

“The Gospel, Resurrection, and Grace”

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, ² through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you-- unless you have come to believe in vain. ³ For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴ and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them-- though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. ¹¹ Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

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Jules Verne is often called a man born before his time. If you are unfamiliar with Jules Verne, he was a Frenchman who wrote such classics as *20,000 leagues under the Sea*, *Journey to the Center* (which was probably the first novel I ever read), and *Around the world in Eighty Days*. He had an uncanny ability either to predict the future or at least to inspire the scientists and engineers who made everything from the calculator to moon travel a reality in our time. His most eerie look into the future was a book he wrote in 1863 entitled *Paris in the 20th Century*. His publisher told him to wait twenty years before he published it because its bleak portrayal of Parisian life in the 20th Century would hurt Verne's reputation in Paris in a day when all was progress. So, he locked the manuscript up in a safe and oddly forgot about it until his great-grandson found it in 1989. It is the story of a man living in a future world with skyscrapers made of steel and glass, high-speed trains, gas powered automobiles, calculators, and a world-wide communications network. The main character has a difficult time finding happiness in his highly materialistic world and his end is disturbing. In 1865 he wrote *From the Earth to the Moon* about a Frenchman and two Americans who traveled to the moon in a giant cannonball that was fired from a giant cannon located in Florida just a few miles away from where Kennedy Space Center is now located and on their return the splashed down in the Pacific. The novel portrays a weird semblance to the development and carrying out of the Apollo moon mission. In his later years, Verne began to write about the disuse of science and technology describing such things as the destruction of native cultures, the decimation of whale populations, and warns that technology in the wrong hands can lead to great destruction.

Jules Verne was indeed a man born before his time. The Apostle Paul on the other hand...well, this isn't exactly what he means by referring to himself as one untimely born. The Greek word for untimely born refers to a pregnancy not going full-term by whatever means possible. It was most likely his former

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teachers, the Jerusalem Pharisees who called him an untimely birth. He was maturing well under them and was a ringleader in the fight against the Christian sect. This was so until he was on his way to Damascus on a mission to round up Christians for trial. On the Damascus Road he encountered Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified and yet God resurrected him from the dead and he ascended into heaven to sit at the Father's right hand as Lord of the Creation. At that moment of this encounter, Paul was born out of a religion based in ethnic favoritism and Law into a new way of being; born into a new humanity and a new creation that was breaking forth into the old. Paul probably took this rude moniker and used it to describe his new life under grace having met the Lord. You see, God's grace extended to us now is the foretaste of what life will be like after the resurrection and the recreation of creation. Paul also uses this derogatory name to say that he had met the Lord in a different way than did the other Apostles. They had met Jesus during his life and after he was raised. The Jesus Paul met was resurrected and ascended. He met Jesus in glory.

Having met the glorified Jesus and lived, Paul's life was now under God's grace. The word grace comes to us from the language of the royal court not from the courtroom. Many Bible teachers make the mistake of reducing grace to a legal fiction of simply a judge's decision to be lenient on a convicted criminal. Grace means the reality, the real event of being the presence of a royal figure and being shown unmerited favour and of having the royal figure acting on behalf of our best interest. Being shown grace results in the desire to love and serve the royal and to act in the name of the royal. Grace is not legal courtroom fiction. It is really living in God's presence, favour, and beneficence and in God's service.

When Paul came before the resurrected Lord there on the road to Damascus, he came under grace. He was brought into the presence of the Lord. The Lord showed him undeserved favour even after Paul had been a persecutor of the Church. Paul discovered that this Lord was really acting in his life for not only his benefit, but the benefit of all Creation. Paul's response could only be one thing: in the words of the prophet Isaiah, “Here I am. Send Me.” and like the first disciples he left behind the nets of persecution and followed.

When Paul had this experience on the Damascus Road and suddenly found himself standing in grace, he also realized he was standing in the in-breaking of the future Day of the Lord. Meeting the resurrected Jesus meant to him that the end-times were now beginning. Standing in grace is standing in the future. Like Jules Verne's uncanny ability to speak the future, Paul's new commission was to announce Jesus' victory over sin and death and the imminent arrival of God's future day. Wherever Paul proclaimed this odd message, people strangely believed it and they too found themselves living under grace in community that forespeaks of what human community will be like in that Day. A grace-filled church is the foretaste of the coming Kingdom of God.

When we encounter God's grace, when we encounter the presence of the Lord in the Holy Spirit we like Paul, Isaiah, and Peter are struck with how undeserved God's favour towards us is. We understand that the Father in his steadfast love and faithfulness is acting really in our lives for our benefit. This is not legal fiction where we are simply to believe that because Jesus died for us

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we are going to glory. We now, as we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and gathered into the Body of Christ in union with him, we are standing in God's presence; indeed standing really within the Good News the Gospel proclaims, truly standing in the future. We are standing in the new humanity. Know this my friends, this loving community that surrounds you is the product of God's grace and it is the proof that Jesus Christ was raised and so shall you be. If there is ever any doubt among any of you of your spending eternity in the Kingdom of God, just look around you. Here in these faces, in these eyes, in these hearts that love you, here is the proof of your eternal security. We are a part of what God is doing to save his creation and it is happening here now. We at this moment are being saved. This is staggering. Go forth and proclaim this incredibly Good News. Go forth living according to the hope of the new life with which you have been filled. We are being changed by the resurrected and glorified humanity of Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit who dwells with and among us. We are under grace. Glory be to God the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Amen.