

"GRACE"
January 15, 1995

Romans 1:7

Robert S. Wilch

The New Testament would be a lot thinner if it were not for a man named Paul. He is the major author in the New Testament. Just think, he is credited with having written the books of Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Phillipians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Colossians, Philemon. That's 13 books - only 14 others are included.

Now each one of these treasures was originally a letter to people whom Paul had gathered together in a congregation around the belief that Jesus Christ was the Son of God and that He was God's Messiah. Just think of it! Here is a man, Paul, who responded to the early claims for Christ with extreme rage. He saw this new movement as a deadly threat against all that he believed. He went so far as to seek out those early believers so they could be eliminated.

So this arch enemy of the new revelation of God now is travelling at great risk to gather believers in this Son of God and then staying in touch to encourage them and to continue their instruction.

It is amazing to me that in every letter he writes to the people in Rome, Thessalonica, Corinth, Colossai, Ephesus, Galatia, etc., he greets them using the word "grace" - and sometimes mercy and, of course, peace. For Paul, it was necessary to greet them with the word grace because it most completely described this new relationship they could have with God. It said that all of them, including himself, now could be at peace with God, not because of anything they do, but entirely because of what God does. And, what God is doing is to make us a gift of forgiveness through Christ that we have not earned or deserved. It is just ours for the taking.

Grace is a very pregnant word. We use it in so many ways. Pastors get asked a lot to say grace. What they do when asked to say grace is to say a prayer giving thanks for food. Next time give him/her time before the prayer is needed.

Insurance policies have a "grace" period. That's usually a period of 30 days after a premium payment is due so the policy will still be in force even though the payment has not been made. Grace periods permit an action to be delayed without penalty.

Then there are grace notes in music. It's a note that's written small that really doesn't belong to the basic melody but which is just an extra sound. Grace is a title for Kings, Queens, Dukes, Duchesses and some Bishops. It was not easy for me to deal with a few English clergy who addressed me at a gathering in Westminster Abby with the title, "Your Grace."

John Bradford was a chaplain to King Edward VI in 1553. During that hurly-burly time, when authority and power was always at risk, he would be heard to say,

"There but for the Grace of God goes John Bradford," every time a criminal was led to his execution. He was a man of deep piety and when he, too, was led to his own execution, he did not see it as a withdrawal of God's precious grace but as a special added grace.

This sermon could well have had the title of "Amazing Grace," because it is so amazing - almost beyond a human's mind to comprehend. How can so great a gift as God's love and mercy be so undeserved - so un-merited yet so precious?

John Newton, the author of "*Amazing Grace*," the hymn which we just sang, ended up being an English clergyman. His life had a wide swing to it. In a period of four years, he was heavily involved in the African slave trade. He would at first participate in the rounding up of these healthy and valuable African men and women and then peacefully sun himself on the top deck of the ship that was transporting these slaves to places where they could be sold. His abhorrence of what he had done and his repentance and forgiveness so moved him that he wrote "*Amazing Grace*." The language in the first verse is frank and earthy. The words could only have been written by one for whom much had been forgiven. Listen to them again: "*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.*"

Grace is a nice name for a baby girl. It wears well as they get older. The name stems from the word "gracias" and means thanks.

At Christmas, we talked about the heartbreak - the deep disappointment which was God's as He looked out at the world which was not at all like He intended. There was no peace. There was greed, selfishness, immorality. He must have been tempted to curse what He had made and destroy it in wrath. But instead, He came to win us back in the person of Christ; vulnerable, humble, loving, giving the appearance of weakness. He even let us hold him in our arms. So His patience with us goes on, hopefully, until we see the light. Grace is never-ending.

How pertinent a portion of Antoine de Saint Exupery's book, "*Wind, Sand and Stars*" is. Exupery was a French aviator flying mail and other supplies in Africa. He was killed early in the war. He recounts a time when three Moorish Chiefs had been taken to Paris. They scoffed at inventions made of iron; were moved by the telephone; but were ecstatic about trees and flowers and gardens.

But what they remembered most was a trip up high in the French Alps. Here is when they concluded that God, the God of the French, is more generous to the French than the God of the Moors is to the Moors.

"Memories that moved them too deeply rose to stop their speech. Some weeks earlier they had been taken up into the French Alps. Here in Africa they were still dreaming of what they saw. Their guide had led them to a tremendous waterfall, a sort of braided column roaring over the rocks. He had said to them: 'Taste this.'

"It was sweet water. Water! How many days were they wont to march in the desert to reach the nearest well; and when they had arrived, how long they had to dig before there bubbled a muddy liquid mixed with camel's urine! Water! At Cape Jubu, at Cisneros, at Port Etienne, the Moorish children did not beg for coins. With empty tins in their hands they begged for water.

"Give me a little water, give! 'If you are a good lad . . .'

"Water! A thing worth its weight in gold! A thing the least drop of which drew from the sand the green sparkle of a blade of grass! When rain has fallen anywhere, a great exodus animates the Sahara. The tribes ride towards that grass that will have sprung up two hundred miles away. And this water, this miserly water of which not a drop had fallen at Port Etienne in ten years, roared in the Savoie with the power of a cataclysm as if, from some burst cistern, the reserves of the world were pouring forth.

"Come, let us leave,' their guide had said. But they would not stir.

"Leave us here a little longer.' They had stood in silence. Mute, solemn, they had stood gazing at the unfolding of a ceremonial mystery. That which came roaring out of the belly of the mountain was life itself, was the life-blood of man. The flow of a single second would have resuscitated whole caravans that, mad with thirst, had pressed on into the eternity of salt lakes and mirages. Here God was manifesting Himself: it would not do to turn one's back on Him. God had opened the locks and was displaying His puissance. The three Moors had stood motionless.

"That is all there is to see,' their guide had said. 'Come.' 'We must wait.' 'Wait for what?' 'The end.'

"They were awaiting the moment when God would grow weary of His madness. They knew Him to be quick to repent, knew He was miserly.

"But that water has been running for a thousand years!"

"And this was why, at Port Etienne, they did not too strongly stress the matter of the waterfall. There were certain miracles about which it was better to be silent. Better, indeed, not to think too much about them, for in that case one would cease to understand anything at all. Unless one was to doubt the existence of God . . .

"You see . . . the God of the Frenchmen . . ."

And so it will be with the Grace God gives to us. Complete - undeserved - endless.

