

BY GOD'S GRACE

By

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Grace - the fountainhead of a deep peace

The time is about 34 A.D. and the scene is Jerusalem. Peter and John have just been released from prison, and the entire Christian community has been threatened and warned by Jewish authorities against preaching in the name of Jesus. Yet, as they gather to consider these severe circumstances, joyful praise bursts forth from their lips and a spirit of peace and joy prevails (Acts 4:21-35).

The scene changes to Philippi where Paul and Silas have been severely beaten, thrown into prison and chained with their feet in stocks. "But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns unto God, and the prisoners were listening to them..." (Acts 16:25).

The time is now 1966, and the scene is the average so-called "New Testament church." The song leader, is rebuking the congregation, and telling them, "A Christian is supposed to be happy. Now get a great big smile on your face. Come on, loosen up ... there, that's better ... Great! Now, let's show we're happy Christians as we sing."

Those early Christians knew the secret of spontaneous joy in spite of all circumstances. Why is it lacking today? The answer: they knew the meaning of God's grace.

THE WAY OF DOUBT

The basic theme of much preaching has been "be good and go to heaven." The standard of goodness may vary with preachers and localities, but generally it fits the ethical practice approved by most Christian people. In practice, it means that a person who has no outstanding bad habits and who keeps himself out of trouble is pretty good. If he adds to his moral ethics the habits of regular church attendance he is considered a good, faithful and loyal "member."

Believers are told to repent, to confess their faith and be baptized for remission of sins, and then they will be saved IF they live in obedience to God.

Here is the rub: "Obedience." In everything? Obviously it means everything. Immediately the mind is overwhelmed with fear and doubt. How can I know that I am perfectly obedient at all times? And even in the things that I do know perfectly, it is obvious that I have failed to obey perfectly! Who is so foolish as to think he is absolutely perfect at all times? To consider the necessity of such is to fill our hearts with fear, not peace.

It is a horrible thought, but one cannot help but wonder if some preachers do not promote this “fear” in order to coerce their followers to keep the rules they impose upon them. Being “obedient” means to attend certain services, give so much money and keep the institutional machinery running.

The effort to justify one’s self by his own goodness can never give peace and joy to a person honest enough to admit his own sins. Hence the uncertainty, the fear complex and the failure and doubt of the modern church member.

ABSOLUTE RIGHTEOUSNESS

It is sin that invokes the penalty of death. “The sting of death is sin ...” and “the soul that sins shall die” (1 Cor. 15:56; Ezek. 18:4). Therefore, in order to attain immortality and LIVE one must be absolutely righteous. This means to be without even one sin. It means to be as righteous as Christ, who was obedient in the very least desire of the Father, to the greatest demand, “becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross” (Phil. 2:8).

Not being able to measure up to this perfect obedience, the believer is in despair. His very belief is the basis of his sorrow, for knowing God’s righteousness and having failed to attain it. He considers the fact of his sin, and the penalty for it and stands in fear of punishment. As long as one is uncertain where he stands in the eyes of God, his joy must be contrived and artificially induced, and all his efforts at peace will end in frustration.

THE WAY OF GRACE

The answer to the dilemma is in the fact that God’s scheme is to save us by His GRACE, and not by our own relative goodness.

“For by grace have you been saved through faith” (Eph. 2:8). In this statement are three facts: (1) grace, (2) salvation and (3) faith. Grace is God’s; the faith is ours, and salvation is the result obtained by both, God and man.

In Christ’s death He took ALL our sin. “Him who knew no sin He made to be sin on our behalf; that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” Note that it does not say “sins” as of certain specific ones, but simply “sin,” encompassing all sin in our lives whether the overt act, the thought or the nature. In assuming our place in death, Christ made no distinction among our sins. He represented the believer in ALL the believer’s sins: was made to BE SIN, “in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin” (Rom. 8:3) and having assumed all sin in our life; he met the penalty for sin in death. Such is God’s amazing grace.

Our salvation depends not upon the degree of our law-keeping, but upon our faith in Christ’s death. The importance of baptism is not in the fact that it is “in obedience to our Lord’s command” as we often say. Baptism is an integral part of salvation because it is

an act of faith. Baptism is not something one DOES. The command is to “be baptized;” that is, to submit to baptism and allow another to baptize you. It is not that you are assisting in the act of salvation by doing something, but that by faith you are submitting to God so He can save you. “By grace have you been saved through faith.”

AND AFTER BAPTISM

A serious mistake is made when we say that Christ’s death saves us from sins committed before baptism. This implies that His death (and our baptism) does not cover sins after baptism. Yet the experience of many of us is that after many years of maturing in Christ we realize that some things since baptism were worse than those before.

What then? Is forgiveness on the basis of “repentance?” But what if one does not fully realize the enormity of his sin and therefore cannot fully repent? Or is forgiveness on a basis of works, a relative basis of trying to cancel sins by good works? Hence a person may know he is harboring a pet sin, but figures some of his virtues will make up for it!

But not so. “Whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (Romans 14:23). Only FAITH that all sin was condemned in Christ’s death will relieve us of guilt. At Judgment the question is not how much sin is weighed against so much virtue! All sin requires the death penalty. Then the only salvation will be in the fact that Christ took the penalty and punishment for all sin one ever committed. In the Revelation the saints are pictured as having overcome Satan “because of the blood of the Lamb.”

To rely on one’s own merits is exactly what is condemned in the Roman and Galatian letters. “Because by works of law shall no flesh be justified in His sight ...” (Romans 3:20). “You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by law: you are fallen away from grace. For we through the Spirit by faith wait for the hope of righteousness” (Gal. 5:4-5).

On the other hand, “he that has died is justified,” and all who are baptized into Christ are baptized into his death, so that His death becomes effective for them (Rom. 6:3, 7). Thus He is “just and the justifier of him that hath faith in Jesus” (Romans 3:26). What, then, does a Christian do about sin? “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8-9). “And the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7).

Thus, whether one sins before or after baptism, the cleansing and forgiveness is all in the same thing: the death of Christ and our faith in it. Knowing, therefore, that our salvation does not depend upon our works but upon God’s grace, we have “peace and joy in believing.” In all circumstances and under all loads, we still have cause to praise God and rejoice in our relationship with Him, knowing that while we are weak, He is strong, and while we do not merit life, He simply gives it to us on the basis of His grace and our faith.

To say “we know” with regard to our salvation is not boasting. It is not saying “I am good, and therefore worthy of salvation.” It is saying the opposite, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” It is confessing that one is not good in himself and by himself, but that he trusts and believes God; that he believes God to do just what He promises: to cleanse us and save us from destruction because of Christ’s substitutionary death.

To say that one believes in the gospel, but does not believe he is saved is a contradiction. If we believe, then we believe that Christ’s death is sufficient to meet the penalty for sin. If we do not believe this, we simply do not believe what the gospel says.

FOR HOW LONG?

Does this mean “once in grace always in grace?” Yes and no. One is in grace as long as he continues in the faith. But the moment he ceases to believe and live in this faith, he is no longer in Christ nor in grace. The New Testament warns us often against losing our lives through unbelief and the entanglements with the world that would wreck our faith. One CAN fall from grace, but one doesn’t HAVE to. Why should one be concerned about this, if he really loves God and has faith? Obviously he can remain in grace as long as he wants to, and why would he NOT want to?

“Now our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word” (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17).

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