

The Story of Grace

1 Corinthians 1:4-9

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Steve DeWitt

In case you missed it last week, we introduced our new series in 1 Corinthians entitled *First Things First*. The reason the title is *First Things First* is that it captures the theme of the book and it's easy to remember. First Corinthians. *First Things First*. Are you getting it? The reason this is the theme is that the church at Corinth was the most messed up church in the New Testament. If there was something less important, they made it too important. If something was of first importance, they put it down the list. Whenever the important things aren't first and foremost, a sports team or a company or a church or a life is in serious trouble.

That was the church at Corinth. They were in serious trouble. The Corinthian culture was incredibly sensual and seductive. The materialism and hedonism was overwhelming. If there was a church that needed to keep first things first, it was the church at Corinth. The similarities to our American culture are obvious and the problems with the American church are very Corinthian. The solutions are very 1 Corinthians. What's the theme by the way? *First Things First*.

Today's passage is going to tell us the story of grace. This is Grace. [There's a picture of Grace on the screen.] Grace is my niece. She is not the grace we're talking about, but she's so cute I had to put her up there. The story is not about her. Then who? [Pastor Steve holds up a mirror facing the church.] Who do you see in the mirror? Us. Bethel Church right here in Northwest Indiana. What are mirrors for? To see ourselves.

Paul is going to recount to the Corinthians the story of God's grace to them. It is always moving to hear other people's stories. But when the story is one we can relate to or that resembles our own story, it is powerful to us. This is true in big and small ways. Have you ever been on a long trip and get talking with someone and find out they are from Indiana? Then you find out they were from Northwest Indiana? Then you find out you graduated with his younger sister in high school or some crazy thing? There is an affinity and rapport because our stories intersect geographically.

I see this often on an emotional and spiritual level when someone in our church goes through a deep trial. Who are the people that tend to rally around them the most? People who have been through similar circumstances. I was with some men recently and one of the men shared with me about another family in our church who had lost a child and he shared this with great emotion. I could tell he was touched. Later on I discovered that he and his wife had also lost a child. He was emotional toward the family because their stories intersected in pain.

Grace stories are the same kind of intersections. All Christians are a story of grace, so it doesn't matter if there is no geographical connection or vocational connection or any other connection; when you meet a Christian there is a grace connection. I can relate to their story because grace is my story too.

This is what I want you to bear in mind as the Apostle Paul recounts to the Corinthians their story of Grace. Their story is our story. Their story is your story.

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:4-9)

Let's first of all get the chapters of the story. Notice three key words. **Was/Were** (verses 4-5), **are** (verse 7), and **will** (verse 8).

Meaning comes through language and language expresses meaning through grammatical details like the tense the word is in. This is very important. For example, there is a huge difference in meaning between you were drowning and you are drowning. Or you had a root canal and you are currently having a root canal. The tense of a word makes a big difference. In Scripture this is important because the Holy Spirit's inspiration extends to the words themselves. This is known as verbal plenary inspiration. Jesus affirmed this when He said that every jot and tittle of the Law would be fulfilled. Those are the smallest marks in the Hebrew text. He also bases His argument on the reality of the resurrection in the verb tense when God said, I AM the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living (Matthew 22:31-33). Tenses are important.

Notice that this passage is outlined by verb tense. Verses 4-5 are all past tense; *given you, were enriched*. Verse 7 is present, *you ARE not lacking in any spiritual gift*, and verse 8 *who will sustain you*. Past, present and future. What happened before, what is happening now and anticipation of what will happen in the future. The story of grace in any Christian's life is the same. It has a past, present, and future. So does yours.

Past Grace (Verse 4)

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus...

Paul says he gives thanks to God for the grace God gave the Corinthians. If you read Paul's other letters, he says very similar things to the other churches as well. This gives us a glimpse into Paul's prayer life. We may think we have a lot to pray about. Paul carried the burdens of all these churches and repeatedly says to them what he says to Corinth. He tells the Corinthians that he gives thanks always (1 Corinthians 1:4). He tells the Romans *that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers...* (Romans 1:9-10). He tells the Ephesians, *I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers...* (Ephesians 1:16). He tells the Philippians, *I thank my God... always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy...* (Philippians 1:3). He tells the Colossians, *we always thank God... when we pray for you... and so, from the day we heard we have not ceased to pray for you...* (Colossians 1:3, 9). To the Thessalonians he was *constantly mentioning you in our prayers...* (1 Thessalonians 1:2). To Timothy he says *I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day.* (2 Timothy 1:3) and tells Philemon the same (Philemon 4).

These are just the ones we know about. How long would it take to pray all these prayers every day? We should think of our own commitment to prayer, the people God has brought into our lives, and the time we spend interceding for them. Paul prayed for people. He shares the content of his prayer for them. There are three past graces:

Grace was given in Christ Jesus

Let's talk a little about grace. Grace is a New Testament word that means different things depending on how it is used.

1. Grace can refer to God. God is gracious.
2. Grace can refer to God's favor toward us and the focus of this use is that it comes to us without preconditions. We don't earn it and it's not given on any basis other than God's sovereign choice. This is the grace of the hymn *Amazing Grace*.
3. The result of sovereign grace is that we are in a state of grace (Romans 5:2). If someone asks what state you live in, don't say Indiana. Say, "I live in a state of grace." At this point you may be in a state of confusion.
4. A fourth use is God's daily grace empowering and enabling us to live our salvation. Do you see how this works? An infinitely gracious God sovereignly extends saving grace to sinners putting them in a state of grace and enables them to stay there by daily grace. As one man said, saved by grace means saved by God. It's all "grace" but it has different shades of meaning.

Paul is here referring to that past grace which the Corinthians received by faith in the gospel when Paul was there in Corinth and began the church. He looks back on those days with tremendous joy and says, "When I pray for you, I give thanks for God's evident grace to you!"

Enriched in Him

The "him" here is Christ. Just a note, look at how often Jesus' name appears in these few verses:

- *Apostle of Christ Jesus* (1:1)
- *Sanctified in Christ Jesus* (1:2)
- *Call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ* (1:2)
- Grace and peace from the Lord Jesus Christ (1:3)
- Grace given in Christ Jesus (1:4)
- *Enriched in him* (1:5)
- *Testimony about Christ* (1:6)
- We wait for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ (1:7)
- *The "day" of our Lord Jesus Christ* (1:8)
- We have fellowship with God's Son the "Lord Jesus Christ" (1:9)

Jesus is referred to 10 times in 9 verses. Why? When a church is really messed up, they've got to get the focus off themselves and onto their Savior. He enriches the church. He changes thinking (knowledge) and speaking (speech). Ten times in nine verses. Do you think Paul would like a church based on *It's all about Him*?

Confirmation of the Gospel

He says the testimony about Christ was confirmed among them. I'll have more to say about this in a minute. Lots of past grace had been given to the Corinthians. God had done wonderful things in them in the past and that filled Paul with thanksgiving. Now, let's look in the mirror a moment. Is their story our story? Your story? How has God shown grace in your past? Have you experienced His grace through faith in Jesus as Savior? Has He enriched your life and transformed your thinking and speaking?

If you're not quite getting there, just think of what life would be like without God's grace. The emptiness of purpose, the confusion about what life is all about, the fear you feel when there is a financial crisis like we've had this week. Americans are trembling because this is what Americans largely live for and place their hope in. Take the money away and there is nothing left. Take a Christian's money away and he's still got everything because he has Christ and Christ is our treasure. Past grace. Think of all the ways God has met our needs, brought us through trials, blessed us with the Word and the Church and the Spirit AND given us the glorious hope of eternal life. It goes on and on. Past grace.

Present Grace (Verse 7)

...so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ...

This is a pretty shocking thing to give thanks for. Paul gives thanks for their spiritual gifts! In this messed up church, spiritual gifts might be the thing they are most messed up about. Paul is about to rake them over the coals for how clueless they are about what spiritual gifts are all about. In spite of that, he begins by saying how thankful he is for their gifts. What? This is like a school principal being thankful that all the students were served food in spite of the fact that they used the food to have a food fight in the cafeteria. How can Paul give thanks for something that has been so clearly misused and is such a source of distress to him?

There is a great truth here for us. Paul doesn't give thanks for what they did with their gifts but for the good giver of the gifts. God. All God's gifts are good gifts. James 1 says that every good gift comes from above. We are the ones who mess them up. We misuse them. We use them selfishly. We act like we earned them or whatever. But the gifts are good because of who they came from.

It seems to me that this is one of the keys to living thankfully in this broken and insane world. Think of the state of affairs in our government right now. Chaos. How can I be thankful? God established government and gave it as a gift of common grace to us. Therefore, pray for your leaders. How about a difficult marital situation? Tension. Difficulty. How can I be thankful in the midst of that? Proverbs says that wife is a gift from God. How about a tough parenting situation? Where can thanksgiving in that come from? Children are a gift from God. At times you might want to "return to sender" but they are a gift.

Thanksgiving will always be a struggle if we focus on the way the gifts in this fallen world aren't what we hope for. The spouse. The church. My family. Whatever. The key is to trace the gift back to the source and to know that His intent in giving it was good and His giving of it was generous. Go back to God. This is how we "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thessalonians 5:18) and even in trials we are to "count it all joy" (James 1:2). The circumstance, the trial, and everything in my life flows from a sovereign God who is working out everything for good (Romans 8:28). On the God level, there is a lot to be thankful for in spite of how often the good gift from a good God feels bad. Someone here needed to hear that.

Future Grace (Verses 8-9)

...who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

This is a wonderful two verses. He will sustain you to the end. What does that mean? This is future grace. He will sustain you in your salvation. He will keep you saved. You see the word "confirmed" in vers 6? It is the same Greek word as "sustain" in verse 8. The word was a legal term in the Hellenistic (Greek) world. It meant legally guaranteed. Legal papers require a legal guarantee. For example, when you buy a house or get a car loan, what do they ask you to do? *Please sign here*. By signing our name, we are guaranteeing and accepting full responsibility for the home or car or loan. It's a guarantee.

This is why verse 9 says, the foundation of our confidence in future grace is that God is faithful. This is interesting timing for this given the present credit crisis in America where thousands and thousands of mortgages have gone into default. Apparently a lot of people made guarantees, but were not faithful to what they guaranteed. The result is that creditors don't want to give away money now because so many people have been unfaithful to do what they said they would do.

But what is true of God? He has legally guaranteed our salvation. How does He do this? He promises to sustain us by giving us grace in the future. This is not the function of grace that saved in the past. This is the grace that sustains us through life's journey. God preserves us in our salvation which allows us to persevere until the end. Philippians 1:6 says, *He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion*. This is a wonderful encouragement, especially if you are a member of a messed up church and see spiritual anarchy all around you.

Let's face it, the church and Christianity seems precarious to us at times. My personal faith can seem like it's on the brink of collapse. What hope is there in these moments? It is the character of God; specifically that He is **faithful** and has guaranteed that we're going to make it. Not because we are faithful. We are unfaithful. We are wishy-washy. Left to myself, I can't guarantee my faith one minute in the future.

But God never wavers and His promises are not subject to change in the midst of circumstances. He is sovereign over those circumstances anyway. He never trembles. He never wonders. He's never afraid. He's never surprised. He's always the same. He's always true. He's always capable. He's always faithful and if His eye is on the sparrow, then I can know He watches me.

Messed up and self-absorbed Christians like the Corinthians will always feel like the sky is falling and everything is about to come apart. Focus on yourself and life and faith will always feel on the brink of collapse. But a focus on a faithful God who has given us grace in the past for our salvation, who presently gifts us for what He calls us to do, and who promises to sustain us in our faith all the way till death is a source of great encouragement.

And I hope it is for you today.

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