



August 16, 2016

feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)

Dearest family,

On Sunday, I lingered in the text of Acts 15 that Bo high-lighted in his narrative approach last Sunday, because of its pivotal declaration from Peter that they could not put a “yoke” on the disciples’ necks: “We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that we are saved, just as they are.” (15:11) I spent the time giving a compacted overview of the operations of **grace**, the strongest theological undercurrent in the narrative of Acts. The opening of Luke’s Volume 1, his gospel account, describes from the very get-go how God’s work is to remove disgrace and bring His favor. The grace of God was upon Jesus, who John declared was “full of grace” from which we have all received “grace upon grace”. From the beginning to the end of the NT, Jesus and grace are synonymous. Grace is in Him, grace is through Him. No wonder then that the evidential and essential mark of the early church was that “great grace was upon them all” (Acts 4:33). Luke establishes the character of the church as the character of Jesus.

So what marked the greatness of the early church? The word “great” pops up all the time in the text: “great boldness... (4:29) great power...(4:33) great numbers... (11:21) great wonders... (6:8) great joy... (8:8; 15:3) great persecution (8:1)” However, there was something else that was “great” that explained all these. In 4:33 we read that “great grace was upon them all.” It described:

- the character of the leaders like Stephen: “full of grace and power” (6:8)
- the good things that were happening: “what the grace of God had done” (11:23)
- discipleship: “they urged them to continue in the grace of God” (13:43)
- the very nature and essence of the gospel: “the message of His grace” (14:3)
- the experience of God’s care and nurture: they were “commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord.” (15:40)
- the experience of salvation: Christians were those who “by grace had believed” (18:27)
- the mission and call: “the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace” (20:24)
- the communication of both written scripture and spoken teaching: “the word of His grace” (20:32)

Indeed, great grace was upon them all. No wonder it is!

“Grace is the sum and substance of NT faith” (Packer) “Everything is of grace in the Christian life from the very beginning to the very end.” (Lloyd-Jones) Why? Because it is the sum of the nature of the Godhead: “God of all grace... Spirit of grace (Hebr.10:29) ... the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 15:11). The whole of NT theology is summed up in it. It has been said that what justice is to law, and love to marriage, grace is to Christianity. In Acts, euphemisms for Christians were grace soaked: they were those who “continued in the grace of God” (13:43); they were those who “by grace had believed” (18:27) What they believed was the gospel described as “the grace of God...the gospel of grace...the word of grace” It was a synonym for anything that was good, that was God no less in his dynamic and delivering, passionate and purposeful, fathering and favoring, birthing and blessing, saving and sanctifying power.

Teachers are always looking for ways to take a wide range of points, of scriptures, and bring them together in a summarized and more easily assimilated form. The simplest ordering when it comes

to the subject of grace is often traditionally presented in the two categories of **common grace** and **saving grace**. John Wesley was the one who first spoke of three main identifiable workings of grace: **Prevenient** (preparing) grace, **Accepting** (justifying) grace, **Sustaining** (Sanctifying) grace.

In doing my own scriptural summary on Sunday I had more than two or three points I'm afraid, so in keeping with my promise to put them in the letter this week, here they are for you to use as a prayer list for the operation of grace in your own life and experience, circumstances and relationships.

1. **Saving** grace: "saved through grace" (Acts 15:11) Part of this experience of saving grace is the instruction we receive for the totality of our lives. Listen to how Paul describes it to Titus (2:11): "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say NO to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in the present age, while we wait for the blessed hope, the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ."
2. **Securing** or **strengthening** grace: "this grace in which we stand" (Rom.5:1-2) ...the true grace of God. Stand firm in it." (1Pet.5:12) We could probably also call this **strengthening grace**: "the word of his grace which can build you up" (Acts 20:32)
3. **Sanctifying** grace: this is grace's work in growing, maturing, promoting, encouraging and effecting our progress in faith and godliness, in pleasing God. Writing to the Corinthians Paul describes his conduct and character: "We have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relationships with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace." (2Cor.1:12)
4. **Serving** or **stewarding** grace: "Use your gifts to serve others as faithful stewards of God's grace." (1 Pet. 4:10) "The grace God gave me to be a minister" (Acts 15:15). This is the enablement to minister with the charismata, the grace gifts. His summation of ministry in his farewell to the Ephesians elders says it all: "If only I may finish the race and complete the task...of testifying to the gospel of God's grace." (Acts 20:24)
5. **Sharing** grace: "Grace given to me for you..." (Eph. 3:2) "all of you share in God's grace with me..." (Phil. 1:7)
6. **Sending** grace: It is grace that both calls and commissions "God called me...by his grace and was pleased to reveal His Son in me." (Gal. 1:15)
7. **Supplicating** grace: "Spirit of grace and supplication..." (Zech. 12:10) "Throne of grace...find grace to help us in our time of need..." (Heb. 4:16) The result of the church's prayer was "much grace was upon them" (Acts 4:33)
8. **Supporting** or **supplying** grace: In Acts 9:11 Paul was prepared by prayer for the reception of grace through Ananias, so the Spirit of grace both prepares us for this supply and then provides grace's support.
9. **Speaking** grace: "grace those who listen" (Eph.4:29) "Let your conversation always be full of grace, seasoned with salt." (Col.4:6) Favor as well as flavor! So crucial that this grace is expressed through us in a culture of contempt and anger.
10. **Singing** grace: "With psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, with grace in your hearts to God." (Col.4:16) The work of grace becomes the gratitude in worship. Lack of worship is always little. Great grace produces great worship.
11. **Sustaining** grace: (strengthening grace) this is about special times of need: "My grace is sufficient for you and my power is made perfect in weakness." (2Cor.12:9); "Let us approach the throne of grace...and find grace to help us in our time of need." (Hebr.4:16) "God gives grace to the humble." (1Pet.5:5)
12. **Staying** grace: By 'staying' here I'm not referring to the idea of an abiding grace, that always stays with us, though it does, but in the sense of staying the hand of judgment. The

grace of God is not just manifested in what He does do, but in what He doesn't - for example, delay judgment. Yes, God's grace is manifest in what He gives and allows, in what He provides, but it is also in what He disallows and prohibits. The word that commands us not to, is a staying word of grace. Stop! Halt! No further! Do not transgress! Do not move that boundary! Thou shalt not! It is crucial to understand the law as an expression of God's grace. He loves us so much that he commands us not to engage that which He knows will destroy us and separate us from Him. In Genesis: *all the trees* (provision) *except* (prohibition). They were equally evidences of grace. There is grace in the giving, but also grace in the staying of things, the with-holding or taking away of those things that are not going to promote spiritual growth in grace.

13. **Suffering** grace: grace often brings God's goodness in a way that doesn't at first feel good to us. Phil.1:29: "*It has been granted (literally-graced) for Christ's sake, not only to believe in him but to suffer for him.*"
14. **Suffusing** (well up from within) grace: "*the grace that is in me*" says Paul. This indwelling spirit of grace that rises within us, "*overflows*" to use Paul's language. This grace that changes us, makes us overflowingly gracious.
15. **Sovereign** grace: "*grace might reign through righteousness...*" (Rom. 5:21)

Clearly, just these few scriptural quotes that I have given are sufficient to dispel any notion that grace is sweetly benign, or is something that is helpful now and again. Grace is not a commodity, a thing – but the very active and engaging presence and personality of God in our lives and circumstances. Invasion, infusion is what we should be thinking about. Grace's power, its penetration, its communication – every expression is proactively an expression of the nature of God ministering to the needs of man – it is strong grace according to the NT. It is a strong brew, and those who experience it are grace intoxicated, but more importantly, God-centered and God adoring. Whoever would choose a yoke of bondage for their necks over a garland of grace?

May this "*great grace*" be on you all too!
Stuart