**APOSTOLIC OPTIMISM AND OTHER SERMONS - SERMONS BY JOHN H. JOWETT**

**09. THE ENERGY OF GRACE by JOHN H. JOWETT**

*"In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace, wherein He hath abounded towards us in all wisdom and prudence."*

*Ephesians 1:7,8*

"According to the riches of His grace, wherein He hath abounded towards us." I recently pronounced the words aloud as I walked alone in a beautiful twilight by the fringe of the incoming sea. The truth in nature seemed to recognise the truth in revelation. They appeared to grasp hands. Deep called unto deep, and they offered each other the help of a mutual interpretation. It is wonderful how frequently an old and unsuggestive word will glow with vivid significance when proclaimed in new surroundings! "Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt." I read these words when standing upon a bold headland, on a day of warm and genial light, with a little breeze playing through it, which was burdened with the essence of the brine; and the one offered itself as commentary upon the other. I knew the meaning of sanctified conversation, intercourse that is warm and genial and cheering, and yet bracing and invigorating by reason of the truth-laden spirit which blows from the infinite. "Always with grace, yet seasoned with salt." "Renewed by His spirit in the inner man." The word repeated itself to me with acquired emphasis as I emerged from a sultry glebe, where the atmosphere had been close and stagnant and oppressive, and I stood in the pure, cool, moving air of the heights. "Refreshed by His spirit in the inner man." And once again I read the words of my text to the accompaniment of the jubilant roar and the majestic advance of the incoming tide. "According to the riches of H»s grace, wherein He hath abounded towards us!" The onrush of the ocean seemed to get into the words. I could feel a magnificent tidal flow in the great evangel. The infinite was moving in determined fulness. The grace of the Eternal was rolling towards the race in a wealthy and glorious flood. "According to the riches of His grace, wherein He hath abounded towards us."

I am grateful for this comment of the ocean tide. I am grateful for its suggestion of unspeakable energy in the ministry of grace. Grace is too commonly regarded as a pleasing sentiment, a sofa disposition, a welcome feeling of cosy favour entertained toward us by our God. The interpretation is ineffective, and inevitably cripples the life in which it prevails. Grace is more than a smile of good-nature. It is not the shimmering face of an illumined lake; it is the sun-lit majesty of an advancing sea. It is a transcendent and ineffable force, the outgoing energies of the redeeming personality of God washing against the polluted shores of human need.

How inclined we are to think meanly and narrowly of spiritual ministries! How we belittle and impoverish their dominion! We think more largely concerning the palpable ministries of the material world. How spaciously we think of the empire of electrical force, the subtle fluid which annihilates space. But when we turn to finer subtleties still, our thinking is inclined to move more timidly, and with a severely circumscribed range. Turn the mind upon itself. Here is a spiritual entity. What is thought? Is it only a faint effluence of the mind that remains locked up within the limits of one's own personality? Is thought only a perfume or a stench which dies away within the confines in which it is born? Or is thought an energy, more potent and pervasive than the electrical fluid, disregarding the limits of personality, and moving irresistibly and inevitably from life to life? What if we cannot dam it up? What if thought will be out, and whether we will or no, becomes an operative factor in the common life? That is the larger and sounder way of regarding spiritual essences. Thought is energy. Purpose is energy. Good-will is energy. And even though we withhold from them the vehicles of speech and act, they will nevertheless express themselves, by the very reason of their being, as influential ministers in the life of men.

Now lift up the argument to a still higher plane. I gaze into the wealthy content of this spacious word "grace." Whatever else it may mean, or does not mean, it includes thought, and purpose, and good-will, and love; and we do it wrong, and therefore maim ourselves, if we esteem it only as a perfumed sentiment, a favourable inclination, and not as a glorious energy moving towards the race with the fulness and majesty of the ocean tide. Wherever I turn in the Sacred Book I find the mystic energy at work. It operates in a hundred diverse ways, but in every instance it works and energises as an unspeakable force. Let me cull a little handful of examples from the old Book. "Let each man do according as he hath purposed in his heart, for God is able to make all grace abound unto you." Do you catch the swift and vital connection? "Let each man do!" for "God will make grace abound." Grace is the dynamic of endeavour! "We have good hope through grace." "We have good hope!" The lamp is kept burning. The cheery light does not die out in the life. All the rooms are lit up. Our confidence fails not "We have good hope through grace." Grace is the nourisher of optimism. "Singing with grace in your hearts." How beautiful the relation and succession! Grace in the heart -- a song in the mouth! Grace is the spring of a grateful contentment. "It is good that the heart be established through grace." There we are away in the basement, among the foundations of the life. "Establishing the heart through grace." Grace is the secret energy of a fortified will. And so in countless other places I find the grace of God working away in human life as an energy whose operations are as manifold as the ministries of the light. And now the apostle tells me that this redeeming, energising effluence flows towards the race in all the spacious plenitude of a flood. Grace does not flow from a half-reluctant and partially reconciled God, like the scanty and uncertain movements of a brook in time of drought. It comes in oceanic fulness. It comes in "riches of mercy," "riches of goodness, and forbearance, and long suffering," "riches of glory." "According to the riches of His grace, wherein He hath abounded towards us." "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God."

Thy goodness and Thy truth to me,

To every soul abound,

A vast unfathomable sea,

Where all our thoughts are drowned.

Its streams the whole creation reach,

So plenteous in the store:

Enough for all, enough for each.

Enough for evermore.

Now in my text the energies of grace are more particularly discovered in their relationship to sin. "Forgiveness of sins according to the riches of His grace." The word "grace" is not a prevalent word in modern speech, and its rare occurrence may be explained by the partial disappearance of the word "sin" from our vocabulary. If we exile the one we shall not long retain the other. Grace haunts the place where pangs are endured and tears are shed because of the sense of indwelling sin. "Where sin abounds, grace doth much more abound." But you may ransack the books of the passing day, and though the life depicted moves among many crookednesses, and perversities, and uncleannesses, there is little or no suggestion of the sense of sin. I do not say it is not there, but men are unfavourably disposed toward the word, and are inclined to banish it from their vocabulary. Sin is a word whose familiar significances are like sharp fangs, and they bite deep into the life. Men are now very busy attempting to draw the teeth of the old rodent, and to leave him with a pair of harmless gums. We are busy creating easier and less distressing phrases, phrases without teeth, which we can apply to our perversities and deformities without occasioning us any pain. The prevalent philosophy is a little favourable to our much sought for deliverance. You know the welcome opiates it offers to our uneasy consciousness. It declares that what is called sin is only the result of imperfect knowledge. But the philosophy does not build itself upon the facts of common experience. Where ignorance reigns, the sense of sin does not prevail. Where there is a sense of sin a man is conscious that he had the requisite knowledge. Where a man can say, "I did it ignorantly," his inner life may be distressed, but not with the consciousness of guilt. For him, in this relationship, sin does not exist. "Sin is inevitable," says another prevalent philosophy, "so long as we are bound to a sensuous body. Our union with the flesh is the necessary occasion of all our sin." But all sin is not the necessary accompaniment of sense. If men were to be stripped of their bodies to-day, the realm of sin would still remain, envy would remain, and malice and wrath, and so would thought and desire and will. No, these philosophic extenuations do not root themselves in the well-recognised facts of the individual life, and so will not bring any permanent peace to men. What philosophy and personal inclination are disposed to extenuate, the Christian religion seeks to deepen and revive. Its purpose and endeavour is not to abate the uneasy sense of sin, but to drive the teeth into still more sensitive parts. There is no mincing, apologising delicacy in the way in which it describes the natural conditions of my life. It makes no attempt at discovering more favourable considerations which will set me more at ease. Its revealing sentences are clear and uncompromising. "Sin dwelleth in me." I have opened the door of my life, and have invited sin to be my guest, and accept my hospitality. "Sin reigneth in me." The guest has become the master, and determines the arrangements of the house. I am "the bond-slave of sin." Sin is not merely my guest, not only my master, he is my tyrant, with his heavy hand upon the neck, holding me down, thrusting me along his own determined way. I am "dead in sin"; I am become a mere chattel, my tyrant's dead implement used in the evil ministry of the devil. I am "dead in sin," not a finely-rigged and self-determining boat, with power to encounter adverse winds, and to ride upon the storm, but a piece of dead driftwood, a poor hull, with its power of self-initiative and self-direction gone, the pitiless prey of the hostile wind and the engulfing waves. "Dead in trespasses and sin." That is the scriptural indictment of the sin-possessed man. Indictment, do I say? I recall the word; it is the scriptural portrait of the sin-ridden life, and I say that the common heart of man acknowledges the accuracy of it, and brushes all attempted extenuations on one side, as being beside the mark, and having no relevancy and pertinacy to man's appalling need. "Cleanse me from its guilt and power." Guilt and Power! Those are the two deadly facts of sin, and they are witnessed to in the common life. I look round and within me, and the evidence abounds. If I interpret my own heart aright, the sense of guilt is signified in more ways than by audible confession and sighs. The sense of guilt has a very varied wardrobe. It is not always found in sackcloth and ashes, lowly kneeling or smiting the breast. I have seen it dressed as flippancy; I have known it put on the guise of a jaunty carelessness; I have known it issue as forced laughter; I have seen it evidenced in a passionate recoil against religion. John Wesley tells us in his incomparable journal, that when he was about twenty-two, before he had felt the tidal powers of redeeming grace, he took up and read Kempis's The Christian's Pattern, and he began to "see that true religion was seated in the heart, and that God's law extended to all our thoughts as well as words and actions. I was however very angry with Kempis for being too strict.'' Is that a surprising consequence? I thought that this enlarged vision of the searching demands of God's law would have drawn him to his knees in humble and contrite confession of sin! "I was, however, very angry with Kempis for being too strict." The consciousness of guilt emerged in the guise of anger in a heated recoil from the man who had searched him in the inward parts. So that I do not look merely for kneeling and tearful worshippers when I want evidence of the consciousness of sin. I can see it in loud living, in violent and sensational pleasures, in proudly assured indifference, in the anger aroused by august ideals, in passionate aversions to the teachings of evangelical religion. To rummage among the secrets of the heart, and to survey the symptoms of the external life is to find abounding witness that man is held in dark and cruel servitude by the "guilt and power" of sin.

And now to this sin-burdened and sin-poisoned race there flows, in infinite plenitude, the "riches of His grace." What is the ministry of the heavenly energy? What are the contents of the gracious flood? The inspiring evangel of the text gathers itself round about three emphases. I am told that when grace possesses the life, it brings in its resources a three-fold power. It brings "redemption," the powers of liberation; it brings "wisdom," the power of illumination; it brings "prudence," the power of practically applying the illumination to the manifold exigencies of the common life. Let us feast our eyes on the wealthy programme. Grace flows round about the life in powers of liberation. It sets itself to deal both with the guilt and the power of sin, and it removes the one, and subdues the other. The Bible seems to exhaust all available figures in seeking to make it clear to men how effective and absolute is the liberation accomplished by grace. Here is a little handful gathered in a field in which they abound. "Your sins may be blotted out! " "Blotted out!" It is the same word which is used in another beautiful promise: "God shall wipe away all tears." Your sins shall be wiped away! Just as you may wipe a tear away from the eye of a child, and its place is taken by sunny light, and no print remains of the grievous presence, so our Father will wipe away our sins by the energies of His grace. "The Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world." "Taketh away! " It is the word which is used in another familiar phrase: "they found the stone taken away." "He taketh away the sin of the world," the huge, unliftable stone, before which we stood in paralysing despair. He taketh it away. "He shall wash away thy sin." The ministry of soft and genial water! When a little child, with slightly afflicted eyes, awakens in the morning and finds that her eyes are fastened by the clog which has accumulated through the night, the mother takes some balmy water, and gently washes away the ill cement, and the little one opens her eyes upon the morning light. And when the glue of guilt has gathered about the powers of my life, and holds their activities in depressing and fearful servitude, the stringent, healing energy of grace washes away the encumbrance, and the powers of the soul exult in newly discovered liberty and light. "He shall wash away thy sin." And so I might proceed with the wealthy array of Scriptural figures. Our sins are to be "blotted out"; they are to be "taken away"; they are to be "washed away"; they are to be "covered"; they are to be "purged"; and all this wealth of metaphor is intended to proclaim the completeness of the emancipation accomplished by these marvellous energies of grace. We have redemption, even the forgiveness of sin, "according to the riches of His grace which He hath abounded towards us."

But this by no means exhausts the contents of the ministry of grace. The grace that liberates also illuminates. The grace that brings "redemption" also confers " wisdom." Our opened eyes are to be fed and feasted with ever more glorious unveilings of the Eternal. We are to obtain more and more spacious conceptions of truth, richer and profounder knowledge of God. Oh, what vistas of knowledge are promised to the grace-filled life! "That ye may know what is the hope of His calling, what the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints." "To know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge." "That ye may know!" "That ye may know!" That is the reiterated emphasis of the word of promise. The grace that lifts up also lights up. The new birth is succeeded by new visions, and the new visions refine and beautify the life. That is the ministry of all vision. The vision soaks into the life and colours it with its own hue. "We all with open face beholding ... the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image." The nature of our contemplation determines the quality and colour of our life.

"Redemption," power of liberation! "Wisdom," power of illumination! And "prudence," power of fruitful application; power to apply the eternal to the transient; power to bring the vision to the task, the revelation to the duty, the truth to the trifle. Grace will not confine its operations to the clouds. It will flow up into the practicalities and prudences of common daily life. It will prove itself the dynamic of the ordinary day. There is many a man possessed of knowledge who does not know how to apply it. But grace does not leave a man in the vacuity and impotence of mere theory. The gift of grace is not only the gift of vision, but the gift of power to realise the vision in the humdrum concerns of the unattractive life.

Now how do we come into the sweep of the marvellous effluence of the grace of God? "In whom we have." That is the standing-ground. I know no other. To be in Him, in the Christ, is to be in the abiding-place of this superlative energy. To be associated with the Saviour, by faith, in the fellowship of spiritual communion, is to dwell at the springs of eternal life.

Jesus sought me when a stranger,

Wandering from the fold of God;

He, to rescue me from danger,

Interposed His precious blood.

Oh, to grace how great a debtor

Daily I'm constrained to be!

Let thy grace. Lord, like a fetter.

Bind my wandering heart to Thee.