

## Receiving the Grace of God in Vain

2 CORINTHIANS 6.— The first verse of the chapter read this morning contains, in a sentence, the pith of all apostolic exhortation, "*We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain.*" This apostolic entreaty suggests several profitable thoughts. It distinctly implies that the grace of God is given for a purpose that may not be realized in all who are the subjects of it. This cuts at the root of popular conceptions of "grace"; according to which, grace is a spiritual essence stealing over the senses, as it were, and influencing the faculties of the mind, and working its own work apart from the will of the subject. This is a sort of grace that would be impossible to "receive in vain"; for once received, the effect is as sure as sleep follows chloroform. The "grace" of apostolic language is a grace that may be received in vain. This grace is neither more nor less than favour of God, manifested in benefits conferred and offered, with the object of evoking in us certain results towards Him which He desires. It is easy to understand this sort of grace being received in vain. Israel, in all stages of their history, exemplifies it. The generation that came out of Egypt, received God's grace or favour in vain. His power was thrown away upon them. They proved ungrateful, unappreciative, disobedient. They did not yield that reasonable response of love and service which it was calculated and designed to evoke; and they perished in consequence. Paul makes a special application of this to believers. He lays stress on the fact that "all our fathers were under the cloud, and baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea." They were all constitutionally introduced to God's favour; but so far as their individual benefit was concerned, it was in vain. "*They fell in the wilderness,*" whereupon he makes the remark: "*Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted*" (1 Cor. 10:6).

Now, the grace or favour of God has come to us in the forgiveness of our past sins, and the promise of eternal life and inheritance in His glorious kingdom; and Paul's entreaty to the Corinthians, and, therefore, to us, who have been brought into their position, is, that we receive not this grace in vain. Let us seek to realize what it is to receive it in vain, that we may be enabled to avoid so hapless a condition. We can best do this by considering what its reception is intended to accomplish. It is intended to induce certain results in which the Father takes pleasure, and in the development of which He finds recompense as it were for His goodness. These results are, by a figure, styled "fruit." Jesus says, "*Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit.*" Barrenness of the fruit referred to is displeasing to Him. Paul's employment of the figure is in this striking form, that the earth which bringeth forth herbs for them by whom it is dressed receiveth blessing, but that which beareth thorns and briars is **rejected**, and is nigh unto cursing (Heb. 6:8). This is the idea of the parable of the fig tree (Luke 13:6), to which the owner came for three years in succession, "*seeking fruit and finding none.*" "*Cut it down,*" saith he; "*why cumbereth it the ground?*" The occasion of this parable makes its individual application unmistakable. Some had been telling Jesus of the accident at Siloam, by which eighteen persons had been killed by the falling of a tower, and of the cruel butchery of certain Galileans by Pilate; with the suggestion evidently intended that the victims of these calamities must have been extra wicked; after the mode of argument employed by Job's friends. Christ says, "*Suppose ye that these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.*" Then comes the parable of the fig tree, teaching them that their exemption from death was due to the divine forbearance, and not to their excellence. This was the doctrine of John the Baptist, who told them that the axe was laid at the root of the tree, and that every tree that brought not forth good fruit would be hewn down and cast into

the fire: which happened with unsparing severity in the days of vengeance that soon afterwards descended on the Jewish commonwealth.

The application of the same principle to us, calls upon us to consider some of the lessons suggested by the figure. A fruit tree exists in itself but not for itself. A fulfilment of the objects of its existence requires that it bring forth something for the use and gratification of its owner. This is completely applicable to those whom Paul exhorts to receive not the grace of God in vain. Salvation has come nigh to them, not merely that they may be personally delivered from evil; but that they may be "*to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made them accepted in the beloved.*" If our appreciation of the Gospel rises no higher than the comfort of being saved, we receive the grace of God in vain. Our hearts must be filled with an appreciation of the greatness, and goodness, and worthiness, and unspeakable excellence of Him by whom all things have been made. The first feature of a true son is that he knows, loves, and glories in his father. The love of his father's property would not be accepted as an equivalent for personal love. Our love of eternal life and the kingdom of God will not stand instead of the "*loving of the Lord our God with all our hearts,*" which is, "*the first and great commandment.*"

The fruit that is acceptable to the great owner of the vineyard is styled "*the fruit of the Spirit.*" This is because it comes from the seed contained in the teaching of the Spirit. No other fruit is acceptable. Actions and conditions that spring from any other source than the mind of the Spirit expressed in the word, are like the strange fire offered by Nadab and Abihu. The commands of the Spirit obeyed, the likeness of the Spirit taken on, will cause the Father to find pleasure in us. "*If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.*"

The fruits of the Spirit are thus defined by Paul: "*Love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.*" With this state of mind, as induced by the teaching of the Spirit, God is well pleased, as a man is pleased with ripe apples from his orchard. But this state of mind must, of course, find expression in action. Faith without works is dead, being alone. While, therefore, our hearts are established with grace, "*let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to his name ; but to do good and communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased*" (Heb.13:9, 15, 16). Peter tells us that the offering up of spiritual sacrifices is "*acceptable to God by Christ Jesus*" (1 Pet. 2:5). Paul thus alludes to the ministrations of the Philippians to his need: "*Ye have done well that ye did communicate with my affliction ... not because I desire a gift, but I desire **fruit that may abound to your account** ... an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice **acceptable, well pleasing to God***" (Phil. 4:14-18).

The nature of fruit-bearing in practical life is therefore evident. To receive the grace of God in vain, is to be destitute of this fruit; it is to know the Gospel without being so influenced by it as to yield to it the results it contemplates in the renovation of the heart, the purification of the affections, the reformation of the life, the opening of the generous impulses towards men, and the fountain of gratitude and adoration towards God; and the abandonment and crucifixion of all that is contrary to the mind of Christ. Where this is the unfortunate state of things: where the heart is still set on earthly things; and the sympathies are yet undrawn out towards the things of Christ; where sin is yet followed and God still distant; where holiness is unknown, and self-denial not understood, nothing waits but a "*fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation which shall devour the adversary.*" The "*unprofitable servant*" is to be cast out. The servant who can show nothing done for the name of Christ: nothing ministered to the wants of the saints: nothing beyond a life spent at the

shrine of self-interest and self-gratification—has little to look for in the day of reckoning. Even those who do their duty are sensible of the inadequacy of their claim upon divine approbation; having done all, they say, "*We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do,*" even as Christ enjoins (Luke 17:10). If this is the case with them, where shall the faithless and unholy appear?

Now, let us consider for a moment the laws that govern fruitfulness. They are very much the same in the substance as in the figure. In the natural, there must be soil; so in the spiritual, and this is sometimes deep and rich, and sometimes meagre. For the character of the soil, we shall not be called to account. If we are only equal to a crop of thirty fold, we shall not be held accountable to the measure of an hundredfold. God is just. We shall be judged with reference to what is possible with us. This is where our whole care should be bestowed. We may have good soil, producing weeds for want of culture. Poor soil will improve under training. So much for the soil. But we are likened to fruit trees. Now, fruit trees would neither yield fruit nor grow if left unwatered either by the hand of man or the rain of heaven. Sunshine and moisture are necessary to their development. It is no less so with the spiritual: trees neglected will run to waste. They must be watered in season by the word, kept free from the insect blight by prayer, and invigorated by the fresh air and sunshine of brotherly intercourse as appointed. The reading of the word stands first in the process of spiritual horticulture. We are told to "*desire the sincere milk of the word, that we may grow thereby.*" Apart from the word there will be no growth. We shall soon absorb what little moisture we have in ourselves, we shall soon wither and decay. "*Let my word abide in you.*" This is Christ's prescription for continuing healthy branches of the vine. Then "*let us not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is.*" The neglect of this item of husbandry will enfeeble the spiritual plant.

A fact to be profitably noted is that growth, though certain under right conditions, is slow and imperceptible. You cannot see a tree grow while you stand and look at it, nor during many visits. Would a gardener be wise in stopping the cultivation because of this? After a long time, you see the great progress made. This progress would not have been realized, if the daily process had been interrupted. So in the spiritual, you may not be conscious of any advance in a week or a month, but persevere. If you only take care to keep yourself subject to the fertilizing influences of spiritual horticulture, you ensure progress, which by and by will begin to be visible to your own consciousness. You will find yourself changing in a spiritual direction. In the course of years you will become a different person from what you would be if the natural mind were left to itself. The direction of the vessel determines the course of the voyage. Her progress may be slow, but if she is always going one way, she will be a long way on at last. The present **drift** is the thing to watch.

These things have to be considered by wise men, and applied in the great undertaking which the Gospel puts in their hands. Vigilance and perseverance will be rewarded in the day when "*the wise shall inherit glory, but shame shall be the promotion of fools.*"

(Taken from "Seasons of Comfort" Volume 1, Pages 142-145 by Bro. R. Roberts.)