

2 Corinthians 12:11-13:14

Introduction

2 Corinthians is the most autobiographical of all Paul's letters. We meet the man as well as learning the doctrine. We are given an insight into the difficulties of the life of Paul as a missionary and a pastor. Some things almost broke his heart. He was criticized, derided, misrepresented, and therefore became so disappointed and frustrated. Even in the closing section of the letter, he is still concerned with bad behaviour, envy, backbiting, ingratitude and quarrelsomeness.

Paul challenges the Corinthians to examine themselves, and see if they are really Christians, and what sort of Christians they are. Then right at the end, the mood changes. Paul urges them to be united, to live in peace, and greet one another with a holy kiss. Then a prayer that they may know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. These words sum up what the Christian life is all about.

We are going to look at these words. They are some of the most important words used in churches, often repeated every week, but the least listened too. We can learn a lot from them. While the benediction is being repeated, people are putting on their gloves, buttoning up their coats, planning whom they must speak to at the end of the service, and these wonderful words are lost to them.

Paul usually ends his letters with reference to the grace of Christ, which he wishes his readers to enjoy. But here he expands on this by adding the love of the Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit. This has been used as a benediction in the Christian church from the earliest times. It reminds us of the doctrine of the Trinity. One God revealed in three co-equal and co-eternal persons. There is no formal doctrine of the Trinity in the New Testament, but all the material is there for one.

The Trinity was always meant to have a very practical bearing on our lives. Each person of the Trinity is related to the experience of every believer, and if we do not realize the ministry of each person, our lives are impoverished, because each has a special part to play in our salvation. We cannot live a full and balanced Christian life if we do not give each person of the Trinity their proper place in our lives.

It is a tragedy if this often repeated benediction has no impact on us just because we hear it so often. It is so vital to our Christian faith and life. It is helpful to pause and think about its meaning. We are baptised into the three-fold name, and from each of the three persons we receive a particular and special blessing. Triple blessing from a Triune God.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ

This is where it all begins. We cannot get in contact with God the Father or enjoy the fellowship of the Holy Spirit apart from the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are all sinners with no hope. Our only hope is in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ – His

utterly undeserved mercy. We need His grace, not only to be saved, but also throughout our Christian experience, as 2 Corinthians makes clear.

- (a) Enriching grace. **For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich** (2 Corinthians 8:9). We are where we are because the Lord of glory left heaven with all the privileges and possessions. He took on human nature, and was born in poverty. He went to the agony of a sin-bearing death on the Cross, and as a result we are rich in forgiveness, eternal life and assurance.
- (b) Enabling grace. This follows from enriching grace. **And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work** (2 Corinthians 9:8). Initial reference is that God meets financial need, but it is true in every area of life. Grace in Christ – for all things, in all circumstances, for all work, for every demand and trial, every responsibility. Unlimited resources are at our disposal.
- (c) Enduring grace. **My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness** (2 Corinthians 12:9). Whatever that thorn in the flesh is, God gives adequate compensation. Enduring grace is so great that Paul could boast and delight in his handicaps so that God’s power could rest on him.

Grace that is enriching, enabling and enduring is all ours in Christ today and every day. It is ours to enjoy. Grace throughout our Christian life as long as we are hungry and anxious for it. There is no grace for the proud and self-sufficient. So often we live below our income. We don’t take full benefit of:

*“My never-failing treasury
Filled with boundless stores of grace.”
(John Newton)*

This thrilling and heart-warming Gospel is so different from the worldly idea that we are saved from the bottomless pit to go on to live a miserable life of “Thou shalt not’s”. The Christian life is a positive, enriching experience of the grace of God for every experience – every day.

The love of God the Father

At the Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ we realize the depth and extent of God’s love for us. At the Cross we learn **But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us** (Romans 5:8). Some talk as if the love of God is clear and obvious. But look at history, nature and human lives – disease, trial, disasters, and sorrow. The love of God is not self-evident. The only place you can be certain of God’s love is at the Cross of Jesus.

- (a) Protecting love. God not only saves, but He holds onto man. **Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Neither death nor life, angels nor demons, present nor future** (Romans 8:39). George Henry Lunn demonstrated this by taking a flimsy piece of paper, and saying to his congregation “That’s you”. Then he took a hard-backed hymn book, said

“That’s Christ”, and he put the flimsy piece of paper inside the hymnbook. Then He put the hymnbook with the piece of paper inside the large pulpit Bible, i.e. God’s love for us. **Our life is hid in Christ in God** (Colossians 3:3). This protecting love gives us a sense of security.

- (b) Providing love. **My God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus** (Philippians 4:19). All our needs, and not our wants. All our needs, and not our greeds. They are met according to God’s riches in glory – not *out of* His riches, but *according to* His riches. If I walk in fellowship with God and within His will, my needs will be supplied. J.Edwin Orr met a commercial traveller in Scotland and asked, “Are you representing some firm?” “I am travelling for my father” was the reply. “Is there much money in it?” “I am not worried about that. My father is multi-millionaire and he sends me all I need.” “Lucky blighter” “I am the happiest man on earth” “I wish I could join your firm” “There is no reason why you should not”
- (c) Prayer-answering love. God guarantees to answer our prayers if we are in His will. **He is able to do exceeding abundantly above all we can ask or think** (Ephesians 3:20). It is a lovely thing that in our relationship with the Father, we can go and talk to Him just as a child talks to is father, and we can know He will welcome us because He loves us.

The love of God protects us, provides for us, and answers our prayers. Let us not fail to respond with joy and wonder at the sense of security which the love of God can bring. Always bring it into the calculation as we face the future.

The fellowship of the Holy Spirit

Because of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we can also share in the communion and participation of the Holy Spirit who makes us one body in Christ. The Holy Spirit indwells all believers, but not all enjoy and experience His fellowship. It is needed for the development of the spiritual life. When He controls and fills us we bear the fruit of the Spirit – nine flavours in one fruit – **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control** (Galatians 5:22,23)

If we are in communion with Him, we get more like Christ and experience His holiness, which He alone can give. When we are in communion with Him, the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts. He makes unloving people loving, He makes the proud meek and lowly, and he makes uncertain characters good and faithful.

Decisions are to be made in God’s will through the Holy Spirit. **As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the Sons of God** (Romans 8:14). Not only does He promise His guidance, but also in Acts we read clear examples of guidance for missionaries and servants of the Lord. Communion with the Spirit makes guidance a reality, as He controls our circumstances, speaks through friends, implants convictions in our hearts, and illuminates the Scriptures. We need to consult Him and trust Him as we face the unknown future.

Then we need the communion of the Holy Spirit as we declare the truth (Acts 1:8). Any preacher mounting the pulpit steps must be able to confirm that he believes in the Holy Spirit, else he might as well turn back.

How essential is the work of the Holy Spirit. We cannot just think about the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God – it would all be merely theory without the work of the Holy Spirit. He makes us sure of Christ's presence and shed's God's love in our hearts. He develops Christian character in us, directs our decisions and enables us to declare the truth.

Why do so many of these things stay in the mind and get no further? When the preacher mentions them, we tick them off in agreement, but it ends there. Why are not all these truths real to us by the Holy Spirit in our daily experience? It is because we are not fully enjoying His communion. We are not fully participating in His life and power. We have failed to surrender ourselves fully to the Holy Spirit, despite our profession of faith. When we are out of touch with the Spirit, we soon lose our spiritual vitality. Too often we want God's blessings but we don't want God's conditions. The price is total surrender of self to Christ and commitment to His will. When we become His unconditionally, we become men and women full of the Spirit. **If we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit** (Galatians 5:25).

Conclusion

Being a Christian is not just about knowing Christ as Saviour and Lord, but belonging to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. We need each person of the Trinity acting for us – the enriching, enabling and enduring grace of the Son, the protecting, providing and prayer-answering love of the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit deepening our Christian life, guiding our decisions and enabling us to declare God's truth.

It is a pity we think of so many other things when the benediction is pronounced at the end of the service. These are the loveliest of words, full of meaning and blessing.