

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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For the full blessing of saints - 2 Corinthians 13:14

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen." This is how 2 Corinthians 13:14 reads. It is the last of our series of four talks on some the prayers of the Apostle Paul found in letters (or epistles) which he wrote to the churches in Thessalonica, Rome and Corinth. There are prayers for his readers in some of his other letters as well. Look through these prayers of Paul, especially those in the Epistle to the Ephesians 1:15-23, and in 3:14-21, and in the Epistle to the Colossians 1:9-12. Also see, as you read through Paul's epistles, how often he mentions that he is praying for his readers and, more, how often he says that he was always praying for them. I wonder how he managed to fit it all in with his busy schedule of preaching, visiting Christians in their homes, travelling to different cities, and making tents to support himself and others in the Lord's work so as not to be a burden to those he laboured amongst.

The other three prayers which we've looked at were much longer than today's single verse, being 12, 8 and 11 verses long, yet this one fairly short verse contains very much for us to consider together. It is commonly known as "The Grace" and is frequently used as a short prayer at the end of a service or a Christian meeting, especially if we're running short of time. The person leading the meeting can just say, "We'll say the Grace together," assuming that everyone who's there knows it well enough to say. Then they all say the verse, with some people thinking about what it means and making it a real prayer for themselves, and some people not knowing the words and mumbling until they get to the "Amen," with the rest somewhere in between these two extremes. Some will concentrate on what they are saying but some will instead be thinking, "I must catch Jim before he goes," or "I've got time to go to the Post Office before I have to be back at work," or whatever else we think about when we've drifted from the matter in hand. Of course, when the matter in hand is praying to God, it matters a great deal if we're not really thinking about it, which is a good reason for being very careful how we use set and frequently-used prayers such as the Grace and the Lord's Prayer. When they just trip off the tongue without our needing to think about them, and we really don't think about them, then something's gone wrong.

Well, this little talk may help us to focus better on the meaning of the few simple but profound words of this verse we're considering today.

How does it start? The first phrase is "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ." Grace is one of the main characteristic Christian words, just as much as love is. It is generally used to mean "undeserved favour." It is sometimes made into an acronym GRACE - "God's Riches At Christ's Expense." This is particularly true of Christian salvation. We read in Ephesians 2:8 and 9, "For by grace you have been saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." We cannot earn or do anything to deserve our salvation. God saves us, not because we are good enough but because He loves us in spite of our sin. It is His grace towards us. He will not have it any other way, as we see from the verse just quoted. If it's by grace, then it's a gift; you can't earn it or deserve it or pay for it, any more than you pay for a Christmas or a birthday present, or an invitation to a wedding reception. The grace of the Lord Jesus is free to us, but costly to Him beyond our understanding. It is only when we look at the cross, that we have any inkling of how much grace the Lord Jesus has shown towards us.

Grace can often be used to describe behaviour and even the way a person moves. A gracious person is one who is kind but with the overtones of being so in an elegant or even refined way. It is perhaps what is expected of a better sort of person, especially the nobility or royalty. Whether they live up to that expectation is another thing. The word grace seems to carry with it the idea of something additional and better than the ordinary.

We find elsewhere in the New Testament the association of grace with our Lord Jesus Christ. In John 1:17, we read, "For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." We also read in 2 Corinthians 8:9, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich." When we think about it, this is an astonishing statement about the coming into this world of our Saviour. He came from where He was in the glory of heaven, the One who was always with God the Father as His Son and the One by whom and for whom all things were created - He came into this world of sin and death and all the misery they cause. He did not come to a life of wealth, of privileges and luxury but to poverty and a life of hard work. Not only did He stoop that low, but He went further down and took upon Himself our

sins when He died on the cross. That truly is poverty - having absolutely nothing. So that is why the Apostle Paul writes, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ."

When the Lord Jesus spoke in the synagogue in Nazareth at the beginning of His ministry, people marvelled at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth. And it is this grace that Paul wants to be with his readers, not only those at Corinth but ourselves today as well.

Next, we have the words, "... and the love of God." Well, we all know that God loves us, even if we have never read it in the Bible. It is one of the things even unbelievers say, although changed in a rather unobvious way. "If God is a God of love, then why does He let disasters and tragedies happen?" they say. They ignore the fact that so many of this world's ills are caused by humanity's wickedness. They also fail to see that, in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, God has entered into the human situation, with all its misery and suffering, as we see from the suffering the Lord Jesus endured on the Cross. God is not only a God of love but God is love itself as 1 John 4:8 tells us, "He who does not love does not know God, for God is love."

What is love? It is a word in very common use and we all know what it means but when we actually have to define it we may find the meaning is a bit more slippery than we had thought. It is obviously a strong liking or affection for a person or an object. It is what exists between members of a family and, as we know from our own experience and observation, it can be and should be very strong. We rightly assume that husbands and wives, parents and children and others related to each other have a special feeling for each other, and will do their utmost for each other, and we think it's pretty poor when they don't. It continues throughout life and serves as a kind of basic glue that keeps us together - "blood is thicker than water," we say. It is most unfortunate and even terrible when it goes wrong, which it can do, as we know.

There can be strong attachments between friends as well but these are a matter of choice whereas love within the family is not. Love within the family is more or less automatic. We choose our friends, generally because we like their company, and because we have something in common with them.

People have a love for their country; they prefer their country to other countries and want their country to be on top or at least not be disadvantaged by others. The interest, fervour and emotion which are aroused by the performance of national football and cricket teams, etc with the great euphoria there is when the national side wins and the corresponding depression and despondency when it loses are well-known examples of this.

Love can sometimes be expressed for objects of no real importance in a quite exaggerated way such as, "I'd love a cup of tea, please." No one thinks that the tea drinker intends marrying a cup of the stuff but that a cup of tea would be most welcome. Children love ice cream. This doesn't matter much but it is much more serious when people love money; that is, they really want more of it and what it will buy, and they think that pursuing it regardless of any other consideration is normal behaviour. And so people love sport, or their particular hobby or interest, or politics or their career or job and so on. These things become people's god, both because they rely on them for their sense of well-being, and because they invest so much in them in terms of effort, money, time and emotion. This may mean that family and friends have to take second place in their lives. And, of course, God may have no place at all. In Luke's Gospel 11:43, we read that the Pharisees loved the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. We also read in the 1 Timothy 6:10 that the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.

However, God's love is not like this at all. First of all, the word almost entirely used in the New Testament for the kind of love that God has is different from the words for love within the family and love between friends. Its main difference from the other words seems to be that it is a deliberate act of the will, not an automatic or expected thing like love between family members or between friends. God loves us because He chooses to do so. Our behaviour as humans, the kind of people that we are, what we think we have done for God or for other people, our acts of charity or kindness, what potential we may have, what talents we may have, our position in life, our education, our wealth or lack of it, our parents' religion, how we were brought up, our nationality, whether we live in what might be called a Christian country (there's no such thing, of course) - all of these things are what some people imagine makes them acceptable to God, worthy of receiving His love. But that is simply not true. God loves us because He loves us. As we saw earlier, God is love. God loves the world in general, and us in particular, in spite of what we are, in spite of our behaviour, and whether or not we have any obvious potential for serving Him and other people. All the other things in the list I read out are of no importance at all. If we are relying on them for salvation, we are truly blind to the reality of our situation. We need to repent of our sins and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ if we are to be right with God.

It's a truly wonderful thing that God does not love us for what we are. If that were the case, I for one would be hopelessly lost because there is nothing in me to make me attractive or even barely acceptable to the God who hates sin and cannot look upon it. My sins offend Him so much and render me so incapable of any real improvement in His sight that He sent the Lord Jesus to the Cross to atone for my sins and for yours. There was no other way you or I could be made right with God. Because of the cross, God can forgive the most appalling and monstrous sins.

So God's love truly wonderful. And it is effective and powerful. All too often human love and concern can only wring their hands powerlessly at the latest tragedy, disaster or wickedness. God, however, has the power to act and the willingness to do so. This is chiefly seen in the Cross. God's timetable is certainly not ours. People often think He is far too slow to put this world to rights or they wonder whether He does anything at all. However, when you think how often humanity gets it wrong, it is more than likely that we would get the timing wrong as well. God's timing is perfect and, the longer He waits, the more time we have to repent and believe and the more people there will be in heaven as thousands upon thousands the world around are being saved every day.

Now God's love is different from ours in another way. We can only love a limited number of people at a time but God's love is for all humanity. We read in John's Gospel 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." We see from this verse that God can love all of humanity and each single person at the same time. Everyone who comes to God through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ has a personal relationship with Him. He treats us as individuals and we relate to Him on that individual basis. We are not just one of a crowd to whom no individual attention can be given. In John's Gospel 10:3 we read that the Lord Jesus said about Himself as the Good Shepherd, "... the sheep hear His voice; and He calls His own sheep by name and He leads them out." There are numerous examples throughout the Bible to show that God deals with whole nations and with individuals.

Governments and other large organisations cannot do that. With the best will in the world, they can only follow a "one size fits all" approach. Trying to fit in every exception to legislation, rules for welfare, etc. so as to cater for every individual's situation doesn't work. It becomes too cumbersome.

It is this love - able to meet the need of every single person but of universal application - this love, which comes from the very heart of God and is what God truly is in Himself - it is this love which Paul wanted to be with his readers. He wanted them to know it and to experience it and for it to be with them. And, of course, what he wanted is not just for the Christians in first century Corinth but for ourselves twenty centuries later.

Next Paul writes, "... and the fellowship (or communion) of the Holy Spirit be with you all." What does this expression mean? Does it mean the fellowship which all Christians share and which has been created by the Holy Spirit? Or does it mean the sharing in the Holy Spirit which all true, born-again Christians have? It is true that the fellowship or communion which Christians have is not something which they have created. It is not like a club or a society where people with a common interest come together and set up an organisation, however formally or informally, for an agreed purpose - breeding canaries, playing a sport, representing tenants, flower arranging, promoting a particular charity or a political party or a type of business, or whatever. They have a common purpose, they have their rules of association and conduct for carrying on their affairs.

In the things of God, however, it is quite different. **God** has set up His church and all true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ are members of it. The Head of the church is His Son and not anyone we mere humans have elected. The church is not an organisation; it is the body of Christ. Now it is the Holy Spirit who is present in the church and, of course, He indwells every believer (John 14:17 tells us in the very words of the Lord Jesus, "... He (meaning the Holy Spirit) He dwells with you and will be in you"). Further, we read in John 16:13-15, "However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you."

It was the Holy Spirit who came upon Mary and caused the conception of our Lord. He also descended upon our Lord in the form of a dove at His baptism and is mentioned in the Gospels in association with our Lord's ministry. From John 3:5-8, we see that it is through the Spirit's action, though unseen as the wind, that we enter the kingdom of God, and by Him we are born again. We are baptised in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. As I said earlier, He indwells the people of God and He also empowers them. We read of instances in the Acts where the Spirit came upon believers and where men were filled with the Spirit. 1 Corinthians 6:19 tells us that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and Ephesians 5:18 tells us that we should be filled with the Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to experience the love of God - Romans 5:5 tells that the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. The spiritual gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12 are distributed by the Holy Spirit.

Now it is this one, the third Person of the Trinity, present at Creation and the one who "will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness and of judgment" (John 16:8) that all Christians share in. We have the common experience of salvation by the action of the Spirit, we have the common experience of the Spirit's indwelling, (though some more than others), and we share in that fellowship, which would not exist without the action of the Holy Spirit.

God has brought us into fellowship with Himself the Father and with His Son (1 John 1:3), and into the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Now what does the realisation of this do to us? How do we respond? There can be no doubt that this

very great privilege is meant for us. If we can get hold of it in our hearts - and surely only God can make that happen - it will have far-reaching implications for the way we regard ourselves as believers, the way we live and the way we respond to God. And this is what the Apostle wanted for us all. May we then prayerfully seek to enter into this particular blessing, to live in the light of it, to enjoy it, and to seek too that we do not spoil it by not treating Paul's God-inspired wish seriously enough or by slack, sinful lives.

So, once again, let me leave you with this traditional Christian farewell; "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen."

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