

# In His Letter to the Corinthians

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*T. Austin-Sparks explores the profound themes of grace, love, and fellowship in Paul's letters to the Corinthians, emphasizing the transformative power of the gospel.*

**Scripture:** Isaiah 61:3, John 12:47, 1 Corinthians 1:30, 1 Corinthians 3:1-4, 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, 2 Corinthians 2:14, 2 Corinthians 4:6-7, 2 Corinthians 8:9, 2 Corinthians 12:9, 2 Corinthians 13:14

**Topics:** "Fellowship", "Grace", "Love"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that the letters to the Corinthians ultimately convey the gospel, encapsulated in the benediction of 2 Corinthians 13:14, which highlights the grace of Jesus, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. He explains that the grace of Jesus is a voluntary act of becoming poor for our sake, while the love of God is the powerful method through which He operates in this dispensation. The sermon illustrates how the Corinthians, despite their flaws, are called saints, showcasing the transformative power of God's grace and love. Sparks stresses that true fellowship among believers is achieved through the Holy Spirit, which is essential for spiritual maturity and unity. Ultimately, he encourages believers to embrace the good news of the gospel in every situation, reflecting the hope and transformation found in Christ.

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## Transcript

We now pass to the letters to the Corinthians, and, again following our method, we seek to find that which will sum up all that these letters contain. After all the details, all that goes to make up these letters - and it is quite a lot - we ask: 'What does it amount to? What is the result with which we are left?' And once more we shall find that it is only the gospel again - forgive me putting it like that - it is just a matter of the gospel again from another angle, another standpoint.

We may be surprised to learn that the word 'gospel', or, as it would be in the original, the term 'good tidings', occurs in these two letters no fewer than twenty-two times: so that we are not just taking a little fragment and hanging an undue weight upon it. We need some fairly solid foundation upon which to base our conclusions, and I think that twenty-two occurrences of one special word in such a space forms a fairly sound basis. Whatever else these letters are about, they must be about that. Much of what you read in these letters might lead you to think it was not like that at all - it looks very bad; but what we are after is the resultant issue.

The Summing Up of the Letters

There is one very familiar sentence which sums up the whole of the two letters. It occurs, naturally, at the end of the second letter.

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all" (2 Cor. 13:14).

This is sometimes called 'the benediction' or 'the blessing'. That is, of course, man's title for it. But it is not just an appendix to a discourse - a conventional way of terminating things, a nice thought. Nor was it used by Paul as a kind of concluding good wish or commendation with which to terminate a meeting, as it is commonly used now. I suppose there is a blessing in it, but you have to look much more deeply than just at these phrases. Really it was a prayer, and a prayer in which was summed up the whole of the two letters which the Apostle had written. In Paul's wonderful way of comprehending much in few words, everything that he had penned through these two letters is in this way gathered up.

### The Order of the Summing Up

It is perhaps important to note the order of these three clauses. The grace of the Lord Jesus, the love of God, the communion or fellowship of the Holy Spirit. That is not the order of Divine Persons. If it were the order of Divine Persons, it would have to be changed: 'The love of God, the grace of the Lord Jesus, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit'. But we have no need to attempt to put God right - to try to improve upon the Word of God and the Holy Spirit's order. This is not the order of Divine Persons. It is the order of the Divine process. This is the way along which God moves to reach His end, and that is exactly the summing up of these two letters. All the way through God is moving to an end, and this prayer of Paul's is according to the principle, the order, of Divine movement.

Let us now come to the words themselves, and see if we can find a little of the gospel - the 'good tidings' of these two letters - gathered into these three phrases.

### The Grace of the Lord Jesus

What was the grace of the Lord Jesus? Well, if you look back in this second letter, to chapter 8, verse 9, you have it.

"Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might become rich".

There are three quite simple elements in that statement. The Lord Jesus did something - He became poor; and what He did was voluntary - for grace ever and always carries that feature at its very beginning. It is that which is perfectly voluntary; not compelled, not demanded, under no obligation, but completely free. The grace of our Lord Jesus meant firstly a voluntary act. That is grace very simply, but it goes to the heart of things. So that is what He did - He became poor. And then the motive, as to why He did it: 'that we, through His poverty, might be made rich'.

I think that is a simple, and a very beautiful, analysis and synthesis of grace. He became poor - He did it without compulsion - and in so doing His motive was that we might become rich.

Now, you see, you have here in the Lord Jesus a Person and a nature wholly and utterly, fully and finally, different from any other human being; a nature completely contrary to the nature of man, as we know it. Human nature as we know it is being rich, doing anything to become rich, and anybody else can be

robbed to make us rich. That does not necessitate taking a pistol and putting it at people's heads. There are other ways of getting advantages to ourselves, at other people's expense or otherwise. There is really no 'grace' about man, as we know him. But the Lord Jesus is so different from this! Christ is altogether different - an altogether other nature.

Now the whole of the first letter to the Corinthians is crammed full of the self-principle. I am assuming that you are more or less familiar with these letters. I cannot take you through page after page, verse after verse; but I am giving the result of close reading, and you can verify it if you care to. I repeat: the whole of the first letter to the Corinthians is just full of the self-principle - self-vindication, going to law to get their own rights, self-seeking, self-importance, self-indulgence - even at the Lord's Table - self-confidence, self-complacency, self-glory, self-love, self-assertiveness, and everything else. You find all these things in that first letter, and more. 'I' - a great, an immense 'I' stands inscribed over the first letter to the Corinthians. This is the nature, the old nature, showing itself in Christians. Everything that is contrary to "the grace of the Lord Jesus" comes to light in that letter, and the Lord Jesus stands in such strong, clear, terrible contrast to what we find there.

In our last chapter we sought to show that, in order to reveal the glory of the good tidings as the good tidings of the God of hope, the Divine method was to paint the hopelessness of the picture as it really was and is for human nature. Now, in order to reach the Divine end, the Holy Spirit does not cover up the faults, the weaknesses - even the sins, the awful sins - of Christians. The grace of God is enhanced by the background against which it stands. And so, while we might feel, 'Oh, what a pity that this letter was ever written! What an exposure, what an uncovering, of Christians! What a pity ever to speak about it - why not hide it?' - ah, that is just where the good tidings find their real occasion and value.

You see, they are the good tidings of the benediction. The good tidings here are found right at the very beginning of the letter. God knows all about these folk. He is not just finding out - He knows the worst. Dear friend, the Lord knows the worst about you and about me, and He knows it all; and it is a poor kind of all! Now, He knew all about these Corinthians, and yet, under His hand, this Apostle took pen and began his letter with - what? 'To the church in Corinth', and then: "sanctified in Christ Jesus, called saints". Now, is that pretending? Is that make-believe? Is that putting on blinkers and saying nice things about people? Not a bit! I repeat: God knew it all, and yet said, "sanctified in Christ Jesus... saints".

Do you say, 'Oh, I cannot understand that at all!?' Ah, but that is just the glory of His grace, because the grace of the Lord Jesus comes out here in calling such people saints. Now, you do not call such people saints; you reserve that word for people of a very different kind. We say, 'Oh, he is a saint' - distinguishing him, not from people who are unsaved, but amongst good people. Now, God came right to these people, knowing this whole black, dark story, and said: "saints"; and that other word, "sanctified in Christ Jesus" is only another form of the same word 'saints'. It means 'separated' - separated in Christ Jesus. You see, the very first thing is the position into which the grace of the Lord Jesus puts us. It is positional grace. If we are in Christ Jesus, all these lamentable things may be true about us, but God sees us in Christ Jesus and not in ourselves. That is the good tidings, that is the gospel. The wonder of the grace of the Lord Jesus! We are looked at by God as separated, sanctified in Christ Jesus. That is where God begins His work with us, putting us in a position in His Son where He attributes to us all that the Lord Jesus is.

Now, you can break that up in this letter. "Christ Jesus, who was made unto us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30). He is made unto us righteousness, sanctification, redemption. I am afraid that some Christians are afraid to make too much of their positional

grace. They think that it will take something away from their Christian life if they make too much of that, because they put such a tremendous amount of emphasis upon the need for their sanctification, actually, as to condition; and they are so occupied introspectively with this matter of what they are in themselves and trying to deal with that, that they lose all the joy of their position in Christ through grace.

We need to keep the balance in this matter. The beginning of everything is that the grace of the Lord Jesus comes to us - even though we may be like the Corinthians - and sets us and looks upon us as in a place of sainthood, "sanctified in Christ Jesus". You cannot describe it. Grace goes beyond all our powers of describing, but there is the wonder of the grace of the Lord Jesus. The fact of the matter is that we really only discover what awful creatures we are after we are in Christ Jesus, and after we have been in Him a long time. I think the longer we are in Christ, the more awful we become in our own eyes. Therefore, if we are in Christ Jesus, what we are in ourselves does not signify. Our position does not rest upon whether we are actually, literally, truly perfect. The good tidings first of all has to do with our position in Christ.

Ah, but it does not stop there. This does not introduce any kind of shadow, or it should not. Thank God, it is good tidings beyond even that. The grace of our Lord Jesus can make the state different - can make our standing lead to a new state. That is the grace of the Lord Jesus. It can make our own actual state now correspond to our standing. Grace not only receives into the position of acceptance without merit: grace is a working power to make us correspond to the position into which we have been brought. Grace has many aspects. Grace is acceptance, but grace is power to operate. "My grace is sufficient for thee" (2 Cor. 12:9). That is the mighty word of power in need. The grace of our Lord Jesus is indeed good news - good news for all Christians.

#### The Love of God

After "the grace of the Lord Jesus" "the love of God". See how God is moving to His end. Now the second letter to the Corinthians is as full of the love of God as the first is full of the grace of the Lord Jesus. It is a wonderful letter of the love of God, and of its mighty triumph, its mighty power. The love of God is God's present-day method of showing His power. If that will not do it, nothing will. What God is doing in this dispensation, He is doing by love. Let that be settled. Not by judgment, not by condemnation. The Lord Jesus said He did not come to condemn, He had come to save (John 12:47; cf. 3:17). Yes, it is the love of God which is the method of His power in this dispensation. The method will change, but this is the day of the love of God.

Now, Paul has already, toward the end of the first letter, given that classic definition and analysis of the love of God - 1 Corinthians 13. There is nothing to compare with it in all the Bible as an analysis of - not your love, not my love; we are not interested in that - but the love of God. "Love suffereth long and is kind, love envieth not, love seeketh not its own, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly", and so on. There is the love of God set forth. We shall find that we cannot stand up to it. No man can stand up to that fully. "Love never faileth" - never gives up, that is. Here is the quality of Divine love.

Now bring it into the second letter to the Corinthians, and see the mighty triumph, the power, of the love of God. First of all, see it as working triumphantly in the servant of the Lord. Look again at the letter. Paul has in different places in his writings given very wonderful, very beautiful, very glorious revelations of the grace of God in his own life; but, considering the setting, I do not think there is anything anywhere in the New Testament that so wonderfully sets forth the triumph of the love of God in a servant of God, as does this second letter to the Corinthians. If ever a man had reason to give up, to wash his hands, to despair, to be

fiercely angry, to be everything but loving, Paul had reason for such a reaction in regard to the Corinthians. He might have been well justified in closing the situation at Corinth, and saying: 'I am done with you, I wash my hands of you, you are incurable. The more I love you, the more you hate me. All right, get on with it; I leave you.' Look at this second letter: the outgoing, the overflowing, of love to these people - to these people - over that situation. What a triumph of love, the love of God, in a servant of God! That is how God reaches His end. Oh, God give us more love, as His servants, to bear and forbear, to suffer long, and never to despair.

Yes, but it was not left there. You can see it, even if it is only beginning - and I think it is more than that - in the Corinthians themselves, as he speaks to them about the result of his strong speaking, his pleading, his rebuking, his admonishing, his correcting. The terms that he uses about them are their sorrow, their godly repentance, and so on. It was worth it, the love of God triumphing in a people like that; and you know that that is what made possible the wonderful, beautiful things that Paul was able to write to them in the second letter. Paul could never have committed himself to write some of the things that are in this second letter, but for some change in those people, in their attitude, in their disposition, in their spirit; but for the fact that he had got this basis of triumphant love.

For this second letter has to do with ministry, with testimony, and Paul would be the last man in the world ever to suggest that anybody could have a ministry and a testimony who knew nothing about the conquering love of God in their own nature. Paul was not that kind of man. It is, alas, possible to preach and be a Christian worker, and know nothing of the grace of the Lord Jesus in your own life - to be just a contradiction. There is far too much of that. Paul would never countenance anything like that. If he is going to speak about ministry and about testimony in the world, he will demand a basis, that grace shall have done its work at least in measure, so that in this way the love of God is now manifested. There is now humility: 'Oh, what godly sorrow', he says, 'what godly repentance!' Where is the 'I'? Where is the self-hood? Something has broken, something has given way; there is something now of the grace of the Lord Jesus, in self-emptying, in the negation of the self-life. Yes, they are down now, broken. This is the triumph of Divine love in such a people.

That is the gospel, the good tidings! It is good tidings, is it not? The gospel is not just something to bring the sinner to the Saviour. It is that - but the gospel, the good tidings, is also this, that people, Christians like Corinthians, can be transformed like this through the love of God. Good tidings! The glory of the triumph comes following on here, in words that we love so much: "Thanks be unto God, who always leadeth us in triumph in Christ" (2 Cor. 2:14), to celebrate His victory over Christ's enemies. This is the triumphal procession of grace and love. It is a different Paul, is it not? - a Paul different from the first letter. He has got the wind in his sails now, he is running before the wind, he is in triumph. He is talking about everything being a triumphal procession in Christ, a constant celebration of victory. What has made Paul change? Why, the change in them! Yes, it was always like that with Paul; his life was bound up with the state of the Christians. 'Now I live if you stand fast' (1 Thess. 3:8). 'This is life to me.'

"And the love of God". "God, that said, Light shall shine out of darkness... shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the exceeding greatness of the power may be of God, and not from ourselves" (2 Cor. 4:6,7). 'We are poor creatures, Corinthians: I am, you are; but God has shined into our hearts. Something has been done in our hearts. The love of God has come in. Fragile vessels as we are in ourselves, that love shines forth - the glory of the love of God.'

## The Communion of the Holy Spirit

"The communion (or fellowship) of the Holy Spirit". Did ever a people need to know the meaning of fellowship more than the Corinthians? Is Paul touching upon some spot that was a very, very sensitive spot? Fellowship? He wrote: "Each one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos and I of Cephas; and I of Christ" (1 Cor. 1:12). Is there any fellowship in that, any communion in that? No. When you stay in the flesh, there is no fellowship, there is no communion; you are all in bits and pieces, all flying at one another. So it was. What is God after? Fellowship, communion, amongst believers; and it must be the communion, the fellowship, of the Holy Spirit, that is, fellowship constituted and established and enriched by the Holy Spirit. This is the result of "the grace of the Lord Jesus and the love of God" - oneness.

Let us clearly recognise that this is the deepest work of the Holy Spirit. Much has been said earlier, in Paul's first letter, about the Holy Spirit. They had made much of spiritual gifts; spiritual gifts attracted them. They were enamoured of power to do things, of signs, wonders, and so on. That was very much after their heart; these gifts of the Spirit, and much more that was just outward, brought a great deal of gratification to their souls.

But when you come to the supreme end and deepest work of the Holy Spirit, you find it in the oneness of believers. It takes the deepest work of the Holy Spirit to bring that about, seeing that we still have a nature that is an old nature. We still can be Christians, and yet Corinthian Christians. There is still lurking - and not always in hidden corners - the 'I', the self-life in some form or other. Seeing it is there, it takes a mighty work of the Holy Spirit to unite indissolubly even two believers; but to unite a whole church like that is something stupendous.

Nothing less or other than that is the communion, the fellowship, of the Holy Spirit. Something of that seems to have come about at Corinth. Oh, wonder of wonders, the difference between these two letters! Yes, it has happened. It is an inward triumph over nature, and it shows real progress. That is the communion of the Holy Spirit. When Paul started his first letter, he said: 'When every one of you says, I, I, I, are you not babes? Do you not have to be fed with milk?' (1 Cor. 3:1-4). Babies are always scrapping and fighting. That was the Corinthians. But they had got past the babyhood stage, through "the grace of the Lord Jesus and the love of God". Things changed; they have grown up.

It takes the Holy Spirit to make us grow up spiritually in this way. The measure of our spirituality can be indicated very quickly and clearly by the measure of our mutual love, our fellowship. We are, after all, little people spiritually if we are always at variance. It takes big people to live with certain other big people without quarrelling. It takes "the grace of the Lord Jesus, and the love of God", to lead to "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit".

This fellowship of the Holy Spirit, then, is essentially corporate. Perhaps you have thought that this last clause, "the communion of the Holy Spirit", meant your communion with the Holy Spirit and that of the Holy Spirit with you. It does not mean that at all. Paul is perhaps just gently hitting back at the old state, touching on that old condition. 'What you Corinthians lacked more than you lacked anything else was fellowship; there was no fellowship. Now you have come along the way of the grace of the Lord Jesus and the love of God "and the communion of the Holy Spirit" is found amongst you'. That is what it means. It is corporate, and it is a mighty work of the Holy Spirit. It has to be in more than one of us. Now you, of course, think it has to be in the other person! No, it has to be in more than one of us, not just the other person. It must be in you and me - it must be in everyone concerned. Well, that is the gospel: good tidings

to a people in a pretty bad state! What good tidings!

Let me close with this. We never get anywhere by recognising the deplorable state and just going for it - beginning to knock people about, wielding the sword or the sledge-hammer and smashing things, bringing people down under condemnation. We never get anywhere that way. If Paul had gone to work that way with Corinth, he would have smashed it all right, but that would have been the end of it. But love found a way, and, although there was brokenness, it was not the end. Something, "beauty for ashes", came out of it - because "the grace of the Lord Jesus, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit", was the principle upon which Paul himself lived and by which he worked.

You and I must be people of good news. We have got good news for any situation, though it be as bad as that in Corinth. Believe this! Good news! Good news! That must be our attitude to everything, by the grace of God; not despairing, not giving up. No, good news! The Lord make us people of the gospel, the good tidings.

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