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Grace

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Ephesians 1:2,7; 2:5,7,8; 3:2,7,8; 4:7,29; 6:24. Zechariah 4:7.

I think you will have been impressed with the number of times in which that word grace occurs in the letter to the Ephesians. I must confess that I was greatly impressed as I noticed it, and it conveyed to my own heart a very blessed significance. I think the higher we go in Divine revelation, the more subtle the perils become, and when we come to a contemplation of what we may call Ephesian truth and the Ephesian position, it is there that we meet one of our greatest perils, our greatest spiritual perils. And the peril there is that of losing, to some extent, the realisation that everything is of grace. In Ephesians we are not particularly occupied with the matter of salvation. When we are in Romans and salvation is so very much more in view, then of course the matter of grace is before us all the time and grace has a large place in our consciousness. In Ephesians we are dealing more with position and vocation and more of the active side of our own spiritual life, and it is just there that we come into the realm of the danger of letting grace in its more intensive form fall away from our consciousness. That is indeed our supreme peril as we advance into the higher and the deeper things of the life to which the Lord has called us.

And so we are brought back almost with a startling reminder as we gather up a dozen references to grace in the six chapters of this Ephesian letter. And it is rather the cumulative effect of that that I want to deal with, not studying each occurrence with its own peculiar connection, but just that we might remind our hearts of the fact that it does not matter how far we may advance, into whatever altitudes of spiritual life we may ascend, whatever may be the honour conferred upon us and the service to which we are called, we never for one moment in the slightest degree get beyond the range of grace or beyond the limit where all is of grace.

Here in this letter, as you know, three things in the main occupy us. The first is identification with the Lord Jesus, the second is revelation, and the third is vocation. We are early reminded of our identification with the Lord Jesus. United with Him in the likeness of His death: "For if we have been planted together in the likeness of His death, we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection" - a theme with which most of us are very familiar. But we must come back to this matter from this standpoint of grace, and realise that identification with the Lord Jesus in His death is a matter of grace. I am not sure that we have recognised that sufficiently. We have rather taken it on as something extra that we had by way of consecration and surrender, giving ourselves to the Lord in a fuller and deeper way than perhaps the average; that we accept all the meaning of the cross for the entire setting aside of the old man, and very often associated with that position and that acceptance is the thought (if it is not clearly defined, it is in the background of our minds) that we are doing something extra, we are going an extra bit of the way, and to do that, of course, means that we are putting ourselves in the way of special favour from the Lord, that we are taking up a special position which must be followed, of course, by special blessing.

Now, it may be that you are able to follow beyond what I have said and see what I mean, but I want to bring that thing right back to this point of grace again. We do recognise, of course, that the cross of the Lord Jesus is God's eternal "NO". The mighty and the all-inclusive "NO" which issues from God. A race, a world, a mankind fallen, no longer according to the original thought of God, and to the whole God has issued His uncompromising "No". "Impossible" is written from God's side over that whole state and that whole realm so that an impasse is made and there is no prospect whatever of the Lord realising any of His intentions and designs in that race, in that state, and Calvary is God's mighty and final "No" to everything in the creation from the time of Adam's sin. What are you going to do in such an impasse, when you come to such a deadlock? Well, on the one side it does spell hopelessness and despair, but God has always had a way of making the valley of Achor a door of hope.

The valley of Achor was indeed a hopeless situation: Achan with all his kith and kin, all his property and estate, everything in any way related to or associated with him was brought forth and utterly destroyed. A "No" issued from God: not one fragment to remain. The prophet tells us that the Lord makes the valley of Achor a door of hope. And Calvary is just that, by the grace of God, because the resurrection of the Lord Jesus is God's emphatic and all-inclusive "Yes". There is a "No" on one side, but there is a "Yes" on the other, and into that "Yes" we are admitted through death in resurrection, and God goes on with His eternal thought and intention through resurrection union with the Lord Jesus. And identification proves to be not something that you and I have meritoriously accepted, but something out of which we could not escape, for whether we will or not, we did die in Christ from God's standpoint. It is not something we do; it has already been accomplished. We cannot get out of it. We come under the final uncompromising "No" of God. All that there is left for us to do is in faith to accept that, but to see that God's "Yes" lies in the direction of our acceptance, and that which looks like a firmly closed door becomes through faith an opened door in the grace of God. And identification, with which this letter opens, is based upon grace, as you notice: having forgiven us all our trespasses. Identification with the Lord Jesus is the grace of God and not something that we do by way of special merit. God has found a way in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus out of an impasse, out of a deadlock, and brought us from a negative into a positive, from a "No" into a mighty "Yes", and what I am feeling is that you and I have got to make more of God's "Yes". I am seeing the great message of the Bible from start to finish is resurrection. It is not death; it is resurrection.

Until we see that, we have not learned the secret of hope. We have not learned God's secret, for God has come out from eternity not with a "No", but with a "Yes", and God has been pursuing His "Yes" through history. His "No" is unto His "Yes". It does seem so often as you read so much of the Word

that it is all negativity, it is all a mighty "No", a subduing, a refusing, but we have got to see that God has never abandoned His "Yes". He is pursuing His "Yes" and even though Calvary from one standpoint may seem to be a "No", hopeless despair, it is God's way through to the realisation of His "Yes". And Calvary, because it sees the removal of the thing which created the impasse for us and for God, becomes the door of Grace into God's eternal "Yes". And the note (study it anew, take it up afresh with me) from Genesis to Revelation is the note of "Yes" - of resurrection. That is the message of the Word of God through and through, and everything that seems to be to the contrary, everything that seemed to be of death and setting aside is only (and you will find it to be so every time) God's way of getting through to His "Yes".

Now, if the Lord deals with us along the death line of setting aside and saying "No" and "No" and "No"; if He is sifting, if He is breaking, if He is emptying, if He is pouring out, if it seems that His way is a way of refusing all the time and bringing to nothing - remember God is pursuing His "Yes" and not His "No". It is with His "Yes" in view then, to make a way for His eternal "Yes", and God's "Yes" is always in terms of resurrection. You see the Lord Jesus in death under God's mighty "No" representatively, as the race under God's mighty: "No, that can never be, that is finished with." But then you have the reaction of God coming in on that, and the mighty, persistent declaration: "God raised Him - God raised Him". And when God had said His "No", He came in and said: "Yes, I do not leave it there."

If we are going on with the Lord we may come to a place where from one standpoint it looks as though a mighty "No" has been written over our entire lives, but God is going to come in with His "Yes"; God is pursuing His "Yes". Hold on to God's "Yes"; do not be over-occupied with the "No". Recognise the "No" is the only way to the "Yes" - another way of saying the death is the way to the life. But the note is the note of resurrection. The note is the note of God's "Yes". God is out for something positive and not for a negative. So identification is a matter of Divine grace.

Then in the next place in this letter you have the matter of revelation, for in this letter the revelation which is given is tremendous, and the prayer of the apostle for the saints is a tremendous prayer in the matter of revelation. He prays here that the eyes of their hearts may be enlightened, that they may be strong to apprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ. And there is much more here prayed for: that they might know the exceeding greatness of His power to us-ward who believe - and so on. Now, revelation is as much a matter of grace as is salvation. Revelation is not something that you and I attain unto. It is not something which belongs to a superior understanding and intelligence which is ours. It is not something which we acquire. Revelation is purely by the grace of God. I should like to pursue that much more extensively than we are able, but I remind you of the apostle himself. You remember what he said concerning the revelation that came to him: "And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness'". Grace came in with the superior revelation. The two things always go together.

What was the fear in Paul, and shall we say in the Lord about Paul? It was that having this great revelation he might consciously, or unconsciously, give other people to think that it was superior intelligence on his part; that it was something that he had acquired, something which had come to him which he had merited, perhaps by reason of the greatness of his sacrifice - what he had given up and suffered for the Lord. And now the Lord allowed suffering to come alongside of the revelation in order to show it was not the man at all. It was not what the man was. This was a matter

of the grace of God, and the apostle reminds us on several occasions that what he had he did not get by his own ability on any ground of superior natural intelligence. It was given to him by revelation of the Spirit. He is dependent entirely upon the Lord for it all. It was all of grace.

Now that puts us all on one level doesn't it? It means that the grace of God can work out in that way for us all if our natural abilities do not count here, if it is no question whatever of what we are by nature but all a matter of the grace of God; well, we can all come into this revelation through grace. But of course, we begin to deny the grace of God immediately we have the slightest suspicion of being teachers, experts, specialists, those who know something. It is a denial of the very foundation of revelation. And I believe that explains why a great many who started by the Lord giving them real revelation in grace through His Word, have finished by simply having knowledge which is cold and dead. That which was once revelation and full of life, health, helpfulness to others, is now the same phraseology, the same truth, the same doctrine, but just as dead as anything could be. It has now become merely mental knowledge. It has lost all its life, all its unction. Why? Because they traded upon it; because they allowed it to constitute them authorities, to make them something, and did not continue to recognise that every fragment of light was the grace of God. And the Lord would keep us very often in that position where we simply have to cling to Him for every bit of knowledge, truth, revelation that comes to us; very often keeps us right up to the last moment clinging to Him, holding on to Him, so that no expert human wisdom is of avail. We need something that only the Lord can give by revelation, and He keeps us close with Himself so that when it comes we shall say it was the grace and goodness of the Lord, not something of ourselves. The grace of God in ministry, the grace of God in knowledge.

And then briefly, a final word on vocation, for Ephesians brings us into our heavenly vocation, and in the matter of vocation it is still grace. Vocation has two aspects. There is that active side of ours, the active on our own part, and then there is what we might call the exhibitivite on God's part. Ephesians brings both these into view. The active on our part. The sixth chapter puts us into our active vocation in the heavenlies in Christ. But, do you think that we can fulfil our heavenly calling, do the Lord's work, be anything effective for the Lord, by anything that we are or have in ourselves? We are brought to a very high position here. We are brought in this chapter to dealing with no less forces than principalities and powers and world-rulers, spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenlies. That is a high vocation, that is a tremendous vocation, where these great spiritual, intelligent forces governing this world in its sinful state are being dealt with directly through the spiritual vocation of the saints as they are in prayer, and in the position which they occupy by faith in the Lord, equipped with the whole armour; a tremendous vocation, getting back of world conditions, men, flesh and blood.

How many have slipped there into the danger, into the trap of thinking that that vocation, that work, that business represents some superior place which they occupy, something which they are? And so they use language, and they put on manners, and they lift their voice in such a way as to give the impression that this work is done out of something unto which they have attained as an office, as a position. It's nothing of the kind. And the Lord has very often allowed such people to be knocked all over the place by the Devil to show them that this whole thing is all of grace; not an acquired position, not something that we are, not something that can be officially fulfilled, but something which is based upon the grace of God. The active side is upon the grace of God and there is no room whatever for man, for the flesh, for man by nature in this.

Then there is the other side of vocation which is what I have called the exhibitivite, God's side, for this letter shows us that God is doing something from His side along the line of grace, which is apart altogether from our activity and very largely apart from our understanding, intelligence, or

consciousness. He is making known unto principalities and powers His grace. They, the higher spiritual intelligences are able to read the grace of God in our lives as no others can read that grace of God and are compelled to marvel at the grace of God as it is shown in us. They know our value. They know our worth. We may have conceits about ourselves, there may be pride about us, but the higher spiritual intelligences know the truth about us, and very often they must smile at the pride, the conceit of these human hearts when there is some suggestion of being something in ourselves, and being able to do something. Oh, they know their superior power over us apart from the protection of God; they know what they could do with us if the Lord took His hedge from us. They can smile at us, when they see that which they can rightly now by reason of our fallen state, rightly and justly regard as worthless, counting for nothing even where they are concerned, even fallen spirits. If it were not for God it would go ill with us, where they can justly see our utter worthlessness, but they see God take that up and through an experience confound them, bring them to the place where they have to answer to Him, where they no longer have a leg to stand upon before the Lord, where a Job is taken up by God to answer the challenge of the prince of the princes of the fallen hierarchy - and there is something of the grace of God in that. God, taking up the nothings, the things which are not, the weak things, the foolish things and there displaying His grace.

What is the grace of God if it is not taking up a worthless thing and displaying His glorious wisdom and power through that? That is the grace of God, and higher intelligences are instructed in the grace of God through the experiences which come to us in God's sovereignty, in God's wisdom. The grace of God is being exploited, and we are told that in the ages to come the exceeding riches of His grace will be shown to principalities and powers through us - the exceeding riches of His grace. Everything is of grace right the way through. Not only salvation, but everything right on to the end. See the word in Zechariah, the top stone being put upon the temple is placed in its position with shoutings of "Grace, Grace unto it". And Ephesians is just the House of God brought into view and when the House of God is perfected, completed, the last thing that is going to be said about the completed and perfected House of God is "Grace".

There is no more merit in service than there is in salvation, no more merit in spiritual knowledge than in our justification: it is all of grace. I want to emphasise that God must have that ground before He can do things. We have such a way of returning to the Lord and after all seeking to in some way suggest a claim upon Him, a right, a merit, a worthiness, presenting Him ground upon which we feel the Lord ought to do this and ought to do that, and the Lord demands that we shall come for every phase and aspect of our spiritual life and relationship to Him to the place where: "Lord, if You do it, it will be all of grace"; "If the work is done, it will be all of grace." The Lord demands that ground. You find it through the Old and the New Testaments, the ground upon which the Lord works is, whether we wholly and fully recognise that, whatever the Lord does it will be all His grace, and while in Christ we have privileges and the Lord will sometimes call upon us to lodge a claim to the fulfilment of His promises - after all, on His side it is all of grace. So let us let go to His grace and give Him the ground that He needs for doing His continual enlarging things, and never ourselves become anything as believers or as workers, or as having any knowledge, but holding all things as of the grace of God.