

Grace, Guidance, and Government

Psalm 32; with Psalms 25, 33, 34, 35.

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We do not read very much about grace in the Old Testament. The word itself occurs about forty times in it, but of these fully half are concerned with "finding grace" in the sight of one's fellows and have nothing to do with God. In a few passages we do get the idea of God bestowing grace, as, for instance, in the words, "The Lord will give grace and glory" (Ps. 84: 11). These however are but few, and they are supplemented by a certain number of others in which God is declared to be, or declares Himself to be, gracious. We may say therefore that in the Old Testament the grace of God is a recognised fact, but by no means a prominent fact.

In the New Testament it is a prominent fact, particularly in the epistles, and we discover why it had so small a place in the earlier part of the record. We read that, "the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared," (Titus 2: 11), and that in connection with the first advent of Christ. In keeping with this we read also, "grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1: 17). The earlier age was the age of law. Grace always existed in God, but not until Christ appeared did it come fully and decisively to light.

In reading Old Testament Scripture, again and again do we get glimpses of the grace of God, even where grace is not named. A striking example of this is found in Ps. 32: 1-7, a passage which sets forth God's grace in forgiveness and deliverance, administered to the one who honestly confesses his guilt and need. David had a very deep experience of this, owing to the greatness of his sin, and the depth of his conviction once his sin was brought home to him, and that experience he shares with us. It is of course, the experience which each of us has to pass through on our way to the blessedness of which the psalm speaks.

There is, however, this great difference between David and ourselves: he could not enjoy as we can the "no more conscience of sins" of which Hebrews 10 speaks. David lived under the law which only had "a shadow of good things to come." He only had sacrifices which could "never . . . make the comers "hereunto perfect." He might know, and did know, the blessedness of having this or that great sin forgiven, but he could not know that once-for-all purging which the gospel brings. Not until Christ appeared and was "once offered to bear the sins of many" could the worshippers be "once purged," and so have "no more conscience of sins." We therefore can read into Ps. 32 a fulness of meaning which could not have been in David's mind when he wrote it.

The general outline sketched in these seven verses applies to every converted soul without exception, though there is abundant variation when we come to consider small surface details. We all begin with *guilt*. We may have to speak, as the psalm does, of transgression, of sin, and of iniquity; and each of these words has its own special significance; yet they all come under this general heading.

Next comes *guile*. This means deceit, hypocrisy, lack of straightforwardness and honesty. It always follows guilt, always has done so from the beginning, as Genesis 3 bears witness. Directly our first parents incurred guilt they sought to hide from God, and also to put the blame upon somebody else. Every soul of man does just the same. It is a deeply rooted instinct of our fallen race.

It is also a very miserable business. Guile only leads to *groaning* — for that is what the word

"roaring" in verse 3 really means. In David's case the groaning came pretty quickly, for God laid His heavy hand of discipline upon him both by day and by night, and he was withered beneath it. He expresses this very graphically by saying, "My moisture is turned into the drought of summer." It is a bad sign when guilt and guile are not followed by groaning for that means insensibility on the part of the sinner, and perhaps that God is deferring His dealings until the coming day of retribution. Happy it is when the groaning quickly follows.

The groaning must continue until *confession* takes place. Sin must be acknowledged. The iniquity that had been hidden away in most careful concealment must be dragged into the light of God's presence. Transgressions must be confessed not to man merely, or firstly, but "unto the Lord." This, you see, is the exact opposite of guile. It is the complete reversal of the former attitude, the abandonment of all deceit and hypocrisy. It is straightforwardness and honesty in the sight of God.

Confession leads directly and immediately to the reception and enjoyment of grace. As David puts it, "Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin." As surely as he uncovered his sin, so surely did he enter into the blessedness of the man "whose sin is covered." Confession on his side led to *covering* of his sin on God's side. He was put right with God.

And there is more than this. For, directly he was right with God the whole aspect of things was changed. Instead of being the Object of his fear, God became the Object of his *confidence*. He knew how to find God, and how to pray to Him. He discovered that God was his hiding place, where he would find refuge and protection when threatened by the storms and floods and troubles of this life: for though his sin had been dealt with the troubles remained. He anticipated by many centuries that saying which is attributed to Augustine to the effect that, "The best way to flee *from* God is to flee *to* God."

We have noted six things in these verses, three that are concerned with guilt, and three that are concerned with the grace that puts it away. The climax is reached in the seventh thing that we observe: he was "*compassed about with songs of deliverance*." Delivered from the guilt of his sin, and even from the oppressive power of storms of trouble, he was a joyful man indeed. Such was the grace of God.

Now we come to the question of guidance, which to many people is a very perplexing one. Verses 8 and 9 sum it up in a very simple way. They do not by any means say all there is to be said on the subject, but they do give us the two essentials — the definite promise of guidance from God, and a word of warning as to the understanding heart which is needed on our side.

Once we are in right relations with God — our sins forgiven, God Himself our hiding place, songs of deliverance encompassing us — *God is going to guide us*. There is no "if" about the matter, you observe.

The statement is definite and without qualification, "I will instruct thee and teach thee. .. I will counsel thee, mine eye shall be upon thee" (margin). In the next psalm also we read of the eye of the Lord being upon those that fear Him, but that is for their deliverance. Here it is for their guidance. So as far as God's care and kindly action are concerned, we may take His guidance for granted. We may safely count upon it.

But, on our side, we can by no means take for granted that we possess the spiritual understanding that enables us to profit by the guidance that is given. It is quite possible for us to be just like a horse or a mule. Another rendering of the verse is, "whose trappings must be bit and bridle, for restraint, or they will not come unto thee." The bit and bridle must be always irksome and sometimes painful. The horse is often pulled up with an unpleasant jerk, but that is because it has no understanding of its master's

thoughts. Now we may be just like that. The bit and bridle of unpleasant yet compelling circumstances may often pull us up with a jerk, or suddenly direct us into an unexpected road. We may be thankful when God does deal with us after such fashion, though the indirect guidance thus given is by no means of the highest kind.

The thought of God is that we should have understanding to appreciate His instruction, His teaching and counsel, which reach us first and foremost in His Word. It goes without saying that we must diligently study His Word, but we also need the right state of heart and mind to enable us to profit by our study. Now this right state is not described in the psalm before us, but it is in Ps. 25, where we read such things as that, "The meek will He guide in judgment: and the meek will He teach His way." Again we read, "All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth unto such as keep His covenant and His testimonies." And again, "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him; and He will show them His covenant."

These verses emphasize three things: meekness, obedience and the fear of the Lord. *Meekness* is only found with any of us in proportion as our own restless self-will has been subdued and silenced. *Obedience* signifies the practical acceptance and carrying out of the will of God. *The fear of the Lord* means that subduing consciousness of His presence, that attitude of deference and subjection to Him, which tends to meekness and produces obedience. Here then are the features of a moral and spiritual sort, which, if possessed, enable us to profit by the guidance which is given.

Thus the conclusion that we arrive at is that there is no problem about guidance save that which is connected with our own spiritual state. Considered objectively, that is as a matter of light and direction coming to us from God, and consequently from outside ourselves, there is no difficulty for God engages Himself to give it. It is when we consider it subjectively, when it is a question of our having the understanding and spiritual sensibilities which enable us to discern and respond to the direction given, that difficulties appear.

Ps. 32 contains the promise of instruction and teaching, yet it does not specify in any precise way how it is to reach us. Psalm 25 it is, which speaks of the keeping of "His testimonies" as the way by which the paths of the Lord become mercy and truth to us, and the form in which we have His testimonies available for us is in the Holy Scriptures. The Word of God is the prime fountainhead of all light and direction for us. There we find laid down the broad principles of action which are to govern us. There are smaller details of an individual sort of course, and we cannot expect to find reference to these in Scripture. Nevertheless we may seek and find guidance amidst many perplexing circumstances if we maintain the fear of the Lord, if we wait upon Him prayerfully in the spirit of meekness, and if we are obedient to that which we know of His revealed Word.

We do not say that we shall always be guided in such a way that we are quite sure, and conscious of it at the time. When the Word of God plainly directs us, and we obey it, we may indeed be sure. In the smaller details of life, when it is a question of where we shall go and what we shall do, we may yet be most happily guided if our state be right, if in meekness and obedience we seek not our own pleasure but the pleasure of God. He has pledged Himself to guide us, and He will do so. The only thing that will hinder is the assertion of our own will or pleasure. If we go forward in simplicity and self-judgment, making our decisions with a desire for His glory, we shall again and again have reason to look back with thankfulness, discovering that indeed His hand has led us.

Before we reach the end of Ps. 32 we find mention of a third great theme — the government of God. Grace is expounded pretty fully, for seven verses are occupied with it. Guidance only occupies two verses, but as we have noted Ps. 25 goes into the matter with greater fulness. One verse only is

occupied with the government of God, but Ps. 33, 34 and 35 are all concerned with this important matter. We are not allowed to forget that God is the moral Governor of the universe and that He has so ordained things that men have to reap what they sow even in this life. This always has been true, and is true to-day. Varying dispensations do not affect its working. It applies to the men of the world, and it very specially applies to the saints of God. It often seems as if the man of the world escapes the working of God's government in this life. But that is because he is travelling on to final judgment and the crash is coming then. Psalm 73 states the problem created by this fact, and gives us its solution. Now the saint is not coming into judgment. The criminal question (as we may call it), raised by his sins, has been eternally settled; but the governmental question remains, and it assumes very special importance. We not infrequently see a saint coming under God's disciplinary hand as the result of some sin, when an unbeliever, who did just the same, escapes.

Speaking generally and characteristically however, it is the wicked who practise evil and reap many sorrows as a result, and it is the godly man who trusts in the Lord, and who as a consequence is compassed about with mercy. This is what is stated in verse 10. It is the normal thing. Still we are living in an order of things in which the abnormal frequently prevails, and therefore in the working out of the government of God we find many complications. Hence the need of the matter being thrashed out much more fully in the three succeeding psalms.

Ps. 33 celebrates the righteousness of God expressed in all His acts — "The Word of the Lord is right; and all His works are done in truth. He loveth righteousness and judgment." The Psalmist then proceeds to speak of how right and firm are all His works in creation: while on the other hand the counsel of the heathen and the devices of the people are all brought to nothing. But if from the place of His habitation on high He looks down on the sons of men and chastens them thus, it is also true that "the eye of the Lord is upon them that fear Him, ... to deliver." His holy government acts in. both directions, not only *against* the ungodly but also *for* His people.

Ps. 34 expands this theme, that God's government acts in favour of the godly. Verses 12 to 16 of this Psalm are quoted in 1 Peter 3: 10 to 12, as establishing the fact that, if the Christian renders blessing in return for the evil and railing which he may receive from the world, he will inherit a blessing for himself. If he sows blessing he will reap blessing. So it is ordained in the government of God.

Again in verse 15 of this Psalm do we get the fact stated that, "The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous." This time it is not for *guidance* as in Ps. 32. Nor is it for *deliverance*, as in Ps. 33. It is in *government*, in order that He may listen to their cry, and overrule affairs on their behalf. But it is "the righteous," be it noted, for whom He acts in this way.

This is important, for it raises the whole question as to what is the spiritual state in which we are found, what is the character that marks us? The character that should mark us is very fully displayed in the course of the Psalm.

Reading steadily through it we shall find not only that God will act in His government on behalf of His people, but that the people for whom He so acts are described as,

"This poor man"

"Them that fear Him"

"The man that trusteth in Him"

"His saints"

"They that seek the Lord"

"The righteous"

"Them that are of a broken heart"

"His servants."

This is a goodly list! Yet the qualities named are not those which the world admires, but the very reverse. They are those which God approves, and, on behalf of a people characterized by them, He pledges Himself to interfere.

There is no pledge that He will interfere immediately. But interfere He will, later if not sooner. The danger of course is that instead of being poor in spirit, and walking in the fear of God, and consequently seeking His face with a broken heart, trusting in Him and going forward as His servants, we begin to take the law into our own hands and fight for ourselves. Then He leaves us to our own devices, and to reap the fruit of our own ways. Then frequently we bring ourselves under a working of His government which more properly applies to the world.

Ps. 34 records the fact that "The face of the Lord is against them that do evil," but we have to pass on to Ps. 35 to find this side of things dwelt upon in detail. That Psalm works out in considerable length how God will ultimately bring the ungodly and the persecutors to shame and to judgment. The poor and needy who are servants of the Lord shall be delivered and brought into prosperity in the day when God shall bring to confusion and destruction their foes, who shall be as chaff before the wind, and tread a dark and slippery way to destruction. Such will be God's governmental dealings with them in this life. There is of course the dark pit of hell before them in the life to come, but that is not the theme of the psalm.

For us the conclusion of the whole matter is this — *that grace introduces us to the life of godliness and devotion and true piety: and that such a life of piety is the secret of a path wherein we are truly guided of God, and where we come under His holy government, acting in our favour and not in correction against us.*