

## Strengthened by Grace

**Hebrews 13:9** *Do not be carried about with various and strange doctrines. For it is good that the heart be established by grace, not with foods which have not profited those who have been occupied with them.*



I put to your attention the main point of verse 9. “*It is good that the heart be established by grace.*” You might want to underline that and make it the motto of your life. Some of your translations will say, “*be strengthened by grace.*” In **2 Corinthians 12:9-10** Paul says God revealed to him a secret that carried him through a period of great difficulty and in process molded his character away from vanity and pride. In fact, God, Paul said, put him through this trial so that the revelations of God to Him would not cause him to be exalted above measure; that is get himself puffed up with pride. The lesson God revealed to him was that God’s grace was sufficient for his life and the proper development of his life. This lesson discovered in Paul’s time of weakness and infirmity was so rewarding to him that he said in verse 10 of 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, *Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

I am going to take it for granted that none of those listening to this message what to be wishy washy people. You don’t want to lose heart when tested by the challenges of life. You want to live your lives consistently; guided by some enduring principles. We want a back bone to our lives; a guiding principle that feeds us strength and resolve and commitment and consistency against the forces of change and decay and the influences of this world that undermine our hold on a truthful, faithful life. You don’t want to be a chameleon who simply changes colors with the times. Or a coward who retreats from his position the minute he comes under fire. You don’t want to be a hothouse plant that only grows in the green house under a controlled environment. You want to thrive in the heat and cold and wind and rains of life. You don’t want to shrivel up. You want to have your roots go down deeper and your life become even more stable after the tests of life. You want to prove strong.

So how is that done? How to endure and that not barely hanging on, but becoming stronger? You want that correct? There is a fear an honest and not self-deluded person will face at some point in their lives. It is a fear that they are not what they profess to be; that they will be proven other than what they claim when put to the test. To prepare themselves for that test they may look for some way to prove themselves or to strengthen their hearts... away to establish themselves so that they can face the challenges life throws at them and not wash out but actually prevail. But very often the strategies they go to in order to strengthen themselves actually result in that pride... that being exalted above measure that God was seeking to keep Paul from... therefore God will not give his children success in these strategies. Let me suggest what they are from this text.

## 1. Two Strategies for maintaining a strong faith that will fail you.

For the follower of Jesus Christ, the two strategies most often employed to somehow build your spiritual muscle are intellectually lifting heavy doctrines and focusing on some duty of outward performance. The first strategy is to anchor yourself in the dogmas/doctrines of your faith. The other strategy is to exercise yourself in some discipline of worship or moral duty. Now don't become get me wrong here. I think Christian doctrine/dogma is good. I think moral duty is good. But these will not make you strong for the test of life. Approached alone without drawn their by the Grace of God they will leave you puffed up. 1 Corinthians 8:2 says "knowledge puffs up." They will also leave you... a spiritual light weight.

The Jews that the author of Hebrews is writing too have endured trials and suffering for their faith in Jesus as Messiah. The church in Jerusalem suffered from impoverishment and persecutions that went on for years. Now how were they going to prevail and be strong against this test? Here is what they tried... They re-asserted an interest in the dogmas of Judaism. The doctrines of the Christian faith were still being sorted out in the writings of the Apostle. The New Testament was not yet fully in the hands of these early Jewish Christians. But what these Jewish Christians in Jerusalem did have was the clear teachings of the Old Testament and all the rabbinic traditions that had passed down to them by their fathers. And looking for something to shore them up in the challenges of life they were facing they gave themselves to the intellectual study of Judaism and its practices that they thought could and should be brought into their Christian faith. Actually, in this they went so far assert the importance of abstaining from certain foods or it may be that they placed an emphasis on eating certain portions of the meat offered up in the temple as sacrifices to God as necessary supplements to a holy life. We don't know exactly what their doctrinal arguments were, but it seems to have something to do with the importance of what was still happening in the Temple and the sacrificial system of Judaism... they were linking these to their Christian beliefs or trying to. And we don't know exactly was the moral applications they made from these doctrinal arguments but in part it seems to have related to what they had been taught in Judaism as to what was proper and good to eat and what was not proper and good to eat. The point here is that they became very interested in sorting out doctrines and then deeds that they thought would make them strong in their faith. And it didn't work, and they were becoming unstable in their faith instead. "*carried about...*" They were actually spiritual light weights blown about by these doctrinal winds. Paul describes this same condition in **Ephesians 4:14**, *no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting...* I am sure those caught up in these theological exercises and moral exercises thought they were the ones digging in the deeper places and thought of themselves as the spiritual

mature ones. And Paul says they are children... spiritual light weights, puffed up and blown about by every wind that blows their way.

There is almost always a theological debate taking place in the Christian churches. It's a good thing. It is refining. It drives us into God's Word. I went to seminary and loved it and I especially loved my systematic theology classes. Among other things we crafted arguments and positions for or against whatever was the point of theological debate at the time. It may have been on positions related to the organization of the church, or on doctrines of the end times, or on the ever-popular debates of election and predestination. And how I enjoyed those times! (Still do...) But if you think you will become stronger in your faith to endure the challenges of life by taking up and arguing your position on when the rapture is going to occur or on the manner in which God expresses His sovereignty in election you are mistaken. A person can go and hunt for all the Bible verses that support his doctrine of free will or double predestination for that matter ... or he may underline all the verses that support his view of what is the proper chronology in the return of Christ and yet not make one stride forward in strengthening himself in heart and faith.

Again, your strategy may be more practical than that. You may prescribe to some necessary activity to maintain your faith. Set times for disciplined reading of your Bible. Rules for the manner of dress you wear. Forms for how you will worship or strategies on how you pray or how conduct ministry etc. All these may be well and good and correct but if you rest in them as the test of your fidelity and the strength of your commitment to Christ, they will deceive you. You could waste away under the surface of some pattern of commendable behavior you've honed in your life. Ex. of the wife I was asked to speak to many years ago. Her husband called upon me. She was being so difficult and contrary that he was beside himself. I went to speak to her and as gently I could raise the issue of her attitude. Her response was to dismiss me with the words, "*Are you suggesting that I am not a good Christian. I'll have you know that I just completed reading my Bible in a year.*" You'll look all nice and conformed to some truth to the naked eye and to your own eye, but God will see that the interior soul of your life is decaying and hollowed out and not able to stand the great tests of life. God may see that you have been carried you off into conformity to some outward action (good as it may be... commendable as it may be... ) but you have not inwardly yielded yourself to the conforming rule of Jesus Christ. Like knowledge unconnected to being caught up in the Grace of God you will become puffed up. You may be very ethical and moral. You may have come to understand the proper way to express your worship. But without coming to this through the overwhelming tide of God's grace you'll become high minded, even while you are spiritual light weight.

So, what will hold you true and strong, consistent and established heart and soul in your faith? If its not honing your theological precession or your outward forms of worship and disciplines what do you do to grow strong. When the winds of adversity

blow upon you, you don't want to blow about. You want to hold fast. Where do you gain that strength of heart.

## 2. **Grace Holds us Strong... Grace makes us strong in heart and faith. Grace is the only source of true stability life.**

1<sup>st</sup> under this point let me give you a definition and then let me make an application: So, what is Grace? It is one of the most common words we read in our Bibles and one of the most common found on our lips. It means *favor*, or *kindness*. It is a very big word with a wide sweeping meaning. **Alexander Maclaren** had a wonderfully simple definition. He said that **Grace was the active love of God**. Paul wrote of the Christian, "*You are not under law but under grace.*" Paul also said that we are *saved by grace through faith... not of works*. When we read and see that grace is put in opposition to law what we are to understand **first** and foremost is that **grace rises not out of our performance but out of who God is... it rises out of Himself**. God is gracious. God is active in love and He is compelled to love not because upon your deeds but out of His own good, giving, loving, blessing Being. God's grace is the outpouring of God Himself upon another out of love. **Alexander Maclaren** again, "*...we just come to this thought, that that active love of God is conditioned... not by any merit on our part — bubbles up from the depths of His own infinite heart... not because of what we are, but because of what He is, transcends all the rigid retributions of law, is not turned away by any sin, but continues to flood the world, simply because it wells up from the infinite and changeless fountain of love in the heart of God.*"

Man sinned. God placed the world under a curse but then God withheld final judgment, He didn't finalize His damnation of fallen mankind all at once; He set up in His heart even before we sinned, Jesus Christ as the lamb to be slain for our sins and in light of that sacrifice God continued to pour out favor and blessing on Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel and on all people. Today every person on the face of the earth experiences common favor and blessing from God. If Christ did not come, was not to come for the sin of men God would have been left only to condemn at once the world to unending darkness. But He didn't because Jesus the lamb was coming to suffer for our sins and so the Lord Jesus kept open the fount of blessing all of us on earth enjoy still today. All people experience grace today in one way or another —this is the **common grace** of life's manifold blessings. The rain shines on the just and the unjust. That means the righteous man and the unrighteous man both experience the common grace of a good clean rain that replenishes the earth. The Christian, the born again person, additionally claims **the saving grace** of God found in the Gospel. By faith in the Lord Jesus they find the payment made for all their sins. Jesus giving me forgiveness. Jesus making me clean in conscience from the reproach of sins forgiven. The Lord Jesus granting me eternal life. The Lord Jesus bringing to me his power to live victorious over sin. The Lord Jesus pouring into my heart Himself, His

Holy Spirit to be my unending companion. All this and more are a part of God's saving Grace to the born again, believing man or woman.

Now, both common grace (that all people realize) and saving grace (for those made God's children through faith) is undeserved, unmerited favor. That is how we encounter God's grace. We encounter it as something we don't deserve. But this definition is not enough to understand God's grace. Don't let the emphasis fall on *unmerited, undeserved*... though its true. Let the emphasis fall on God himself... it is **God's grace**...

Go back again... Grace is God's nature, His goodness and benevolence and activated eternal love poured out for us. God has always been gracious. Eternally gracious. Because God has always been active in love and goodness. Grace is God loving you and for you, grace is God loving you through His Son, Jesus who He gave to die for sinners, sinners just like you.

So again: **The Bible speaks of Grace as God as His active love outpoured** - conditioned on His eternal, infinite love and goodness and not on your merits. **The Bible also speaks of Grace as that unmerited love channeled to us through the sacrifice of God's Son** for our sins. **Finally** as Maclaren points out the **Bible will refer to Grace as the character such love and grace produces in those who consciously receive it**. In **1 Corinthians 15:10** Paul illustrates this last expression of Grace. God's grace received produces a gracious life... *But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me*. In **2 Corinthians 8** Paul urges the Corinthian Christians to excel in giving generously to those in need. He calls this giving **activity a grace** and includes it in other such graces. Listen **2 Corinthians 8:7** *But as you abound in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all diligence, and in your love for us—see that you abound in this grace also*. Where did this graciousness come from? From sharpening their theological swords? From finding just the right moral practices, or forms for worship? No. It came from getting under the fountain and spring of God's Active Love at the Cross of Jesus Christ and staying there. The more you understand grace the more gracious you become... strong, stable, established... grace filled, overflowing with the active love of God shed in your heart by the Holy Spirit. You don't want to wish washy. You want a back bone of solid endurance; a stable and strong in heart for Christ. Get under and remain under the fountain of God's unmerited Grace poured out for you through Jesus Christ and His cross. Set your mind on all that God is and all that God lovingly is towards you. Rehearse the multitudinous expressions of His love outpoured to you. Need help to recall all this? Read your Bible and find out what God has done in coming to you and recovering you from your sin and blessing you instead.

**3. Such a life/heart made strong/established by Grace is... beautiful.**

*For it is good that the heart be established by grace...* The Greek word of good is *Kalon* it can mean excellent or honorable, but the most common meaning is **beautiful**.

I strongly exhort you to think about God and His works. Study the Word of God and narrow down your theology to that which is in God's Word. Don't invent your own system of truth. Find out what other good men have taught as they thoughtfully processed the instruction of God's Word. And also I strong exhort you to search out and find what is good and right **to do** according to God's revealed Word. Obey Him and find those faithful, submissive responses that the Spirit of God calls for in your life, which will express the Holiness God would to shape in you. Seek God's Word to find His will for what you are to do. But... never conduct your search or rest in the positions and postures of what you learn in God's Word apart from living under the fountain of God eternal and active love to you... apart from a conscious consideration of His unmerited goodness upon you... His grace.

Mere knowledge puffs up. Mere morality does the same. But living under the out poured, undeserved grace that is God's life and love showered on you will make your life simply beautiful. And how wonderful that! What endures and stands the test of life is the beauty of a life under God's grace. Paul says in **Romans 5:2** that *it is this grace that we stand and rejoice*.

**Conclusion:** Finally, should you find it difficult to chart the flow of God's Grace to you out of His infinite being. If this becomes just a philosophical consideration that seems to distant then I commend to you the person of Jesus Christ. Study His life in the gospels and study it as an expose of the Grace of God outpoured. John saw it as such... **John 1:14** *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.* Study the active love of Jesus expressing both great teachings and flashing forward wonderful expressions of moral glory and goodness. And let yourself live in His presence and rejoice that this most gracious One lives in you by faith ... Set your minds on that and your life will be beautiful and then you'll be like Paul. In the challenges of life God will come to you, graciously come to you... saying *"My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."* And you will learn to say with Paul, *Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. <sup>10</sup> Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.* (**2 Corinthians 12:8-9**)

**Benediction: Romans 5:1-5** *Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup> through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. <sup>3</sup> And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; <sup>4</sup> and perseverance, character; and character, hope. <sup>5</sup> Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.*