

THE FARFLUNG REACHES OF GOD'S GRACE

by E. W. Lawrence*

"Though sin is wide and deep, thank God His grace is wider and deeper still."

—Romans 5:20 (Phillips).

The Bible is an encyclopedia of sin. You can find a thousand and one references to it in the smallest of concordances. It is really a twofold problem—that of wrong being and then wrong doing; and the first-named, which is the real problem, explains the other. Man sins because he is a sinner already. He is a member of a fallen race, for the Bible explicitly speaks of the solidarity of the human race "in Adam," and himself is guilty of transgression against the will of the Lord. Sin is a virus of the heart, and then an action in the life.

So far as its outward manifestation is concerned, sin is a falling short, a failing to rise to God's ideal, or, as the Shorter Catechism puts it, "any breach of or want of conformity to the Divine will." Now, says the Bible, "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

The Scriptures also speak of transgression; and if sin is what we fail to do, then transgression is something we perform in disobedience—something positive. "Judas by transgression fell," says the Word, and with that particular man it led into betrayal of the Son of God, bitter remorse and suicide in the bargain. "Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth the law," says I John 3:4.

Now if sin is missing the mark, and transgression is breaking the law, then iniquity is the root out of which all others spring and flow—the root principle behind all outward acts of sin. Every time an Anglican congregation recites the General Confession, this threefold aspect of sin comes to the fore: "We have left undone that which we ought to have done (sin), and done that which we ought not to have done (transgression), and there is no health in us (iniquity)."

In short, sin is self in opposition to God, in its hundred and one different manifestations. "My claim to my right to myself" is how Oswald Chambers described it. One psalmist conceived the idea of Jehovah God looking down over the battlements of heaven to see if there were any who understood and sought after Himself. With what effect? Scripture says, "They are all gone aside, they are altogether become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one." and the apostle Paul had that verse at the back of his mind when penning Romans 3. O'er the entire earth, he said sin abounded!

God's attitude can be summed up in the one word "wrath," which I always think of as holy love on fire. Jehovah is a jealous God—He said so Himself!—and although that does not mean jealousy in the way we use the word today, He is jealous just as any honorable man is jealous of the love and integrity of his wife.

In that song of praise that ascended to God, after the successful crossing of the Red Sea, Moses and the children of Israel declared that "Thou sendest forth thy wrath, it consumeth them as stubble." God's wrath had evidenced itself against the might and main of Egypt.

"Why doth thy wrath wax hot against thy people?" asked Moses on a later occasion. Then in his Ephesian epistle Paul said that "the wrath of God cometh upon the children of disobedience."

And it leads to death, for that is sin's wages. "Each man is tempted," says James, "when he is drawn away by his own lust, and enticed. And the lust, when it hath

conceived, beareth sin: and the sin, when it is full grown, bringeth forth death" (James 1:14, 15, R. V.). "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap," for "the wages of sin is death" and "the soul that sinneth, it shall die."

The word "death," however, in the Bible, has a fourfold significance. There is spiritual death. God told Adam that in the day he disobeyed, in that same day he would die. Die he did, spiritually, right there and then. Scripture likewise teaches that each of us is, by nature, dead in trespasses and sins.

Then there is moral death, and physical death; and even the believer's assurance that the loved one is now "with Christ, which is far better," and "at home with the Lord," does not do away with the stark reality that they are "absent from the body." Finally there is eternal death, which implies final separation for all eternity from the presence of God.

God cannot just bypass sin nor wink at it. He is Himself of purer eyes than to behold iniquity. He must judge sin, and death is the penalty, for "the soul that sinneth, it shall die." The law of God's righteousness also must be maintained, and at any cost. So what? Man lies hopeless and helpless in the hands of his Creator.

It is here that a new element creeps into the picture—the grace of God. What is grace? One definition calls it "unmerited favor." It is, and much more, for you must understand His love and favor in the light of human sin which made necessary the sacrifice of Christ's Cross. The Bible says that "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself." That is what grace is—God taking the initiative; God making the first move to secure the sinner's redemption.

I have always thought of grace as "the love of God acting on behalf of helpless man who, because of his sin, cannot help himself." The definition is my own. Grace is atoning love, for what justice demands, that grace supplies.

Grace—the grace of God—is His favor to sinful men, without regard to merit. Grace is, says Dr. Griffith Thomas, "spontaneous (not prompted from outside); free (no conditions are required); generous (no stint is shown); and abiding (no cessation is experienced). It is also (as favor) opposed to wrath, which means judicial displeasure against sin. Further, it must be distinguished from mercy, even though mercy is one of its methods of expression. Mercy is related to misery and to the (negatively) non-deserving. Grace is related to redemption and to the ((positively) deserving." Dr. Thomas' definition leads right on to the text of this message, for Paul says, in Romans 5:20, "Where sin abounded, grace super-abounded." That is the force of the expression in the Greek original. I like the way friend J. B. Phillips puts it (remembering, of course, that his translation is a very free one), "Though sin is wide and deep, thank God his grace is wider and deeper still."

Superabounding grace—for the grace of God goes further. Love going upwards may be adoration, while love going outwards may be affection, but love descending and going down, that is grace. Dr. J. H. Jowett called grace "redeeming love energy," and he says that it also ministers to the unlovely, and endows the unlovely with its own loveliness. It superabounds, even where sin abounds. Said Alex Smellie, "Grace is the activity of the heart of God, the coloring of the dress of God, the fruit of the orchard of God." Then Romans 5:17 speaks of the "abundance of grace." Bishop Handley Moule seems to take the whole picture into view when he sums it all up in four little words, saying that grace is "Christ Himself in action."

Grace, superabounding to me—"manifold," as I Peter 1:10 has it," the infinite love of God adapting itself to

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