

"TRANSFORMING GRACE"

"But by the grace of God I am what I am; and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me." I Corinthians 15:10.

There are many influences that enter into making a man what he is. A man is what he is, in some respects, due to heredity. There are certain physical characteristics and qualities of character that come to him through his ancestors. A man is what he is, in some respects, by association and environment. These have a large part in determining his physical condition and in molding his character. A man is what he is, in some respects, by training. He is a cultured, educated man, instead of an ignoramus, because of the effort he has put forth and the training he has received. A man is what he is largely because of his own choices. God has given to every man the right to choose the way in which he will go. The man in prison, facing punishment for his crimes, is what he is because he chose to go in that direction.

But, above all the influences that enter into the making of a Christian man is the grace of God. Apart from that grace there can be no Christian. In this passage Paul magnifies the grace of God by showing what that grace has accomplished in his own life. "By the grace of God I am what I am." Paul is unquestionably the greatest personality mentioned in the Bible except Jesus Christ. No other man was so many-sided as he. Each one can find in him something that is appealing. The practical man recognizes the business capability which leads him to the great centers of population and which makes him use the Roman roads as he travels over the empire. The mystic hails with gladness the spiritual gifts and his sense of the reality of the Unseen. The simple lover of humanity rejoices in the Apostle's powers of affection, in the zeal which reckons nothing of persecution, in the desire to become all things to all men if some thereby may be saved, in the spirit which prompts him to close his letters with loving messages to those whose names are before him. All these things endear this great man to us and cause us to think of him, not so much as a saint removed far from us, but as a wonderfully attractive human character, gifted with a heart that could beat in unison with humanity's needs. He tells us that he owed everything to God.

What did Paul mean by grace? We can get nowhere at all with Paul if we do not get his meaning of grace, for he was always talking about it, and wherever he was, he always came back to it. The pivot of his theology was the doctrine of grace. The grace of God is the free good-will of God toward the human race, going out to all as a redeeming and available power for life. There are two things in it. First, there is the attitude of God towards us. Grace is how God stands to us. Secondly, grace is the power of God's saving good-will at our disposal and for our using. It is ours to proceed upon. It is the good-will of God resting on the human race as a purpose and a power of salvation. The active love of God towards us sinful creatures and the gifts with which that love comes to us are connected as root and product. "By the grace of God I am what I am."

In a sense this is true of every man -- believer and unbeliever, Christian and non-Christian. Whatever a man is, he is by the grace and favor of God. In God's hand our breath is. In Him we live and move and have our being, and apart from Him we should not be at all. Should God take away our breath, we would die and return to the dust. Whatever we are, we are by permission of God. It is equally true that you are a doctor or a lawyer or a teacher or a merchant or a mechanic by the grace of God. In our text grace means not simply the good-will of permission, which God shows to all men, but the active and positive favor and good-will which God shows to all those who are in Christ Jesus. The essential meaning of grace is love. While it is true to say that all grace is love, all love is not grace. Love can be shown by an equal for an equal, by a higher for a lower, by a lower for a higher; but grace can only be shown by a higher for a lower. We can

love God, but it would be a blasphemous impertinence to talk about our being gracious to Him. But God is gracious to us. Grace is love that flows down, love that stoops, the love of the Highest for the lowest. And so in the Scriptures it stands for the love of God for man. And it was that love that made Paul.

I realize that I am speaking of something to which in its implications people today do not take kindly, and in terms to which they do not readily respond. There is something in the spirit of our age against it. It is an age with a strong sense of man's ability to think, to act, to care for, and to save himself. It is an age of an intensified humanism. According to many, the sense of sin which once drove men to the throne of grace is reduced to ignorance, or immaturity, or some psychical derangement, or some maladjustment. The gospel of grace says that our salvation is of God, and the hope of the world lies in the outflowing of God's grace, remaking, cleansing, illuminating, liberating, and transforming men and women who are in bondage. It goes without saying that this is what some find very hard. The circumstances of their surroundings, of their education, and of their inherited traditions make it very difficult for them to get away from the thought that their achievements and efforts are all-important.

Paul's words imply that grace is active, operative, and energizing. Grace is not a mere sentiment, but it is a force, a power, and an energy. Grace is the fountain of power, and the secret of triumph over cowardice and fear. Grace begets courage and confidence. It is like the coming of reinforcements to a sore-pressed army. It fires the heart and nerves the arm. It changes doubt and despair into the assurance of victory.

Now this potent energy of grace had been at work in the life of Paul. From the time of his conversion the love of Christ had been the dynamic of Paul's life. "The love of Christ constraineth me." That love had saved him, cleansed him, comforted him, strengthened him, and enabled him to do and to suffer. Looking back upon his life, Paul realized that all he had known and had done was due to the energizing love of God. Without grace he would have been nothing; to grace he owed everything. What had grace done for Paul?

1. It had transformed him from a lost sinner into a child of God.

Paul thought of the years when he resisted the Gospel and fought against Christ. Then the marvellous experience on the Damascus Road came to him, and his whole life was changed. His sins were all forgiven, and he became a new creature in Christ. It was not by the works of the law, but by the grace of God, that he was saved. So it is with every saved person. But for the grace of God he would still be a lost sinner groping in darkness. If Paul had been asked, as Sir James Simpson, the great Edinburgh physician, was asked, what was the greatest and most welcome discovery of his whole life, he would have answered, as that great doctor answered, "The discovery that I have a Saviour." Yes, the best and brightest and happiest day in all Paul's life was the day when, through Jesus Christ, he was delivered from his load of shame and sin.

2. It had transformed him from a servant of sin into a saint of God.

Paul was not a saint in the sense of sinless perfection, but he was a saint in that his life was yielded to the Holy Spirit, and he was daily growing in the grace and knowledge of his Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Paul was the bondsman of sin. Sin dwelt in him and reigned over him. But God's grace not only saved Paul from his sins and transformed him into a child of God, but it continued to work in his life to impart spiritual graces and to produce a Christ-like character.

3. It transformed him from a persecutor of Christians into an apostle of Christ.

Paul could never forget and was always ashamed of and sorry for the fact that he had persecuted Christians. Although he was once a persecutor of the Christians, he became an apostle of Christ, carrying the Gospel message all over the Roman Empire. This marvelous transformation had been wrought out by the grace of God.

Paul never ceased to wonder at the marvel of his salvation. Next only to the marvel of his salvation was the marvel of his apostleship. Paul was "lost in wonder, love and praise" when he thought of his apostleship. For of all men he seemed the least worthy of this high honor. It was God's grace that had lifted him up to the height and conferred upon him that honor. How was it that he who was less than the least of all saints became an apostle? By grace. Grace did more than save Paul; it brought him to honor and dignity.

4. It transformed him from a busy person into a fruitful Christian.

He travelled innumerable miles; he preached innumerable sermons; he suffered unspeakable hardships. He knew that his vast toil and the success he met with were not to be put to his own credit, but to the Divine love aiding him and strengthening him. Paul knew that the excellency of the power was of God and not of himself. He knew there would never have been a soul saved or a church established but for the "grace of God that was with him." Paul gave himself without reservation to the work to which his Lord had called him, but he realized that it was the grace of God, and not his efforts, that had brought results. It was the grace of God that created within him the desire to serve, and it was the grace of God that made his efforts fruitful. No movement can ever transform society or reform individuals that tries to work apart from the grace of God.

We are surrounded by infinite, redeeming, uplifting, strengthening, and keeping energy. This Divine energy is ours for the taking.

CONCLUSION

1. Paul was not what he had been -- a slave to sin and Satan.
2. Paul was what he never expected to be -- a Christian.
3. Paul was what he did not deserve to be -- an apostle.
4. Paul was not what he hoped to be -- Christ-like.
5. Paul was what he was "by the grace of God."