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The Grace of God

BY THE BISHOP OF WORCESTER

The opening paper at the Islington Conference, 1954

DR. GRIFFITH THOMAS, in his book, *The Principles of Theology*, says, "Revelation is the unfolding of the character of God, the supernatural communication from God to man of truth which the human mind unaided could not discover, and of grace for life which human power alone could not provide".

This quotation seems to give us a thought for our opening meditation this morning. It lifts us up to realize afresh that God breaks through from His Eternal Being to our human position in all its need, that God does for us wonderful things beyond human discovery or invention, that God comes to us with the offer of His pardon and forgiveness through His sovereign grace, and that He brings to us His own power manifest through the incarnation, death and resurrection of our Lord. The Islington Conference has been famous in all its long years for the way its speakers have magnified the grace of God.

Sometimes when I try to express how God's love met me and what it has meant to me in the long years ever since, I am told in reply that such an experience now has a psychological explanation, and by that I imagine is meant a human explanation. But however this may be explained away in an attempt to avoid any idea of the supernatural or to prevent any belief in man's direct touch with God, the fact meets us in the New Testament. "We are saved by grace," and in every century of our era men have borne witness to this supernatural experience that has brought life, hope and forgiveness in its train. From St. Paul's own life story to the people of our day, millions have found Christ as a personal Saviour and Lord. Dr. Moffatt has some strong things to say on this in his book *The Thrill of Tradition*. He says, "We discover a continuity of experience. The evidence of history shows that it is not any sudden transport or revival, though that may be included in its range; it is not mere ecstasy or excitement, occasioned by some fresh phase of expansion, not even the thrill of a new idea striking the mind, though that again may occur at some moment of challenge and crisis". "Fundamentally," says Dr. Moffatt, "the thrill of tradition may be described as the pulse of the timeless in time, or if one desires a rather less abstract definition, let us call it the throb of being in contact with some living truth or force which is older and larger than ourselves". "Above all things," continues Dr. Moffatt, "it enters a sturdy protest against the notion that up-to-date views and impressions of the passing day are the first or the last word upon the eternal issues of the human soul".

We meditate to-day in this Conference at its very outset upon the eternal issues of the human soul. We believe that our life turns upon the choice between the Lord Jesus Christ, our Lord and yours, and between any other Lord. We believe that our choice has been bound

up with our knowledge of the written Word. That is why centuries after Christ died Christians confessed their faith in a Saviour, " King of kings and Emperor of all nations ". In the days of persecution the martyrs were persuaded that neither death nor life was able to separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus their Lord. Such witness was given again in the persecutions in our own life time, when men died for their faith, and to them it was a vital faith in an ever living and revealing Lord and Saviour.

Whenever I am thrown into controversy, doubts or fears, I turn back from the many words of man to my Bible. I open to one of the Epistles and read it again and again, until I have sought to soak myself in its message from, it may be, St. Paul or St. James, and that I suggest is our great need at the present time. We read our Bibles in preparing sermons or for other purposes, and in doing so we often miss the essential message to our own souls.

This morning let us meditate upon the grace of God. When St. Paul, the evangelist and preacher sat down to write his theological statement on the Gospel of Christ in his Epistle to the Roman Church, he sought to explain all that his faith in Christ had meant to him. He had shown previously how his mind was working in the Epistle he wrote to the Galatians. He appealed there to the Church not to adopt another Gospel " which is not the Gospel ". St. Paul did not intend that this letter to Galatians should be, in any sense, an adequate statement of his theological position. He was alarmed at the inroads being made by his opponents. He appears to write in some haste to Galatia, and he certainly wrote from his heart his words of solemn warning. St. Paul was seeking to make clear how Christ had won and brought to him forgiveness, how the miracle had happened that had transformed his life. He consequently despatched his letter to Galatia and continued to turn over in his mind the real explanation of the Gospel.

It was about the year A.D. 58 that St. Paul began to dictate his great epistle to Tertius, his amanuensis. Phoebe, a Greek Christian woman, is about to visit Rome, and she agrees to carry the precious manuscript to the Church in Rome. St. Paul opens his message in the first verse, where he speaks of himself as " separated unto the Gospel of God ". His life, he tells them, is lived in the service of the Gospel. It has so gripped him in an ever fresh spiritual experience that he can never be ashamed of it. It is indeed the power of God. So deeply has it influenced him that he speaks of it as " my Gospel " (Rom. 2. 16). He hopes therefore to visit Rome in " the fulness of the blessing of the Gospel of Christ ".

He seems clear in his own mind that the Church must now consolidate its faith. Christians must learn that conversion is but the beginning of a new way of life. The moral problems of the Corinthian Church and the failures of Christians in Galatia had made him stress again his central message of the Gospel. It is, to use our modern language, a campaign among the Churches for Bible study, prayer and dedication.

In the first chapter of Romans St. Paul describes himself as a slave (*δουλος*). He is a slave by a voluntary surrender of all to Christ. He is called to be an apostle. He is separated unto the Gospel of God.

He goes on to show that this is God's message of salvation and in it he declares that we shall find a Gospel of the Incarnation—Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our Lord, of the seed of David. Because Christ is the son of God His Gospel is a power, or a divine force that will operate in human lives through the Spirit of holiness. For this reason, says the apostle, it is a "Gospel of Grace", and with this he begins to explain his theme.

It is probably the first time that the phrase, slave of Christ, had been used in connection with the Christian ministry, but when St. Paul yielded His life to Christ, it was so deep as to make the apostle Christ's bond-slave. It was the response to Christ's own word to him, "I am Jesus of Nazareth, Whom thou persecutest". His surrender, his loyalty to Christ and his deep sincerity had kindled a fire in his soul that burned with growing intensity. Headlam translates the passage thus: "He, Christ, is the sum and substance of my message, Jesus, the Jews' Messiah and the Christians' Lord. And it was through Him that I, like the rest of the apostles, received both the general tokens of God's favour in that I was called to be a Christian".

As we begin to study this Epistle, we notice at once three outstanding words in common use. They are: power—righteousness—wrath, and the apostle immediately begins to reverse the order of these key words. He spends a full half of his epistle in explaining the consequences of sin and the consequent wrath of God, until in 3. 23 he reaches a climax that all, whether Jew or Gentile, have sinned. From this point he begins to explain how God brings righteousness even to us who have come so short. This leads him on to a deep passage on the power of God in human lives. Dr. Wand translates verse 16 thus: "I am not ashamed to proclaim the Gospel. It represents the power of God to save every-one who believes, the Jews first and then the Greeks. In it the justice of God's way is made clear in proportion to our belief; that is why the Scripture saith, 'Belief is the good man's very breath of life'."

St. Paul must answer the question, so frequently put to him, How is righteousness to be attained? His answer, put in various ways, is always clear. Righteousness is never won by man's worth or merit, but by God's gift. It is of grace, through faith. St. Paul uses the word power to emphasize the fact that it is something God alone can do. While science speaks of the forces of nature, St. Paul speaks of a force of God, released through Christ to all who believe. Behind the Gospel stands all God's omnipotence, all Christ's love and sacrifice in His life and death, all the appeal and inspiration of His Spirit.

So St. Paul opens his theme by explaining that man is a sinner, who in his despair comes empty-handed to God, and who accepts God's love revealed in Christ, and each step of faith leads a man to further committal of life to Christ—for, says the apostle, it is "from faith to faith". St. Paul could never forget that in the coming of Christ was revealed the saving act of God.

The apostle seeks to make his meaning clear, and he uses the word righteousness, because no other word would fit the situation. The Greeks used the word *Το Καλον* to mean something morally noble, a thing of beauty, expressed in a good life. The Romans had no such word in Latin, and they fell back on the word justice. The translators

agreed that in English we had both the words justice and righteousness. St. Paul's point is that while the Jews understood the meaning of the word righteousness, they went the wrong way to attain it. St. Paul's seeming paradoxes are startling. Our Lord had said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart . . . and thy neighbour as thyself". St. Paul explains that we come to Christ, accepting Him as our Saviour, and seek His forgiveness. Christ accepts us and we are, as Ephesians says, "Accepted in the beloved". We are at this stage disciples in the making. Christ meets us, forgives us, and through His death pronounces us righteous. It has been explained by the illustration of a prisoner in the dock. He is declared, Not guilty. God forgives and acquits us as in faith we come to Him.

But, says St. Paul, this is but the starting point and at once Christ takes us in hand to make us morally righteous. The apostle is giving us in his own language the theology of the prodigal son. "Father, forgive me," cries the boy. "Put on him the robe," is the father's reply. Justification is a forgiveness that alters all God's attitude and relationship to His children.

It is worth while at this stage noticing again St. Paul's use of grace as an over-all word that connotes something lost by his Jewish opponents and discovered afresh by all who had faith in Christ. We meditate on this enriching word, for by the grace of God we are what we are.

St. Paul burst out, as his message flows on like some great river in torrent that bursts its banks and flows forth into the wide areas before it. The love of God constrains him, captures him, and as it breaks forth it sweeps away all racial barriers, for now they are all one in Christ Jesus. All sectarian differences can be solved. He sees no difficulty in all this, for the saving power of the Gospel is unlimited. Thus we are carried forward as on the crest of a wave. Being justified we have peace with God. We have access by faith into this grace. We rejoice in hope. We glory in the dangers of our times, in our tribulations. We triumph because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts. The Holy Spirit is given unto us. We are indeed saved from wrath through Christ. We are reconciled to Him and are actually saved by His life (5. 10), and Why? says the apostle—because the grace of God and the gift by grace which has reached us by Jesus Christ abounds to us as demonstrating His mercy.

St. Paul is crystal clear about the consequences of our forgiveness. He makes it quite clear that justification is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end, as Bishop Moule puts it, "We are accepted that we may be preserved". We have been raised to newness of life that we may be holy, separated from sin. The sinner redeemed, forgiven, accepted and called, is ready for service. His life is aglow as he senses this new power of Christ within him. As Christ was raised up, even so we should walk in newness of life.

For these reasons, says St. Paul, we must never again be servants of sin. Do we ask, wretched men that we are—who shall deliver us? The answer is, says the apostle, "I thank God, through Jesus Christ".

Thus we are led to a summary of the matter. St. Paul has dealt with the potential and the ideal. We are painfully aware of our actual condition. But he argues that the pathway ahead is marked

Victory. Remember, he says, that "we now live with Christ". Exercise your will and do not let sin reign in your bodies. Do not yield your members to sin, but remember that sin need not again have dominion over you. Yield yourselves to God and draw upon the resources of His grace promised to you in Christ. St. Paul himself could speak of his struggles against temptation and sin, but he can turn to his own autobiography to explain how Christ turns defeat to victory. I can . . . through Christ. I can in fact do all things through Him. His Spirit has made this clear. So immediately we pass to consider the work of the Spirit—the harbinger of victory, as given to us in Rom. 8. The chapter explains God's way of deliverance.

Chapter 7 and 8 in Romans are very like a river I saw in Persia. After we left Ispahan the river flowed beside the road for some distance, when suddenly it disappeared as if the river had run dry and gone. But the fact was it had gone underground and was still flowing on underneath the soil. As soon as the farmers knew what had happened they dug wells, inserted pumps and drew the water up to the surface for the irrigation of the land. Is the Christian experience something like this river? The Christian life can only be lived as we enter into our heritage in Christ, only as we draw upon His resources of grace, only as we know a daily experience of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul is clear that only through the Holy Spirit can our lives be Christian at all. "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His." Listen to these words: "There is now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus, who walk after the Spirit. The Spirit of life has made me free". So, says the apostle, "to be spiritually minded is life and peace". So we come back to where we began. St. Paul speaks of the Spirit in terms of the Divine breaking through into human life. God's love is given by the Holy Spirit, and this Spirit of love works in us God's will in all the concerns of life. Defeats are changed to victory, slavery is changed to freedom, death is changed into life.

St. Paul had learned that as he lived a surrendered life in daily touch with Christ, the Spirit was released within him. He had different ways of expressing the same truth—"In Christ", "In the Spirit", "The Spirit within", "Christ within". St. Paul's Christian experience was made real and operative by the Holy Spirit. For example, the apostle would say, The Spirit helps our infirmities and difficulties, for instance in our prayer life. We do not know how to pray, but the Spirit makes intercession. Thus we are taught the mind of the Spirit. Thus we learn that all things work together for good, because God's mercy has reached us—even us. God is the present guarantee of all the future. How true it is that if God be for us, who can be against us? Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Nothing, nobody, for all things work together for good. The apostolic message for our day surely is, We are more than conquerors through Him that loved us.