

Paul's Parenthesis

by C.H. Spurgeon

Salvation is by the free favor of God, and we must deny our own merits to have the merits of Christ.

Duration: 34:19

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:10

Topics: "Free Will", "Divine Grace"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the importance of understanding the role of man's will in salvation. He acknowledges that there are different views on this topic, but he chooses to focus on the perspective presented in his chosen text. The preacher emphasizes that salvation is not achieved through human works or self-righteousness, but rather through the grace and power of God. He encourages believers to rely on God's grace and to preach the doctrines of free grace, while also urging those who may have forgotten or never known the concept of grace to rediscover its significance.

Transcript

The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit. Paul's Parenthesis. A sermon published on Thursday, March 19th, 1908.

Delivered by C. H. Spurgeon at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington on Lord's Day evening, April 26th, 1874. By the grace of God I am what I am. 1 Corinthians 15, verse 10.

If you will read the context of this passage, you will find that these words occur in one of Paul's digressions, or parentheses. He was a writer who very frequently went off at a tangent. He often left off the subject on which he was writing, turned his thoughts in quite another direction, and then came back and went on with the subject which he had left for a while.

In this respect, I've often in my own mind likened the Apostle Paul to Samson. When he was on the road to Timnath with his father and mother, he turned aside to slay the lion and afterwards to find the honey in the carcass. And each time he came back to his parents, just as if nothing had happened.

2 So the Apostle Paul often turns aside from some grand argument upon which he is engaged and says something very valuable and important upon quite another topic, and then comes back again and calmly and deliberately goes on with his argument. There are some kinds of parentheses which we can always excuse and indeed commend. For instance, the parenthesis of prayer.

When we are engaged in any duty, it will not delay us. Really, we shall make all the better speed if we pause for a while to pray. I like to think of the Apostle Paul while he was writing that grand epistle to the Ephesians, turning aside from his main argument to offer that great prayer.

For this cause, I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith, that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height, and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God. His argument would not suffer in the least. Indeed, it would be all the stronger for that little interval of prayer.

At another time, it is very sweet to see how he pauses, after recording the Lord's abundant mercy to him, to write that notable doxology. Now unto the King Eternal, Immortal, Invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Such parentheses of prayer and praise must be acceptable to the Most High. Our text, then, is found in a digression of an exceedingly blessed kind. It would be well if preachers would digress thus nowadays, if by digressing they preached more of free grace and more about the Lord Jesus Christ.

I have heard of a preacher who, on one occasion when he entered his pulpit, found himself suddenly stricken with blindness. I think it was old Dr. Gouge, the great Puritan. Being unable to read the discourse which he had taken up with him, and being a man of unusual calmness of spirit, instead of making any outcry or telling the people that he had lost the use of his eyes, he preached extemporaneously.

When he came down from the pulpit, a woman thanked him for the sermon. Alas, said the good man, a great calamity has happened to me. I have lost my sight.

Blessed be God for that, said the woman, if it makes you give up reading your sermons and enables you to preach as you've just done. It is a good thing when a preacher loses the thread of his discourse, if his discourse is made of thread, and he goes straight away to the cross and begins talking about Jesus Christ and him crucified. Or, if he has been wandering in the mazes of modern thought, it is well when he gets back into the old paths and preaches about the grace of God.

That is, if he can declare, as Paul does here, by the grace of God, I am what I am. God grant that they who preach free grace doctrines may never get out of the habit of doing so. And may those who have almost forgotten the sound of the word grace and those who never knew the music of it be made to lose their way until they ramble into the blessed preludes of the sovereign grace of God.

For sure am I that nothing but the gospel of the grace of God will ever drive potpourri out of this country. The only antagonist that can ever overcome the self-righteousness and priestcraft of Romanism and ritualism is a clear, bold, outspoken declaration of the great truth that, by the grace of God, the saints of God are what they are. Coming to the text and speaking plainly and simply and praying that God may speak to your hearts through my words, I want to prove to you first that the text contains a doctrinal statement.

By the grace of God, I am what I am. And that statement may be read first as meaning this, that Paul ascribed his own salvation to the free favor of God. He believed himself to be a regenerate man, a

forgiven man, a saved man, and he believed that condition of his was the result of the unmerited favor of God.

He did not imagine that he was saved because he deserved salvation or that he had been forgiven because his repentance had made an atonement for his sin. He did not reckon that his prayers had merited salvation or that his abundant labors and many sufferings had earned that boon for him at God's hands. No, he does not for a moment speak of merit.

It is a word which Paul's mouth could not pronounce in such a connection as that. But his declaration is, it is by God's free favor that I, Saul of Tarsus, have been converted and made into Paul the apostle, the servant of Jesus Christ. I attribute this great change entirely to the goodwill, the sovereign benignity, the undeserved favor of the ever-blessed God.

Now, my dear hearers, let me put this truth very plainly so that you may not mistake it. If you are saved, you do not owe your salvation to anything that you have done, nor if you ever are to be saved will it be the result of any goodness of your own. You may spin, but if you are ever saved, the first thing God will do will be to unravel that which you have spun.

You may clothe yourself in the gaudy garments of a self-made righteousness, but God's first act of grace will be to strip you of them, to make you feel that all such garments are nothing but filthy rags fit only for the fire. You must deny your own merits, or you cannot have the merits of Christ. Your church goings, your chapel goings, your baptism, your so-called sacraments, your confirmation, your private prayers, your family prayers, your Bible readings, your good thoughts, your alms deeds, all these put together have no merit in them that could help you to go an inch toward salvation.

Salvation is not of works but of grace alone, and they who do not obtain salvation in this way will as surely perish as the blasphemer or the drunkard. There is but one way of salvation, the way of free favor. That was the way in which Paul went, and that is the way in which we must go if we would enter into eternal life.

The word grace in scripture also means something else besides free favor. It very often means operative power. When the Spirit of God works savingly upon the heart, the influence which he exerts is called his grace.

So the apostle means here, by the grace of God, I am what I am. That is, whatever I am, that is right. God made me that.

If I am regenerate, I must have been born again from above by the power of God. If I have repented, my repentance was the gift of God. If I have believed, my faith was the work of God.

If I have perseverance in faith, that perseverance has been the effect of the work of God in my soul. If I have ever prayed an acceptable prayer, it was God's grace that enabled me to do it. If I have ever sung God's praise so as to please Him, that praise was first written in my heart by the Holy Spirit.

What hast thou which thou hast not received is a question to which the answer from every true heart is, I have nothing which I have not received except it be my sin. But all I have that is good must have come from God. If any of you are to be saved, God must save you.

Sinner, you are lost and lost beyond recovery by any hand but that which is divine and omnipotent. It is not of Him that willeth, nor of Him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy. Let that text roll like thunder

over the heads of those who think that they can save themselves.

The Lord must do it from first to last. His is the first act of grace when He quickeneth the spiritually dead, and His must be the last act of grace when we lay down our vile bodies and our spirit enters into the joy of our Lord. Now, these two things being true and being surely believed among us, that salvation is by the free favor of God and that it is by the power of divine grace, I think I may say that if Paul had been here, he would have pushed this matter a little further.

There are some of our dear brethren, and true brethren too, who do not see the doctrines of grace quite clearly. They see men as trees walking, for they seem to attribute the fact of their salvation in part to themselves. I do not say as to merit, for I believe they abhor that idea, and I do not say as to power, for I believe they hold as earnestly as we do that the sinner is dead in sin and that the power to act comes from the Holy Ghost.

But somehow or other, they make a great deal more of man's will than I think they should, just as, on the other hand, some speak too little of the will of man and treat man as if they had not any wills, but were so many logs of wood. There is truth on both sides of the question, and as some of my brethren preach the other view of the truth, I will preach that view of it which my text gives me. If I am a saved man, how came I to be saved? Somebody asks, but why are you saved and not other men? My dear friend, there are two questions there, so I must take them one at a time.

Will you kindly let me take the first one, only altering it thus? Why are you saved? If you are saved, there is a great difference between you and others who are not saved. You were once a lover of pleasure and of the world, and you are now a lover of God. Now somebody made that difference, and whoever did it did a good action, so let his head be crowned.

Here is the crown. Now, sirs, upon whose head shall I put it? Have you made yourself to differ from what you used to be and from what others still are? Are you prepared to wear the crown? You bow your head and say, O no, let the Lord have the glory of it. Well, then it is quite evident that God has made a difference between you and others, and that it was a commendable thing for Him to do so, and as it was commendable for God to do it, it must have been so for God to purpose to do it.

And if it was commendable for Him to purpose to do it, the day He did it, it was commendable for Him to purpose to do it from all eternity. And thus we get back to the old and glorious decrees and covenants of divine grace of which some are so afraid, though as surely as this book is written of God, it stands there that He hath from the beginning chosen His people unto salvation. By the grace of God, I am what I am.

If there is an antinomian here, he will very boldly declare the meaning of this passage, but I will speak as boldly as he does and dare to do it with the truth on my side. I am sure that this is pure and unadulterated truth, that grace, grace, grace, grace saves the soul from beginning to end. But if you ask me why is a man lost, then the antinomian and I will differ altogether.

I say if he is lost, it is his own fault. It is his sin and his willful rejection of Christ that caused him to be lost. And if there is any Arminian here who will lay the guilt of sin on the sinner's conscience, I can do that as much as he can, and I believe I shall have scripture with me in so doing.

Damnation is all of man from first to last, and salvation is all of grace from first to last. Someone asks, how do these two things agree? Nay, brother, how do these two things disagree? If you will tell me when they

quarrel, I will tell you to reconcile them. They stand in this book side by side as two grand inspired truths, and they should be preached side by side.

They never did fall out, and they never will. If you love self-righteousness, they will quarrel with you, but they will never quarrel with each other. Now, secondly, I shall briefly treat our text as a grateful acknowledgement.

Here is a child of God who stood very high among his fellow believers, one who had many gifts, much grace, great success, and high honor in the church. Yet he says, by the grace of God, I am what I am. It would be right for any of us who are nobodies, and who never did anything, to talk thus.

But this is Paul who is speaking, the one who could truthfully say, I was not a whit behind the very chiefest apostles. Yet he says, by the grace of God, I am what I am. Paul's grateful acknowledgement means first that he forbade himself ever to boast.

Why should he boast? Whatever he had that was good, had been given to him by the great benefactor. So he might well have said, what have I in which I can glory? I am nothing. I have done nothing except what God has made me, and what his grace has wrought in me and by me.

Beloved friends, it is an astonishing thing that we should be the subjects of pride. Yet considering what poor creatures we are, it is not astonishing that we are proud or that we are anything that is bad. But if we are proud, what fools we are.

Proud? Just a heap of dust and ashes that the wind would blow away if it were not for a daily miracle? Just a mass of corruption that would be putrefying in a few hours if the life were gone out of it? Yet we swell out in think ourselves some great ones. Oh, what big somebodies we are until the grace of God brings us down to our proper level. The heavens themselves are scarcely high enough for our tall heads.

We think ourselves so great, but it is a death blow to boasting when anyone can say, by the grace of God, I am what I am. And dear friends, this grateful acknowledgement incites us to holy service. If everything that we have already received has come from God, let us surrender ourselves and all we have to God.

As he has made us, let us live for our Creator. As he has wrought all our works in us, let us give up to him our spirit, soul and body as our reasonable service. Debtors to free graces we are.

If others talk about good works, let us go and do them. While the idle dream of self-righteousness leads some men to make sacrifices, let gratitude for free grace constrain us to make greater sacrifices still. Moreover, our text, I think, as a grateful acknowledgement, leads us to further confidence in God.

If by the grace of God I am what I am, then by the grace of God I shall be, by and by, something better still. He who hath brought us to repent and to believe will bring us to greater faith, to fuller assurance and to completer conformity to Christ and will preserve us unto the end. When any tell us that God will leave us to perish at the last, I never care to answer them.

For it always seems to me that those who talk so of my master do not know him. What, leave his beloved, leave his spouse, leave the members of his own body to perish? It is useless to tell us that. He loves his own with too mighty a love ever to cast them away.

Let others say what they will. I join with Paul in saying, by the grace of God I am what I am, and I am persuaded that by that same grace I shall one day be with Christ and be like him. You who are not the subjects of divine grace may well fear that you will perish, but you who have received God's grace may rest assured that since grace was the motive which began the good work in you, the same motive will continue even to the end.

If God had begun saving us because we were good, he would of course leave off saving us when we were not good. If he had begun to save us because we were pure in heart and gracious in life, he would leave off when we ceased to be so. But as he began to save us from no motive but his own sovereign determination to save us, how can that be affected by anything that may happen to us? And so let us fall back upon this comforting assurance.

By the grace of God we are what we are, and by the grace of God we shall one day share Christ's glory. I will not say more upon that part of the subject, though it is one upon which I might possibly talk for an hour. But in a third place, I want you to regard the text as a sweet encouragement.

A sweet encouragement to whom? Why, first to the minister. Beloved friends, he who is now speaking to you feels himself to be a marvel of the grace of God, and he can say to you honestly and without any mock humility that since God saved him he has never doubted the possibility of the salvation of anyone else of the whole human race. Preserved from outward sin of the grosser kind, I nevertheless had for some years such a full sense of my own depravity and such a whole of darkness on account of the evil that I saw within myself that I can have sympathy with the most despairing soul that is here.

If you are sitting at hell's dark door, I can tell you that I sat there month after month, and if you are tempted even to destroy yourself, I can assure you that I have known the misery that Job felt when he said, My soul chooseth strangling and death rather than my life. Yet am I saved by the sovereign grace of God. Glory be to his holy name.

If the Lord sent me to preach the gospel to the devil himself, I should believe that God was able to convert even him. I know that he never will do so, but if there be any man who is as bad as the devil and the gospel is sent to him, I shall never despair of the possibility of that man being reclaimed and made to stand among the redeemed at the last. I know that there are many here who were drunkards and swears and worse than that, but they have obtained mercy.

They have been washed in the precious blood of Jesus, and they are rejoicing tonight that their many sins have been forgiven them for Christ's sake. Those who have been in such a plight as that do not despair of the salvation of the greatest sinners here. You have gone far into sin, but you have seen another saved who was once just what you now are, so why should not you be saved? There have been murderers saved, then why not you if your hands are red with the blood of others? There was a thief who was saved at the last hour, then why not you if you are a thief? There have been many Magdalenes saved, then why not you if you belong to that sad sisterhood? O ye who lie despairing at the gates of hell, the silver trumpet of the gospel is sounded in your ears by one who has enjoyed the music of it in his own soul.

What an encouragement it is to the preacher when he can say, by the grace of God I am what I am, and what an encouragement it should be to the hearer when he is told that salvation is all of grace. If Christ came to you and said, you cannot be saved unless you perform so many good works, there would be no hope for the most of you, though I fear that there are some who think that such a message would just suit them, for they fancy that they have done a great many good works. In cherishing that delusion, they are

like a Hindu of whom I once heard.

He believed that he must not eat any animal substance, or that if he did he would perish. A missionary said to him, that idea is ridiculous. You cannot drink a glass of water without swallowing thousands of living creatures.

He did not believe it, so the missionary took a drop of water and put it under the microscope. When the man saw the innumerable living creatures in the drop of water, what did he do? Why, he broke the microscope. That was his way of settling the question.

So when we meet with persons who say, our works are pure and clean and excellent, we bring the great microscope of the law of the Lord and we bid them look through that, and when they do look through it and discover that even one sinful thought destroys their hope of salvation by self-righteousness, and when they see a whole host of sins in every one of their prayers or acts or thoughts, then they are angry with the preacher and they try to break the microscope. But for all that, the truth remains. By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.

But salvation comes by grace. Catcheth that sinner, for it is by grace that sinners are saved. Why should not you be saved? If a thing is given away, nobody can be too poor to have it.

If it is the gift of charity, poverty is a recommendation rather than a hindrance. My Lord and Master does not tell me to come and say to you that salvation is by your own feelings. It would be as impossible for you to feel a right as to do a right, but salvation is entirely by God's grace.

But, says someone, my heart is hard. Then come to God to have it softened. But I have no good thing to bring him.

Then come to him for every good thing. But I cannot even bring a sense of need. Then come without a sense of need, for the man who feels that he has not a sense of need is often the one who has the best sense of need.

He who says, I have at last a sense of need, shows that he has not got to the bottom of it. For if he were brought to the bottom, he would feel that he had not any feeling. He would groan that he could not groan and grieve that he could not grieve.

Dear friends, you have to do nothing and to be nothing and to feel nothing by way of fitness for salvation, but just to come and accept free gratis for nothing the abundant mercy of God in Christ Jesus. He is the empty sinner's fullness, the dead sinner's life, the perishing sinner's salvation. I do not know any truth that can encourage poor sinful souls to pray, to repent and to believe in Jesus, except the truth that salvation is all of grace from first to last.

As the apostle was saved by grace, so must it be with all the rest of us, and so may it be with you. Now to close, I think our text gives us a suggestion for self-examination. By the grace of God, I am what I am, says Paul, and I want each of you to ask yourself, what am I? My eye cannot reach you all, but I want you to feel that God's eye is looking at you and that he puts this question to you.

What are you? Paul tells us what he is, but what are you? An unregenerate sinner? An unpardoned sinner? An impenitent sinner? An unbelieving sinner? Will you put on the right label and wear it? I almost wish I had some labels to put on you, but let your own consciences do it. And when you get home, will you

take your pen and write down what you really are? You are either condemned or uncondemned. Write down whichever you are and look the truth in the face.

No man is usually so near bankruptcy as the one who dare not look into his books, and that man must be bad who dare not search his own heart. What are you then, dear friend? Let that question begin your self-examination. Here is another question.

How much do you know about the grace of God? Paul says, by the grace of God I am what I am. You see that the mark of a child of God is that by the grace of God he is what he is. What do you know about the grace of God? Well, I attend my place of worship regularly, but what do you know about the grace of God? I have always been an upright, honest, truthful, respectable man.

I am glad to hear it, but what do you know about the grace of God? You think you do not need it. Though you are not a saved soul, yet none are so certainly lost as those who think they do not need the grace of God. Has that grace ever changed you? Well, I was born again in baptism.

Yes, I have seen a great many of those who were said to have been born again in baptism, but I have not seen any difference between them and those who were not born again in baptism, nor can anybody else. Ye must be born again, even ye baptized heathens who know no more about the grace of God than if you had ever lived in a land where the gospel is preached. I will put to you another straight question.

Is Christ Jesus your only hope? Were you ever made to feel that there was no merit in anything that you ever did? Were you ever thrown flat on your face on the grace and mercy of God and made to pray in the name of Jesus Christ, God be merciful to me, a sinner? If not, what is your hope? If there be in the matter of your supposed salvation, anything that is not of the grace of God, do with it what the man did with the forged bill, bury it in the earth and run away from it and be afraid that anybody should think it was yours. Your own righteousness is such an abominable thing that it will surely damn you as the greatest profanity. And the best thing for you to do with it is to bury it and run away from it.

If you cannot say that you are what you want to be, if you cannot say that you know anything experimentally about the grace of God, the last question I will put to you is this. What must that principle be which does rule you? The grace of God made Paul what he was. What has made you what you are? Well, sir, I think I am as good as my neighbors and rather better than most of them.

What made you so? I suppose you are a self-made man and it is a matter of fact that everybody worships his creator. So that if you believe that you made yourself, I am not surprised that you worship yourself. But I do wonder where you expect to go when you die.

You who have never done any wrong and have been so good that you do not need a savior, do you expect to go to heaven? Well, if you go there, what would you do? I read of the multitude that no man could number. These are they who came out of great tribulation and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple.

But if you could get there because your garments never wanted any washing, surely you would throw up your cap and say, well done myself. And what a discord that would cause in the music of heaven. What a stranger you would feel amongst those multitudes who would all praise the blessed God.

But you will never go there until you fling that righteousness of yours back to the pit from whence it came. For there is nothing in it that God can look upon with pleasure. It is a vile compound of pride and ignorance.

May the light of the Holy Spirit shine upon it and make you loathe it and abominate it and flee from it. And may he teach you that there is life in Jesus. There is pardon in Jesus.

There is salvation in Jesus for every soul that comes to him. If you say. By my own merits and abilities, I am what I am.

May God save you from that dreadful delusion and bring you humbly to trust in the merits and sacrifice of his dear son. So you shall find salvation and he shall have the glory world without end. Amen.

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