

"THE GOSPEL OF THE GRACE OF GOD"
(ACTS 20:24)

Paul was returning from his third missionary journey. The boat on which he and his companions had taken passage stopped for a few days at Miletus. Ephesus, where Paul had labored for more than three years, was about thirty miles away. He sent messengers to that city, calling the elders of the church to come to Miletus. It must have been with a feeling of joy that the elders responded to that call. How glad they would be to see their great leader again! When they arrived at Miletus Paul reminded them of his labor of love in their city; he pointed out some of the dangers that confronted them, and exhorted them to be faithful and true; he told them something of the experiences which he was about to face. He was on his way to Jerusalem, not knowing what would befall him there, save that in every city through which he passed men who were filled with the Holy Spirit had said that bonds and afflictions awaited him. Then he uttered these words of the text, "But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God."

In this statement we see something of the courage and spirit of devotion to his Lord, which characterized the apostle Paul. Not all the threats of evil men, not even the danger of death itself, could turn him back. In the 13th verse of the next chapter, when the prophet Agabus had warned him that the Jews at Jerusalem would bind him and deliver him into the hands of the

Gentiles, and when his friends and companions begged him through their tears not to go to Jerusalem Paul said, "What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? For I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." What was it that could put a spirit like that in the soul of this man? Study the life of Paul and you will find many answers to this question. He was by nature a man of courage and loyalty to the cause which he espoused. It was not in him to be half-hearted in anything which he undertook. "As much as in me is, I am ready," was the spirit in which he faced every task. But in the words of the text, the apostle points out the two things above all others which put this spirit of courage and loyalty into his soul.

I. THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF A DIVINE MISSION.

"So that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I received of the Lord Jesus." He carried with him the conviction that he was following the course which the Lord Jesus had marked out for him, and was fulfilling the ministry which he had received from his divine Master.

When had Paul received that commission from his Lord? Go back and read the story of his conversion as he himself told it when he stood before king Agrippa. When that bright light from heaven shone around him, and he fell on his face in the dust, and heard the living Lord speaking to him, he cried out, "Who art thou, Lord?" The answer came back, "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister, and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the

which I will appear unto thee; delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God." From that moment Paul was conscious of a divinely given mission, and he would be true to that mission whatever the cost.

Many times during his career Paul referred to the fact that he had been divinely commissioned. From time to time we hear such declarations as these from his lips, "A dispensation of the gospel is committed unto me," "Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!" "According to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which was committed to my trust." When he was an old man, and was held as a prisoner at Rome to be tried for his life, we hear him say, "I press on, if so be that I may lay hold on that for which I was laid hold on by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself yet to have laid hold; but one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

If there is anything that will put zeal and courage into the soul of a man, it is the conviction that he has been called of God for his task. That is the explanation of the spirit of the Old Testament prophets. They felt in their souls that God had called them to go forth and speak for him. And that is the explanation of the spirit of all the men and women who have wrought for God on this earth.

One Sunday evening, many years ago, in a little farmhouse on the western plains, a farmer was teaching his little daughter the words of Charles Wesley's hymn:

"A charge to keep I have,
A God to glorify,
Who gave his Son my soul to save,
And fit it for the sky."

When he came to the second verse:

"To serve the present age,
My calling to fulfill,
O may it all my pow'rs engage,
To do my Master's will,"

the father told his little girl that God had brought her into the world to fulfill that verse. The child believed it, and, as she grew up, she dedicated her life to a great cause. She never faltered nor turned back no matter how strong the opposition, because there burned in her soul the conviction that God had called her.

William Booth went down into the slums of East London and started a work for God that was to girdle the globe. In the face of opposition and persecution, he pressed on. When at last he was an old man, and his eyesight had failed, he underwent an operation in the hope that his sight would be restored. But the operation was not a success. His sight was gone forever. But the old man girded his loins, and turned his face to the future, and gave voice to the great spirit of his soul in these words, "I've done my best for God with eyes, now I'll do my best without eyes."

Several years ago, at one of the Northfield conferences, a missionary from Africa told a story that stirred the hearts of the men and women who heard him. He told of going to Africa with companions that were eager for their task. One by one they

succumbed to the terrible climate. He buried three of them, and the others he took to the coast and sent back home broken in health. Then he turned back to stand alone in the midst of the thousands who had never heard the name of God. He tramped the blistered plains until his tongue was so swollen that he could not speak. Thirty times he was stricken with fever, with no white man to care for him. He was attacked by wild beasts, ambushed by savage natives, and ate almost everything from ants to rhinoceroses. He concluded his message with these words, "I know the great joy of walking with Jesus Christ in the midst of all this; I stand ready at this moment to go through it all again for the joy I had in flashing the word Savior into the darkness of a great tribe. Is it God's will? That makes the wilderness a garden; that makes the desert glow with the very presence of God."

When George Whitefield was starting out to the fields to preach what proved to be his last sermon, a friend said to him, "Sir, you are more fit to go to bed than preach." "True, sir," he replied, but turning aside he looked up to heaven and prayed, "Lord Jesus, I am weary in thy work, but not weary of thy work. If I have not yet finished my course, let me go and speak for thee once more in the fields, and come home and die."

I could go on and give other illustrations of the truth that, when a man or woman has the conviction that he is doing the work God gave him to do, there is a zeal and courage in his soul that all the forces of this world cannot destroy. May God give to you and me that conviction in the work we are trying to do in his name.

II. THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF A GLORIOUS MESSAGE.

"To testify the gospel of the grace of God." Paul's message was the good news of the grace of God. You notice that he didn't say "the gospel of the holiness of God." To be sure, it is a gospel of divine holiness. Any gospel that minimizes the holiness of God is not the gospel of God. But a mere gospel of divine holiness would leave men in despair. It is not "the gospel of the power of God." The gospel does have the power of God in it. On another occasion Paul said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God." A gospel without power would be a poor gospel. But a mere gospel of power would not bring much comfort and hope. It is not "the gospel of the wisdom of God." The gospel has the wisdom of God in it, but a mere gospel of divine omniscience could never redeem a soul from sin. The gospel which Paul was commissioned to preach was "the gospel of the grace of God."

The word "grace" is one of the most baffling words of the Bible. No one English word can give the full meaning of the Greek word which is here translated "grace." It occurs more than one hundred and seventy times in the New Testament. Sometimes it denotes "charm" or "loveliness." Sometimes it is translated "thanks," and sometimes "lovingkindness" or "good will." It was left for Paul to take the word and pour into it all the glory and power of the gospel.

Many efforts have been made to give a definition of "grace." Dr. J. H. Jowett defined it in this language, "Grace is holy love, but it is holy love in spontaneous movement, going out in eager quest toward the unholy and the unlovely, that by the ministry of its own sacrifice it might redeem the unholy and the

unlovely into its own strength and beauty." Another has said, "Grace is more than pity with tearful eye; more than mercy with outstretched hand; it is an arm made bare - an omnipotent arm, bared for a mighty task." Dr. G. Campbell Morgan says, "There is no word in the New Testament that more baffles the expositor than this word 'grace.' Gather up the occasions in which it is found in the New Testament, and read them in their context; then sit down in the presence of them, and wonder, and worship."

Grace is something which has its origin in God's great heart of love, and is bestowed upon undeserving sinners. It is contrasted with law. John says, "For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." Law is God asking; grace is God giving. Law is God commanding; grace is God bestowing. It is also contrasted with works. In speaking of salvation by grace, Paul says, "And if by grace, then it is no more of works; otherwise grace is no more grace." Works seek to merit the favor of God; grace bestows the unmerited favor of God.

The supreme manifestation of the grace of God is in the gift of his own Son. Grace is the love of God going out to a lost world in the person of his Son. "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich." Grace not only brought Jesus Christ to the world, it led him on to Calvary. The cross stands at the heart of divine grace. The gospel of the grace of God is the gospel of a crucified and risen Savior. That is what Paul himself said about it. "Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which ye also received, and

wherein ye stand. ----- For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures." The gospel of the grace of God is the good news of salvation through a crucified and risen Savior.

Let us notice, now, some characteristics of that gospel of the grace of God as set forth in the New Testament.

1. It is the gospel of saving grace. In Ephesians 2:8-9 we have that classic passage, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast." In order to make clear what he meant by saying that salvation was by grace, the apostle added two explanatory clauses.

"Not of yourselves." Salvation is not bestowed because of any good thing God sees in the heart and life. That does not discount goodness, nor take away from the individual the obligation to be good. But no person has ever been saved because of his goodness, for there has never been one who was wholly good. It is a startling picture which the Psalmist presents in the 53d Psalm, "God looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, that did seek God. Every one of them is gone back; they are altogether become filthy; there is none that doeth good, no, not one." The people who have come closest to God are the ones who are most ready to acknowledge their own sinfulness.

Doctor Edward Payson, one of the most saintly of men,

when he lay dying, uttered these words, "Oh, how sovereign, how sovereign is the grace of God! I might be dragged through heaven and earth and hell, and would be the same polluted, wretched sinner, unless God himself should renew me and cleanse me." Salvation is not of ourselves.

"Not of works." Men are not saved because of their good works. This statement does not discount good works, nor take away from the individual the responsibility to serve. But he does not thereby win salvation. A person may spend his days in work, he may sacrifice and suffer in order to do good, but all of his work, and all of his sacrifices and sufferings, can never bring salvation to his soul.

Bishop Asbury, the founder of Methodism in America, gave himself to service in the name of Christ as few men have done. Yet, near the end of his life he gave this testimony, "Were I disposed to boast, my boastings would be found true. I was converted at the age of thirteen. At the age of sixteen I began to preach, and travelled some in Europe. At twenty-six I left my native land, bade adieu to my weeping parents, and crossed a boisterous sea to spend the rest of my days in a strange land, partly settled by savages. In thirty years I have crossed the Allegheny Mountains fifty-eight times. I have slept in the woods, and have been without food and covering. Through the Southern states I have waded swamps and led my horse for miles, and in those journeys I took cold that brought on the diseases that now prey on my body and must soon terminate in death. But my mind is still the same, that through the merits of Christ and by the grace of God I am saved."

2. It is the gospel of sustaining grace. In Corinthians 12:9 we have another classic passage, "My grace is sufficient for thee." Paul was suffering from some malady which he called "a thorn in the flesh." He prayed to the Lord three times that this thorn might be removed. The Lord did not see fit to answer the earnest prayers of his servant by removing the thorn, but he answered in this gracious promise, "My grace is sufficient for thee." When Paul realized the full significance of these words, he said, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." The grace of God can, and does, sustain his trusting children in all the experiences of life.

Nine miles from our little city, in a country home nestling amid the trees, there lives a little palsied woman who is a member of our church. She will soon reach her ninety-first birthday. Years ago she was a teacher in our city schools. That dread disease laid its blighting hand on her, and she had to give up the work she loved. She went out into the country to make her home with a niece. In the course of a few years that niece died, leaving a husband and seven children. The oldest child was thirteen, and the youngest a babe of seven months. People wondered what would become of that home and that group of children. That little palsied woman answered the question. She went back and took a mother's place in that home. In her trembling arms she held that baby boy, and lavished on him the love of a mother. She has lived to see all of those children grow into promising manhood and womanhood. Now she sits there in the rocking chair, no longer able to walk. Her body shakes from head to foot. And yet, there is a smile on her face and an eternal calm in

her soul. Sometime ago when I was making her a little visit she uttered a word that has been a song in my heart ever since. After we had read God's Word and prayed together, she looked up into my face and said, "Pastor, I want to say this to you; as I look back along the way, there have been many dark hours. Sometimes I could not see the way ahead. But now the way ahead grows brighter and brighter." As I went on my way, I thought of that promise of old, "But the path of the righteous is as the dawning light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day." And I asked myself the question, "What is it that can so undergird a palsied woman, give her strength to take a mother's place and hold a home together, and drive away the clouds along the way ahead and make it shine with an ever-increasing light?" There was but one answer to that question, the gospel of the sustaining grace of a loving Father.

3. It is the gospel of prevenient grace. In theology prevenient grace refers to that grace of God which operates on the human heart and will before conversion. But I am using the term in the sense of preventive grace. Jude closed his short epistle with these words, "Now unto him who is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever." We thank God for that grace that lifts us up when we fall. But there is something better than that - a grace that is able to keep us from falling.

I can imagine Peter and John getting together and talking about their Christian experiences. I can hear Peter say, "O John, what a wonderful Savior we have! How marvelous is his grace! When

I forsook him in the hour of his suffering, and denied him when he needed a friend, he did not cast me off. After his resurrection, he came and sought me, and restored me to a place by his side. When I fell before the power of temptation, he lifted me up, and set my feet on the rock. Oh John, what a Savior he is!" And I can hear John as he answers, "Yes, Peter, that was a marvelous manifestation of his grace, but he did more than that for me, he undergirded me with his power in these testing times, and kept me from falling."

One day a company of men were telling about God's great mercy in preserving their lives when a boat on which they were crossing the lake was wrecked. The boat had been driven upon a rock. A great hole was made in its side, and it began to sink. These men cast themselves into the troubled waters, and, after a struggle, they were rescued. Now they were rejoicing in God's mercy that had spared them. A Christian man who had listened to their story said, "God did a more wonderful thing than that for me." They looked at him in amazement, for they had never heard of any narrow escape that he had had. They asked him what it was that God had done for him that was more wonderful than what he had done for them. He replied, "I crossed the lake in a boat and it was not wrecked." God had saved those men out of a wreck, but he had done something more wonderful for this man, he had kept him from having a wreck.

We rejoice that, when our lives go upon the rocks, God is able to reach down and lift us out of the wreckage and ruin. But it is a greater cause for rejoicing that God is able to keep us from having a wreck. He is able to keep us from falling.

But if we are to experience that grace and mercy we must stay close to God, we must hold on to our Father's hand. A little child was walking with his father along a rough and slippery way. The father wanted to hold the child's hand and keep him from falling, but the child thought he could get along without any help. In a few minutes he slipped and fell, injuring his body and soiling his clothes. The father reached down with his strong hand and lifted him up, and wiped away the dirt, and the two walked along hand in hand. The father lifted up the child when he fell, but it would have been better if the child had taken his father's hand in the beginning. Then he would not have fallen.

Many of us are like that child. We break away from God, and think we can walk along the pathway of life in our own strength, but we do not go far before we fall, and cry for help. We have a loving Father who hears our cries, and reaches down his hand of love and lifts us up and wipes away the stains. Thank God for that. But it would have been much better if we had stayed close to him all along the way. Then we would have been kept from falling.

4. It is the gospel of providential grace. Listen to those words of Paul in Romans 8:28, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose." This grace of God gets richer and richer all along the way. Not only do we have a God who can lift us up when we fall, and a God who is able to keep us from falling, and a God who can sustain us in all the experiences of life, but we have a God who can take all the experiences of life and use them to bring blessings to his people.

When Moses was recounting to the children of Israel their experiences along the way, he reminded them of the time when Balak sent for Balaam that he might pronounce a curse upon the children of Israel. Then he said, "But the Lord thy God turned the curse into a blessing unto thee." God has a way of doing that for his people; he turns their curses into blessings.

I have stood in the beautiful valleys in western North Carolina and have seen the storm-clouds gather over the lofty peaks. I have seen the flash of the lightning, and heard the roar of the thunder. I have watched the people as they fled for shelter before the angry clouds of the on-coming storm. I have climbed to the summit of those lofty peaks and looked down upon the clouds from the heights above. A marvelous transformation has taken place. Under the sunlight of God, those black and angry clouds from which the people fled have been changed into billows of glory.

So it is with the experiences of life for the child of God. When we view those experiences from the earthly side, they look dark and threatening, and we flee from them in fear. But when we climb the heights, and see those experiences in the light of God's love, they are transformed into experiences of glory.

That must have been what Paul was thinking about when he asked that question, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" and then answered his question in this shout of triumph, "Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us." He was saying, "Our God

not only gives us victory over the dark experiences of life, but he changes those experiences into channels of blessings."

When I was a young minister, I was settled in a happy pastorate. I had just married and established a home. Then a blighting disease laid its hand on me and my body withered under its touch. It became necessary for me to give up my work, leave my wife to pack up our goods and store them and go back to her own home, while I went to a sanatorium in search of health. It was a dark hour. I had little money, and knew not whether I would ever preach again or not. Seven long months went by, then the clouds disappeared and the sunlight came. God gave me back my health, and with it he gave me spiritual and physical blessings which I would never have received if the experience had not come. The gospel of the grace of God is the gospel of providential grace.

5. It is the gospel of enabling grace. Hear Paul again in I Timothy 1:12, "And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry." Not only had he been saved by the grace of God, and transformed from a bitter persecutor of Christians into a devout follower of Christ, but he had been empowered by that grace for a great life of service. Standing at the height of his glorious career as an apostle of Christ, he cried out, "By the grace of God I am what I am." It was the grace of God that had saved him; it was the grace of God that had made him the man he was; it was the grace of God that had enabled him to do the work he had done. From his prison in Rome he sent forth this triumphant message, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."

There is no "can't" in the spiritual vocabulary of a child of God. All that God would have him do, he can do, because God empowers him to do it. Who are we to lose heart and turn back in the face of difficulties? "If God be for us, who can be against us?" We are living in the midst of world confusion. The powers of evil seem to be in the ascendancy. Viewed from the standpoint of the world, conditions seem well-nigh hopeless. But out of the darkness of it all, there comes a triumphant shout, "The Lord God omnipotent reigneth! O church of the living God, rise up in the strength of thy Lord and go forward!"

6. It is the gospel of a glorifying grace. Listen to these words of Peter, in I Peter 1:13, "Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is being brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ." The work of grace that is now going on in the world will be brought to its glorious consummation at the revelation of Jesus Christ. "It doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is." Paul said, "By the grace of God I am what I am." He could also have said, "By the grace of God I shall be what I shall be." When he comes, feeble and faltering saints will be transformed into his likeness. When he comes, "every knee shall bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

He is coming, O my spirit, with his everlasting peace,
With his blessedness immortal and complete,
He is coming, O my spirit, and his coming brings release;
I listen for the coming of his feet.

These are some of the characteristics of the Gospel of the Grace of God; It is a Gospel of saving Grace, a Gospel of sustaining Grace, a Gospel of prevalent Grace, a Gospel of providential Grace, a Gospel of enabling Grace, and a Gospel of glorifying Grace. No wonder Paul was ready to live for a Gospel like that, and to die for it. Who wouldn't be?