

The Return of Grace

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of the principle of grace in the new Israel, and how it demands that we minister to others, using the gifts and resources given by God.

Scripture: Matthew 21:43, Luke 22:32, Ephesians 1:7-8, 1 Peter 1:2, 1 Peter 2:4-10, 1 Peter 2:19-20, 1 Peter 3:7, 1 Peter 4:10, 1 Peter 5:10, 2 Peter 3:18

Topics: "Grace", "Transformation"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the transition from the old Israel to the new Israel, as declared by Jesus, highlighting how the Kingdom of God has shifted to a new nation that produces spiritual fruits. He illustrates this change through the life of Peter, who embodies the transformation necessary to embrace this new spiritual identity. The sermon focuses on the concept of grace, particularly how believers are called to reflect the grace they have received from God in their interactions with others, especially during trials and suffering. Sparks encourages the congregation to understand that true grace is demonstrated through patience and humility in the face of adversity. Ultimately, he calls for a deeper understanding and application of grace in the lives of believers as they navigate their spiritual journey.

Transcript

We proceed to a further small fragment in this great matter which has been opened to us concerning the change from the old Israel to a new Israel, which was declared by the Lord Jesus Himself when He said to the leaders and representatives of the old Israel: "The kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (Matthew 21:43). This actually has taken place. As the last many centuries of history have made perfectly evident, the Kingdom of God has been taken away from that former Israel, and they are without it all through this present dispensation. It has been transferred to a new Israel - "a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof".

We have been seeing how Peter is the bridge between the two Israels, standing in the gap between the old and the new, and how by him the old passes and the new is established, both in his own person, and what was done in him by the Holy Spirit, and in his ministry. The fruits of a nation, of the kingdom of the new Israel, are manifested, and we have been looking at some of the fruits as seen in and through the life and the ministry of this first of the twelve, the Apostle Peter.

If you have any doubt whatever about the truth of this, you only have to look at his first Letter again. We have said a lot of things, which are true, but there is that which gathers it all up and presents it to us

concretely. You will find it in his first Letter, chapter 2, verses 4-10:

"Unto whom coming, a living stone, rejected indeed of men, but with God elect, precious, ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Because it is contained in scripture, Behold, I lay in Zion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be put to shame. For You therefore which believe is the preciousness: but for such as disbelieve, The stone which the builders rejected, the same was made the head of the corner; and, A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence; for they stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed. But ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that ye may shew forth the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light: which in time past were no people, but now are the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy."

(Note in verse 9: "But ye..." There is the transition to the new.)

That section does not leave us in any doubt that the old has been transferred to the new, but in a different realm and with a different nature. Peter, who had all the tradition of the former Israel, has come to see that now all that was there in a temporal way has been passed over to a spiritual realm. Now all is of a spiritual, and not of a temporal, character.

There are many things here that would be helpful for us to dwell upon. We could take up this whole paragraph bit by bit, for there is so much wealth in it. I am not intending to do that, but I want to point out one thing in that connection before passing on to the thing which I feel is the Lord's word for this time.

The Location of the New Israel

Here the Apostle says: "Ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that ye may shew forth the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light." Do you notice that is all in the singular? "An elect race, a holy nation, a royal priesthood."

In the old dispensation that was all concentrated in a place on this earth: in the temple at Jerusalem. That Israel had its focal point, its unity, in that geographical centre. The elect race was represented, gathered into, Jerusalem, and its focus was there. The holy nation was synonymous with Jerusalem, whither the tribes went up. The royal priesthood was centred in Jerusalem. That was where Israel went to see the priesthood, for it functioned in the city of the great king. They were 'a people for God's own possession': one thing, with that focal point in the nations.

Now, how does Peter begin his first Letter? "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the elect" ... who are centred in Jerusalem? No, not at all! ... "who are the sojourners of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia" - and anywhere else you like to mention. Do you see the point? Wherever this people is there is a representation of all this. If it is anywhere in the world, dispersed amongst the nations over the earth, there it represents, or is intended to represent, all that is here about the new Israel.

An Elect Race

If we were to dwell upon that it would take a long time, but there is one thing that we will say.

You know that the elect is something very, very precious to God, so precious that it is going to be saved (Matthew 24:22). It says that at the end "there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew

great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect" (Matthew 24:24 - AV). Logically, of course, the elect is not going to be deceived. It is something very precious to God, wherever it is, but it is no longer something concentrated in some place on this earth, whether it be Rome, or Jerusalem, or anywhere else, but it is scattered abroad in the nations. Not only is it representative of the new Israel, but it is called upon, and expected, to function there in this capacity.

A Royal Priesthood

The priesthood in the new Israel is not a cult of men wearing certain kinds of robes, performing a certain ritual, and going through a certain performance of religion. There are no outward robes on the royal priests in the new Israel. You, dear friends, if you are in this, are as much a priest as ever there was a priest in the Israel of old, and your function as such, therefore, is to "offer up spiritual sacrifices" to be a sacrificing priest in union with the King. A royal priesthood is a priesthood of kingship, of Divine rule, authority, majesty, and united with the Throne, to function as such.

A Holy Nation

Do you remember what we have said about holiness? 'Holy' in the Bible means being completely separated from all that is not God to all and only what is God, being separated unto God. 'Holy' and 'sanctified' are the same word, with the same meaning - completely God's, with every other link severed. God's holy people are a holy nation among the nations, but different from the nations, a holy nation in the world, but different therefrom. Peter says: 'You are not now a temple made with hands, built with stone, after the old order, but you are a spiritual house, wherever you are scattered, and God only sees one. However so many parts there may be, with very many miles between, God only sees one spiritual house, composed of spiritual stones. Jesus Christ is not so many corner stones, but one corner stone of the whole.'

There is here another one of these remarkable allusions to Peter's former life in the days of Christ's flesh, and it is more than interesting. I sometimes feel that these allusions almost touch a vein of humour as Peter in his mentality is picking it all up and transferring it. He says here about this new spiritual house that is being built in this dispensation, that this is the fulfilment of the Old Testament statement: "I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious...", and then he goes on: "A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence; for they stumble at the word."

'Peter, I am going up to Jerusalem, and there I am going to be delivered into the hands of wicked men. They will crucify Me...' 'No, Lord, never! This shall never come to Thee!' "Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art a stumblingblock unto me." "They stumble at the word." This is wrought into the very fibre of Peter's spiritual life. How the word of the Cross was a stumblingblock to Peter! What Paul said about the Jews was true of him: "The word of the cross is to them that are perishing foolishness... we preach Christ crucified, unto Jews a stumblingblock" (1 Corinthians 1:18,23). It was an offence to them, and the word 'offence' is, as you know, the same word in the original as 'stumblingblock'. The Greek word is 'scandal', 'offence' or 'stumblingblock'. Peter fell headlong when the Lord Jesus spoke of the Cross, and He said: 'You are an offence, a stumblingblock. You are a scandal to Me. Get thee behind Me!' Ah, Peter has pulled over here, and to the unbelieving people he says: 'This whole new spiritual house, and all to do with it, is not believed and therefore you stumble at the word. You go headlong over this. It is a rock of offence. The word of the Cross is an offence. But to you who believe is the preciousness.' That is the difference between the old and the new.

Well, I have said that we could see so much more about this change from the old to the new - the new house, the new sacrifices - but I want to give the short remaining space to one special thing in this Letter.

The Return of Grace

First, we note how Peter himself represents this new Israel in the transition, and the tremendous thing that had to be done to make that transition from the one to the other. We have been seeing what a transition it was in Peter's case. We have really only been glimpsing it, but it was a tremendous thing that happened in this man! Look again at the former Peter, the Simon Peter before what the Lord Jesus referred to as his conversion - "when once thou hast turned again" (Luke 22:32) - and remember the fulness of selfhood, and his assertiveness. If anyone is going to speak first, it will be Peter, and if anyone is going to speak loudest, it will be Peter. If anyone is going to take the floor before anyone else, it will be Peter. He was asserting himself all the time. "Thou shalt never wash my feet" (John 13:8), and then, seeing that there is a possibility of losing something and that by changing his attitude he would get something more: "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head." ... 'I will have all that I can get.'

You see this strength of self-assertiveness, his self-sufficiency all the time: 'I will never forsake Thee. Though all men forsake Thee, I will never do so. I will go even unto death with Thee.' Such self-sufficiency: and we could enlarge upon this side of the man - how full he was in himself! Then see this man being undone, really taken to pieces and emptied. It was a terrific thing! You would hardly believe that in so short a time after making these assertions, these bold, self-confident assertions, this man should be found totally unable to carry out what he said he would do. He was stripped, emptied of it all, undone; and the last word of that scene is: "And he went out, and wept bitterly." He was broken, shattered, desolated and emptied. But that was necessary for this passage through into the new realm, this new Israel, this new spiritual position. And so I say Peter himself is a representative of the kind of thing that has to be done to make the transition from one Israel to the other.

With you and with me it may not all happen between the morning and the evening, and it may not ever go like that in one day, but, believe me, the principle holds good. Dear friends, it is going to be just in the measure in which you and I are emptied of ourselves that we know the meaning, the power, the glory and the preciousness of the new Israel and of the Lord Jesus. That is why the Lord takes pains to empty us. It may be spread over many years. Indeed I think that when it starts, and we do not so rebel that we bind the Lord's hands so that He cannot go on, it goes on until the end of our lives. On the one side making us say 'NO!' to our own weakness and our own foolishness after all, to our own emptiness and undone state. That is on the negative side, but on the positive: our utter dependence upon the Lord, so that if it were not for the Lord the situation would be hopeless. That is Peter, representing this new thing that has come in.

That leads me to the thing that I want particularly to emphasize at this time, in the light of what I have just been saying, and in that setting - the undoing of this man.

What is Peter's characteristic word in this Letter? I have no doubt that Bible students would give it to me at once! It is the word 'grace'. It does not take more than about ten minutes to read this Letter, and when you have done so you have read the word 'grace' twelve times. Unfortunately it is not always translated as 'grace'. I do not know why the translators changed the same word into another English word. Twice they have translated this same word into 'acceptable', but, including those two occasions where the original word is still the same, the Apostle uses the word 'grace' twelve times in this very short Letter.

You know how he begins his greeting: "According to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace be multiplied" (1 Peter 1:2).

Then in verse 10: "Concerning which salvation the prophets sought and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you." The prophets looked forward to what we have, and there it is: the grace purposed for this new Israel. It is the inheritance of this new Israel, and the prophets prophesied about it long before.

We turn to chapter 2, and here we come upon the other unfortunate translation, but in putting it right we have something very rich:

"For this is acceptable, if for conscience toward God a man endureth griefs, suffering wrongfully. For what glory is it, if, when ye sin, and are buffeted for it, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye shall take it patiently, this is acceptable with God" (verses 19,20).

Now put it right:

"For this is grace, if for conscience toward God a man endureth griefs, suffering wrongfully. For what glory is it, if, when ye sin, and are buffeted for it, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye shall take it patiently, this is grace with God" (RV margin).

You will see at once that Peter uses the word 'grace' in an altogether different way from Paul. Paul uses this word tremendously; indeed, it is almost a characteristic word of his, but his use of it is always 'God's grace toward us'. We call it 'unmerited favour', justifying us, who are not just at all. "The riches of his grace, which he made to abound toward us" (Ephesians 1:7,8).

Peter has a different angle on this matter. Of course, he would agree with Paul, for this whole experience of his is based upon God's favour toward him. Just think of the grace of God toward this man! But what is he saying? 'Out of the grace which has been so marvellously shown in my case, I have to show grace from myself outwardly in this world of difficulty and of suffering. That grace has to have a reaction toward people and toward things. That grace which God has shown to me I have got to show now when I am under stress, trial and difficulty, buffeted for being right and doing the right thing, and unjustly accused and made to suffer. There must be no retaliation. I must endure patiently.' That is the return of grace - the grace of God in us as a return action, in order to 'show forth the excellencies of Him'.

That is a wonderful way of using the word 'grace'! But it is very practical - Peter is very practical. He says: 'Look here, you are being treated unfairly, unjustly, and you do not really merit what you are having to put up with. It is not because of wrong in you. You can be bitter, rebellious, resentful, if you like. You can give as good as you get. You can retaliate.' But Peter says that is a breakdown of grace. If, when things are like that, you take it patiently, then that is grace. You see, this word 'acceptable' is quite a good word: "acceptable with God". The meaning is there, but it is not so apparent, is it, as when it is translated correctly? 'This is grace with God: suffering wrongfully and taking it patiently.'

Now we are all put on the spot over this! This human nature of ours is not like that! Mine is not, at any rate. Is yours? Have you got any fighting nature? Have you any self-strength? Have you any soul strength? Do you say: 'I am not going to take that lying down'? Well, that is just what is here. Grace is: Taking it lying down and letting them go on.

This is a new order of things, is it not? So different from the old Israel! It is a new realm: grace in its reactions to persecutions, misrepresentations, slanders and everything that is unfair and untrue, keeping your tongue still, your lips closed and refusing to vindicate yourself. This is grace with God.

In the last chapter I mentioned one other thing and I am not going to return to it in detail - the relationship between husbands and wives and wives and husbands when the situation is difficult because either may be having to put up with something difficult from the other. The Apostle, as you remember, said (in chapter 3:7) that the basis of that relationship is that they are 'fellow-heirs of the grace of life'. If they are true, both of them being born again, they have a common ground - Divine life, the grace of life, and they must always seek to react to one another upon the common ground of what is of the Lord in each other. It is not always easy, but it is a very different kind of life from the old realm.

We just mention that, and pass on into chapter 4:10: "Good stewards of the manifold grace of God". Here we are again on very practical ground. The Lord has given you a gift of some kind. It may be a gift of a temporal kind, such as means, or a gift of influence, or it may be that you have a spiritual gift of some kind. Whatever it is, you have, by the grace of God, some resource, something in your hand, something that you possess. It is something that the Lord has given you, and He has given it to you to use. Whatever it is, it is a stewardship that has been committed to you, and that stewardship has to be exercised upon the principle of grace. Grace does not mean keeping to yourself what you have, and withholding from others what you could give. It does not mean letting others suffer loss when you could do something to meet their need, whatever it may be, spiritual or temporal. Grace in us demands that we do all that we can to see that others are ministered to. That is grace - 'as good stewards of the many-sided grace of God', which just means that to one the grace of God has given this, and to another that. It is not the same to everyone, but everyone in this new Israel has something to give.

I could take you back to the Old Testament and illustrate that. What about the building of the tabernacle? Everyone had to give something - gold, silver, wood, fabric. Everyone had something to contribute, and they were called upon to minister what they had. Now we have passed over into this new spiritual Israel, and what have we got that others would benefit by? It is a violation of the principle of grace to keep it to ourselves and not let others have it. Well, perhaps that is too self-evident to need emphasizing, but you see that Peter uses the word 'grace' in this connection, meaning that every member of the spiritual Israel should be a contributing member in some way or other, and not just a receiving one. There are far too many passengers in the Church, far too many who just sit with open mouths, taking it all in, and never giving anything. I hope that does not apply to anyone here. Grace means that we are a giving people. We have something to give, and we are giving it, and we ought to have something to give.

"Likewise, ye younger, be subject unto the elder. Yea, all of you gird yourselves with humility, to serve one another: for God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble" (v. 5). I like this very much! You would miss it very largely, except for the obvious surface statements and words, unless you knew exactly what lies behind this in the original language, and then you would see at once what Peter is talking about. Supposing I give it to you: "All of you gird on the apron of humility to serve one another." Now where are you? You are back in John 13, where Jesus laid aside His robe and put on the apron of the servant - girded Himself with the apron of the servant. Peter has not forgotten that! "Now all of you put on the apron of the servant to serve one another; for God resisteth the proud." Peter was very, very near to that at that time: "Never wash my feet!" Why not? Peter was too proud. "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble." Grace is donning the servant's apron to serve one another. Need we say anything more about that? This is the true grace of God.

"And the God of all grace, who called you unto his eternal glory in Christ, after that ye have suffered a little while, shall himself perfect, stablish, strengthen you. To him be the dominion for ever and ever" (v. 10,11).

Grace triumphant through suffering. Peter is at the end of the Letter now and is only going to have one more use of this word. But he has said a lot in this Letter about suffering - the sufferings of Christ being shared by the members of this new Israel... "Think it not strange concerning the fiery trial among you, as though a strange thing happened unto you" (4:12). Yes, he has a lot to say about sufferings, and they were sufferings! You do not perhaps know that when he wrote this Letter the great persecution under Nero had broken out. Paul was beheaded, and how long there was between that and Peter being crucified we do not know, but he remembered and mentioned it here, in 2 Peter 1:14, that he was to put off his tabernacle even as the Lord had shown him. And where did the Lord show him that? In John 21:18: "When thou wast young, thou girdest thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not. Now this he spake, signifying by what manner of death he should glorify God." Although it is not recorded in the New Testament, the tradition is quite strong that Peter was crucified. The difference between Paul's death and Peter's was this: the Romans could not crucify a Roman citizen, and Paul was a Roman citizen, so he could not be crucified. But anyone of another nation could be crucified, so Peter was crucified and Paul was beheaded.

So now it was the time of suffering. Paul meets the ultimate of that suffering and Peter is about to meet it. It was a time when all the Christians everywhere were being terribly persecuted, but here Peter says: 'Through the suffering of this little while there will be grace sufficient to make us triumphant.' Grace triumphant in suffering! I would say that we are not always overwhelmingly conscious of that triumphant grace, but what I could say is this: After a fairly long life, and knowing a little bit about this, the marvel of the triumph is that we are still found going on with the Lord, when a hundred times, if it had been left to us, we could have gone out. It is a terrible thing to say, but it is possible to come to such a place that you would wash your hands of Christianity altogether when you come to know the real state of things in the realm of Christendom. Well, that is a shocking thing to say - but for the grace of God where would we be through all the sufferings? However, here it is: "After that ye have suffered a little while, shall himself perfect, stablish, strengthen you."

Now, with all this about grace in this Letter, what is the final word? "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). 'Grow in your patience, in your forbearance, in your being silent under provocation, in your enduring suffering, in the difficulties of your relationships - let it be growing in grace.'

You will see how hurried one has had to be and how much one has had to leave out, but that is enough! I can say more in an hour than you can fulfil in a lifetime!

Let us go away and ask the Lord for grace, that the word which He has spoken to us shall really be, as with this man, in our very being, and that this shall be the kind of people that we are.

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