOLY LIFE IN ALL OF IT’S FULLNESS? WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS THAT STAND IN THE WAY?**

H. Let’s look together at a fourth truth concerning the story of salvation - a fourth step if you will. . . .

II. **(Slide #7) TRUTH #4: Having accepted God into our lives with all of its benefits, we begin a LIFETIME OF GROWTH. Growth has it’s barriers. The biggest is what could be called “The Valley of Frustration.”**

A. Now some of you are already saying, "Oh great. That's all we need. Someone telling us that one of the healthy steps of a person in relationship with God is to be frustrated."

1. Please stay with me because in actuality this may be one of the most profitable sermons you will hear.
2. This sermon is deeply rooted in the reality of life, as you will see.
3. We can discover this fourth step as we consider the words of Paul in Romans 7.

B. Read with me the words of Romans 7:14-25. While we read the words, let’s do more than listen with our ears; let’s listen with our emotions.

C. Let’s break down this text and understand it in light of our fourth truth. Let’s consider our text from three different perspectives.

D. **(Slide #8) Perspective #1: The Valley of Frustration Defined:**

1. What is the message of Romans 7:14-25? Let us first understand Paul as a person.

- a. Paul's life was, for many, one to be envied. He had everything.
 - b. As a lad, Paul was given the best of education by the best of all religious instructors of that day - a man by the name of Gamillial.
 - c. One might say that Paul was a product of the finest Parochial School available in that day anywhere in the world.
 - d. Not only did he have the advantage of attending the best school in the world with the best teacher in the world, but Paul was naturally intelligent and gifted.
 - e. Soon he was known by the masses as a Jew - the classic definition of what a Jew was to be.
 - f. He was called the "Pharisee of the Pharisees" because of his knowledge of Jewish law.
 - g. He not only knew the law, but many supposed him to be the most legally righteous person of the day in keeping the laws.
 - h. To add to all of this, Paul was a naturally born leader and a gifted orator and debater.
 - i. Good parentage, the best of schools, the best teacher, natural giftedness, the works - Paul had it all!!
 - j. Until one day, while on the way to trap some more Christians to have them imprisoned or put to death, Paul had all of his doubts concerning the truth of Christianity erased with one encounter.
 - k. Along the Emmaus road, Paul was blinded by a bright light and then spoken to by Jesus Himself and called to be a follower of Jesus Christ.
 - l. Such a dramatic encounter completely changed Paul's entire life - gave to him a brand new perspective on life, if you will.
 - m. Suddenly, all that he had learned began to take on a new color as faith replaced law and relationship replaced legalism.
2. Having encountered Christ and a new way of thinking, Paul began to analyze his life up to this point in time and arrived at some conclusions:
 3. Paul literally entered into a stage of frustration where he had to learn life's system all over again with different rules.
 4. What was it that Paul discovered in this stage? Listen carefully now:
 - a. Paul came to understand that the religious laws were indeed spiritual and true, but if that were true, he was very much unspiritual.
 - (1) Suddenly it became clear to Paul that the very laws he was defending as the definition of life were the very laws that were his condemnation.
 - (2) Sure, he kept the laws better than the masses, but in truth, no one could keep all of the laws to the letter and so in essence the very laws that he was defending as the way of life where condemning him to death.
 - (3) Paul took a hard look at life and made a discovery: ***"What I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." (vs. 15). . . I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good that I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do - this I keep on doing. (vss. 18-19). . . When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (vss. 21-24)***
 - b. Put in today's English, applying it to some actual facts of life, I believe Paul was saying something like this:
 - (1) I have from childhood learned all the rules of what a person is supposed to do as a "Christian," but even my best efforts can't seem to get the job done and I am constantly

feeling condemned.

- (2) I know I should pray every day, but so often I get to the end of a day and I am so tired that I just don't do it and then when I wake up the next day, I feel guilty.
- (3) I know I should read my Bible every day, but there is so much going on in my life that there just doesn't seem to be time, but I feel so guilty about it.
- (4) I know that I should love my neighbor, and most of the time I feel pretty good about how well I do, but that one person just gets me every time and when he does, I feel so guilty that I failed to love my neighbor once again.
- (5) I know that church should be a priority, but my kids schooling and my kids sports and my other family obligations sometimes forces me to put church second, but I feel so guilty and dirty when I shun God's house.
- (6) I know I should tell others about Jesus, but I just freeze up and then when the opportunity passes, I just kick myself for being such a coward.
- (7) I know that I shouldn't look at certain things for they cause me to sin in my thought life, but it seems so harmless at the time and it is only afterwards that I feel this ugly feeling of guilt inside me.
- (8) I know that I am supposed to be a better steward of my time, my money, my eating habits, and everything else in life, but it's so hard. But not doing it feels bad too. I am just trapped.
- (9) I KNOW WHAT I AM SUPPOSED TO DO, BUT I JUST CAN'T SEEM TO DO IT AND THEN I FEEL GUILTY. WHAT A WRETCHED MAN/WOMAN I AM!!! BUT I GUESS IT'S THE BEST I CAN DO.

5. I know already that if I were to ask you if you know what Paul is talking about, every person in this room would raise their hands.
 - a. Every one of us knows what it feels like to want to do well and fail at it.
 - b. Every one of us understands what it means to be mentally aware, but physically weak when it comes to fulfilling what we know we ought to do.
 - c. In fact, this conjures up such horrible feelings in some of us who are gathered here this morning that right now you just want to run for the back door and run away from this feeling - it is reality and reality feels sickening.
 - d. And yet for many of us we have come to the following conclusion: It's the best we can expect, no one's perfect, I'll just have to live with this guilt because there is nothing that can be done about it.
6. Would you believe me if I told you that this horrible feeling of frustration you are experiencing right now can be your greatest friend because everyone who enters into relationship with God must go through this phase in order to discover the victorious life.
 - a. The problem is when we accept the phase as the best God has to offer.
 - b. The problem comes when we begin to look for excuses and rationalizations instead of answers.
 - c. When we do that, we destroy our chances for receiving what God really wants to give us and we promote to the world a lie in terms of the definition of what Christianity is all about.
 - d. Romans 7 is not a definition of the successful Christian life, it is the definition of The Stage of Frustration that is the pathway to what God really intends for us.
7. This morning I am going to give you the beginning of the way to escaping this stage, and I will complete the definition of the way out, but before I do so, let me quickly define for you why it is that the majority of Christians never escape this stage.

E. (Slide #9) Perspective #2: Why so many get trapped for a lifetime in the Valley of Frustration – recognizing the traps.

1. The trap called the Valley of Frustration is a nasty one for many of us, and we get caught there

and decide that there just isn't any way out.

2. We get caught there, I believe, because of four main reasons - listen to these carefully.
 - a. **(Slide #10) REASON #1:** We have come to believe that walking with God is a matter of the mind instead of a matter of relationship.
 - (1) Paul was in every way one of the greatest intellectual thinkers of his day.
 - (2) He had studied well, he had learned well, he had the natural ability, and he knew what to do with it.
 - (3) In his mind, he had analyzed life and come to the conclusion that he had it all figured out.
 - (4) There was this list of rules that Paul had masterfully memorized and figured how to use, and so for Paul his walk was defined as intellectual consent to a list of rules.
 - (5) As Paul awoke in the morning, he intellectually considered the things he must do in that day to feel fulfilled and then at the end of the day he analyzed his actions and arrived at the conclusion that he was a success.
 - (6) This all worked for Paul in isolation - without anyone to do analysis for him - until one day He met a person that he saw as someone he needed to have relationship with, Jesus Christ.
 - (7) Suddenly his self-evaluation was not so promising.
 - (8) Suddenly, the fulfilling of rules was not so great for he began to realize that the fulfilling of rules not only did not give him happiness, but his fulfilling of rules was not quite as good as it appeared to be - not in light of Christ.
 - (9) Paul came to understanding that religion is not a matter of human knowledge and intellect - it is instead a matter of relationship with one who is greater than ourselves, Jesus Christ.
 - (10) What Paul found to be true, many sitting here this morning need to discover if we are going to escape the valley of frustration.
 - (11) The Christian walk is not a matter of learning all the truths and walking in that truth; it is a matter of daily rediscovering Christ and the difference that discovery makes.
 - (12) It is not the fulfilling of prescribed rules but rather the living of life as God directs us every moment of every day.
 - (13) It is not a mundane striving to be legally correct but instead an aggressive striving to be constantly in right relationship which means something different every day of our lives.
 - (14) I have heard it said by some, "I've walked with God so long that I pretty much know everything there is to know about the Christian walk. There isn't a whole lot more that surprises me or gets me excited anymore. It's just a matter of living out what I have already learned."
 - (15) Such an evaluation of the Christian life is fraught with frustration and defeat because it defines the walk of the Christians as the walk of the mind.
 - (16) When we live the Christian life as relationship, every day is a matter of adventure and every truth we hear, whether or not we've heard it a million times or not, is a new truth as God defines it in light of where we currently are.
 - (17) Might I say to some who are gathered here this morning that if you want to escape the valley of frustration, the time has come to move from the mind to the heart; from intellect to relationship.
 - b. **(Slide #11) REASON #2:** We have come to view God as our condemner instead of our Redeemer.
 - (1) For others of us, we fail to escape the valley of frustration because we view God as the divine frustrator.
 - (2) We envision God as the one who has the perfect record of the laws who sits enthroned in heaven for the purpose of keeping track of how many times we mess up.

- (3) With such a vision of God, life is a tension.
 - (4) We work hard and long trying our very best to prevent God from putting another mark against us on our record.
 - (5) Life as a Christian has become a frustration because it seems that no matter how hard we strive, we cannot please our unreasonably strict God.
 - (6) To those of you who are in this place - and there are many - the frustration will never go away until we allow God to redefine Himself in us.
 - (7) The God of the Bible is not a legalist - he is a grace giver.
 - (8) The God of the Bible is not interested in form, He is interested in intent and heart.
 - (9) The God of the Bible is not out to condemn us, but to redeem us as His primary objective.
 - (10) The God of the Bible is not waiting for us to mess up so He can put a mark against us, but He is waiting with anxious anticipation to daily offer us grace and love and guidance and forgiveness if we do mess up.
 - (11) God is not so much interested in how well we perform; He is interested in how well we love Him and live in relationship to Him.
 - (12) With a new vision of God, every day can become a day filled with adventure as God lovingly leads us into new territory and walks with us in gentle nurture and love.
- c. **(Slide #12) REASON #3:** We have come to stubbornly believe that we can run our lives better than anyone else - including God - and refuse to live life any other way than "My way!"
- (1) This reason is as old as Adam and Eve who bought Satan's lie and decided they knew better than God.
 - (2) Every generation from Adam until Jesus comes will struggle with this issue and as long as the struggle exists, we will find ourselves in the valley of frustration.
 - (3) I want to save a lot of us some time this morning by simply saying this: "Your way will never be better than God's way, so why not give it up now!!!!"
 - (4) The words of Proverbs rings loud and true: "***Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding, but in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight.***"
- d. **(Slide #13) REASON #4:** Fear!
- (1) The final reason I would list this morning is quite simply fear.
 - (2) It is a fear of letting go and trusting in God because it seems so risky, so dangerous, so unknown.
 - (3) It is a trust factor that is being struggled with - can God be trusted?
 - (4) It's O.K. if you are feeling that way. Let's look at Paul's response.
- F. **(Slide #14) Perspective #3: Discovering the pathway to freedom: RELEASE FROM CONDEMNATION!**
1. So how do we escape the valley of frustration.
 2. The escape route has more than one step, and the extra steps will be outlined in future Sundays.
 3. For today, though, I want to simply offer to you one of the greatest truths you could ever hear; a truth that will set you free and give you new hope for your pursuit of the holy life.
 4. Here's one of the most freeing truths imaginable. Look at Romans 8:1-2 - "*Therefore, there is now **no condemnation** for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.*"
 5. Friends, do we realize what is being said? Do we understand the power of these verses? To we comprehend the release and the freeing nature of Paul's declaration of promise?
 6. Let me put it in simple, every day layman's terms, combining it with what we've already learned.
 - a. You can be saved from sins, because God wills that you be forgiven, died on a cross to make it possible, and offers salvation to all who will receive it.

- b. Being forgiven of sins, you can determine and will that you will live a life that no longer is a slave to sin, but rather a slave to righteousness.
 - c. Getting there can lead you into a time of struggle and frustration where you try to do good, but seem to fail.
 - d. But you are going to make it through that valley, and here is why: In God you have someone who understands, someone who is patient and kind, someone who longs to see you succeed, and so He will not condemn you but help you, call you, guide you, and help you get through that valley to the mountain top of victory.
 - e. Do not lose heart, don't grow faint or weak, and don't carry the burden of guilt. Look to God who does not condemn you but will bring you through.
7. Friends, then there are shoutin' words. Praise the Lord. You win again, I win again, we win again, and it goes back to the place we began this journey.
- a. We win because of God's choice.
 - b. We win because of God's will and promise.
 - c. We win because God wants us to win, and so He comes not as our condemner but as our Redeemer, and Enabler, and Empowerer and Friend.
 - d. We win because there is a Jesus who understands the valley of frustration and will do all within His power - and that's a lot of power - to get us through.
8. We win!!!!!!!!!!

III. CONCLUSION.

- A. Are you getting excited yet?
- B. Is this journey sounding pretty sweet?
- C. Is this not a journey that is filled with hope?
- D. Is this not a journey worth taking? And isn't it one that you just think your friends would love to take with you?
- E. Here's the key: We must not stop in the valley of frustration; God is challenging us to keep on walking.
- F. Invitation: (**Slide #15**) Anyone want to get out of the valley today? Come on out of the valley of frustration into the mountain called holiness. There is a pathway called "no condemnation."