

GREAT GRACE AND ITS OUTWORKING

Reading:

“And with *great power* gave the apostles their witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 4:33).

“And *great fear* came upon the whole church, and upon all that heard these things” (Acts 5:11).

“And *great grace* was upon them all” (Acts 4:33).

Great power, and great grace, and great fear.

You know that what was taking place at the time of which these things are recorded was the beginning of a new dispensation, a new order of things — for that is the meaning of the word “dispensation”. It is not only a time mark. It is the nature of what obtains within the compass of a given time, and when God institutes a new dispensation, which is both a new time and a new order, He does two things. He does it in no uncertain way. There is no mistaking the fact that God is moving with a new thought and intent and is really instituting a new order of things. He commits Himself very strongly and very deeply to that new regime. That is, of course, perfectly patent in the case of the dispensation inaugurated on the day of Pentecost. There is no mistaking that God is doing something and that He is committing Himself most strongly and most deeply. The other thing marking such a movement of God is that He establishes the principles which are to hold good and govern for the duration of that dispensation. He lays the foundations, He institutes definite spiritual laws upon which the whole of the new order will stand, or, by their violation or non-observance, will fall. So it was that in bringing in the dispensation of the Holy Spirit, God did it in power, and then certain results followed which showed what the ways of the Spirit are for all time.

Here, in the words we have taken out of this whole movement of the Spirit, we have two of these principles, these issues, which emanate from the instituting of this new Holy Spirit order, and they spring from Christ risen and are always at work in relation to Christ risen, so that the Holy Spirit is working not only to an historic fact that Christ was raised from the dead, but to a great spiritual reality — if you like, a great spiritual principle. Everything is the expression of Christ risen. It is what Christ risen means, how it works out, and that is what is here.

Great grace upon all

We had a statement — “and great grace was upon them all.” We take that first, although it comes second in the three great things mentioned. Grace, as you know, in the New Testament is inclusive of various things. Grace is that which sets forth the beneficence of God in the acceptance of those who have no ground of acceptance in themselves. Grace, just grace, all of grace.

But then grace is used in other ways. It is used as of an enablement to suffer and to endure. “My grace is sufficient for thee” (2 Cor. 12:9) was said to a sorely tried and perplexed servant of the Lord. “You will be able to go on; I will give grace though you have to carry a heavy load.” And so grace is used in various ways, and here it is in another way.

“Great grace was upon them all.” Here it refers to the character and behaviour of the Lord Jesus reproduced in the church and all its members: the beauty, the striking beauty, the graciousness, the

selflessness, the kindness, the thoughtfulness of the believers. That is the meaning of grace as it is mentioned here. That was great grace which was upon them all. Here in this chapter you have that wonderful outworking of the second chapter, verse 42 — “they continued stedfastly in fellowship.” If you want to know what that means — “in fellowship” — it does not just mean they got together at meetings and attended meetings. You have to go to chapter 4 to know what fellowship meant and means. Fellowship is a wonderful word in this book of the New Testament. It was the overflow of a Christly disposition one to another. That was the essence of the fellowship — “great grace was upon them all.”

Well, what did they do? How did it work out? What was its practical value? Well, just read the rest of the chapter, read what immediately follows: this Christly character which was called the great grace, the grace of the Lord Jesus. It is not here specifically and peculiarly the grace of God, the grace of God towards men as sinners to make a way for them into His presence — that is the grace of God. It is the grace of the Lord Jesus here in this sense — the wonderful kindness of the Lord Jesus. “Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor” (2 Cor. 8:9) and they were just giving up their riches, their wealth, their properties, their possessions, and virtually becoming poor for the sake of the church, and that is the grace of the Lord Jesus. The self-emptying of the Lord Jesus — that was His grace for the sake of others.

Great power built upon great grace

This Christly character, as you notice had these two effects. Firstly it lay behind the great power of their witness. “With great power gave the apostles their witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.” Why? Because the Holy Spirit always demands and requires for ministry, for witness, a life behind, something to back it up, something that speaks of Christ in the life. That would never have been written but for the foundation. Great power is built upon great grace. It was the spirituality of the church, the spirituality of those who composed it that issued in the great power in testimony, in witness. Let us remember that. There is no power where the character of the Lord Jesus is not manifested. There is no really effective ministry if there is a contradiction to Him in the background. Great power requires great grace. Shall we use the other word, great power demands great graciousness. Christlikeness is the word. These men were not only proclaiming doctrines and historical facts about Jesus. They were carrying in their very presence and as from behind the embodiment of the Lord Jesus risen, and the embodiment of the Lord Jesus above all other things is this — great grace. He emptied Himself, He humbled Himself. Great grace, great power, comes along that line.

Well, we pray for power, we pray for effective testimony, we pray for the expansion and the extension of the testimony. Our hearts want to see real effectiveness, real fruitfulness, real increase. Let us always remember the one thing that will make all that impossible is any un-Christlikeness in the background, and if there is great grace, you can leave the matter of the great power to take care of itself: it will just register.

The practical outworking of grace

And so this grace, this great grace, was very practical. It says immediately — “Neither was there among them any that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles’ feet: and distribution was made unto each, according as anyone had need” (Acts 4:34-35). If anyone has need, the work of the Holy Spirit is not going on. If anyone has need, there is a contradiction to the very disposition of the Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus was to see that no one had need, that there were no needy souls.

“And Joseph, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas (which is, being interpreted, Son of exhortation) (or, consolation)” (Acts 4:36) — tremendously interesting that, because the root of his name is the same root as the name of the Holy Spirit — the Paraclete, the one who comes alongside to help, console. Is not that the Holy Spirit? This man had a beautiful Holy Spirit ministry of exhortation and consolation, and he was so filled with the Spirit that they gave him a name which meant the same in effect as the Holy Spirit. Consolation. Paraclete is the Holy Spirit’s name, and this is Paracletos. We are getting very near to the Lord when that can be true, when your given name is on the basis of what you are, and this man, because he was like Jesus, was surnamed Barnabas, Son of consolation. “Barnabas ... a Levite, a man of Cyprus by race, having a field, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.” That is great grace. That is the meaning of grace. Grace is practical. The Holy Spirit produced a church like that, and a church like that gave witness with great power. It is all one thing.

And, while it is very nice and very beautiful to think about and talk about, it is a challenge. What are we doing about it? Have you got any fields? What have you got for the Lord’s interests? We have known in time past the Spirit of God to sweep over a company of the Lord’s people and so burden them with the Lord’s need in the world that they have come and, if they have not had monetary gifts, have put watches, jewels on the table before the Lord to be turned to account. I am not suggesting that you do that sort of thing, but it is the spirit of the Holy Spirit. This is grace. There was a time when the whole question of whether the Lord was going on with His people centred in that thing. They came to the point when the Lord said, “Ye are a stiffnecked people; if I go up into the midst of thee for one moment, I shall consume thee: therefore now put off thy ornaments from thee, that I may know what to do unto thee” (Ex. 33:5). And they stripped themselves of every adornment and got adjusted that the Lord might go up with them.

The grace of the Lord Jesus did that. He stripped Himself for our sakes, and that is how it was there when the Lord instituted this dispensation. There must be a spirit like that, a disposition like that, where we hold everything in the interests of the Lord, and not just say that we do, but do it. Now that is a spiritual matter. You may say that is coming down to a low level. I do not agree with that. I am trying to get at the heart of this thing — great grace, how it works out. It will work out in many ways, but it does work out like this, in a very real, heartfelt, selfless concern for every child of God in the church, real care for each one. “Care one for another” is an apostolic word (1 Cor. 12:25). I say again, that is the spirit, not meetings, not coming and going, but a real care for one another, making a business of this care for one another. The Lord takes account of that, and sees the reflection of His grace, of His Son, and great power will follow, and great extension and expansion will take place. That is the way of enlargement. It has ever been so.

Great grace leads to great fear

This very thing led to the great fear which came upon all. Why? Well, you see, where there is the preciousness to God of Christ there is the jealousy of God. God is very jealous for the preciousness of His Son. The Holy Spirit was jealous over the fellowship. Fellowship is a matter over which the Holy Spirit is very jealous. He acted accordingly; He acted judicially. When things are like this, there is something very precious for the Lord and the Holy Spirit acts on that ground; He acts judicially. You see, there was that which was knowingly contrary to the Spirit. It was perfectly obvious what the Holy Spirit was doing, the way that the Holy Spirit was taking, what he was producing, how He was exercising people, what He was causing them to do; that was clear to all. And when Ananias and Sapphira did what they did, they did it in the face of the obvious way of the Holy Spirit, and that is where the Holy Spirit intervened in this very solemn way. Let us note this.

You see, there were two aspects to this matter, to this case. It was, after all, a voluntary and gratuitous matter. It was not legal. The Holy Spirit had not laid down any laws about selling fields, houses, or anything else, and said, “This is the pattern and you have to do it; if you do not, woe betide

you.” It was the spontaneous, gratuitous response to the work of grace in the heart, not a bit compulsory. Let us beware about setting up a system of Christian Communism and imposing it and saying, “This is the order that obtains in the church — a Christian Communism.” You can be as legal and cold and dead about that as about anything else. The Holy Spirit never did that at all. This was simply a heart response to the Holy Spirit, not obedience to a set of laws, or regulations, which had been imposed or established. The apostle said, “While it remained, did it not remain thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thy power?” (Acts 5:4). But there is a difference between withholding like that and consciously doing something to deceive. The Holy Spirit cannot be deceived. In the light of what was happening, they consciously sought to deceive. There are two aspects. You can just not do it and in not doing it you will not meet judicial judgment, the Holy Spirit will not smite you, you will not be one of those who die, not discerning the Lord’s Body. You will lose spiritually, you will lose right enough, but it will not be judicial action. But if we are aware of something contrary to the Lord Jesus, and in our awareness of it seek to go on as though it did not exist and make believe and deceive, try to pass ourselves off with the others who are going wholly with the Lord as though we were on the same footing, and we know all the time in the background of our life there is a lie, and that lie is to the Holy Ghost, not to men, it is not even to ourselves, it is to the Holy Ghost, then that opens the door to something else. It is a very serious thing to have the knowledge of something wrong in the background of our lives, and then try to come in and pass ourselves off as though that did not exist. That is a lie to the Holy Ghost. The Holy Spirit knew all about it, and this loss was much more than just a spiritual loss: this was a judicial act of the Holy Ghost. No, no deceiving of the Holy Spirit.

The point is that absolute transparency is the mark of grace, absolute truth before God in the background of our lives, absolute facing up to the situation and accepting it, what it means to be in the Holy Ghost regime. That is a very holy regime; that is a very holy dispensation. You may have and keep it, you will only suffer spiritually, the Lord will not come and do anything to perhaps take your life away. But if there should be that in the background which the Holy Spirit has pointed out as being altogether inconsistent with the truth and the purity and the holiness of a life in the dispensation of the Spirit, and we just close our eyes to it and go on as though all was right, we are going to meet something presently. That is not a pleasant thing to say, but it is very necessary in order to get to this.

“With great power gave the apostles their witness”, and then you get the whole of this book on the movement of the Spirit, the power of God, what is happening everywhere. God is on the move, and He was able to do it because this Christly condition obtained in the background. You can read the New Testament in the light of that. You have nothing said about the church in Corinth as to its far-reaching testimony, its spiritual influence beyond its own borders because this state of things did not obtain. But in Thessalonica it is otherwise. “The love of each one of you all toward one another aboundeth” (2 Thes. 1:3). “From you hath sounded forth the word of the Lord, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith to God-ward is gone forth” (1 Thes. 1:8). It is self-evident. You see the basis of power, of victory, witness, fruitful ministry, far-reaching testimony. It is a life in the Holy Spirit, a life according to Christ, and a very practical one at that. It is looking after all sorts of details within its own company. The Lord make us a company like that.