

SOLA GRATIA: By Grace Alone
1 Cor. 15:8-10

Turn back to 1 Cor. 15...

If you take a standard Christian hymnal and search the index for hymns about God's grace, listen to what you'll find:

There are hymns about: converting grace, the covenant of grace, efficacious grace, the fullness of grace, magnified grace, refreshing grace, regenerating grace, sanctifying grace, saving grace, and sovereign grace. –

There are hymns speaking of abounding grace, abundant grace, amazing grace, boundless grace, fountain of grace, God of grace, indelible grace, marvellous grace, matchless grace, overflowing grace, pardoning grace, plenteous grace, unfailing grace, immeasurable grace, wonderful grace, the word of grace, grace all sufficient, and grace alone.

Theologians speak of common grace, electing grace, irresistible grace, persevering grace, prevenient grace, pursuing grace, and saving grace.

Are you noticing a common theme here, a favourite subject that Christians have always loved to sing about and speak about? – God's grace!

YET for many Christians today, grace has become boring, not amazing. – It should amaze us more than all the other most amazing things in life put together. – God's grace should stun us more than the most fascinating discoveries in science, more than the greatest advances in technology, more than the most impressive feats in business, sports, history, art, or architecture.

YET too often God's grace fails to amaze, to thrill & captivate us any longer. – WHY? – Why is that?...

Because we think "too highly of ourselves", as Rom. 12:3 puts it. – Our view of God is too small, and our view of ourselves is too big. –

We fail to realise God's utter holiness and sovereign freedom to save whomever He chooses. – And we fail to realise that unsaved humanity is spiritually dead and unable to lift a finger towards God *unless* His grace intervenes and initiates everything.

We've come this morning to a great text to help us rediscover God's grace (or perhaps discover for the first time for some of you): 1 Cor. 15:8-10.

Stand, Read (from vv. 1-11) & Pray:

Give title...

Define grace = G.R.A.C.E. (acrostic, God's Riches At Christ's Expense); God's unmerited favour to Hell-deserving sinners, and His saving power & sanctifying power.

Let's jump to the headline phrase & banner theme over this whole text:

v. 10a – Matthew Henry makes this brilliant point: God Almighty can say, ‘I AM that I AM’; in fact His name Yahweh means, “I AM that I AM”. – But us? – Puny, finite, fallen & wretched creatures like us?

All we can say is: v. 10a...! – Never forget that contrast!...

Christian, think about it: Somehow you got saved. – You have never been the same. – You are a totally new person now. – An awesome work has been done. –

Someone’s head must be crowned for such a miracle of salvation? – Whose head should the crown go on? – Yours? – Of course not! – ‘To God be the glory, great things HE has done!’ – v. 10a!...

BUT why do you say only God could save you? – Did you not have free will? – Did you not choose to believe in Him?

But then we see in Scripture, and in human experience if we’re honest – we see that our will is only free to do what our nature & our heart wants to do. –

And Scripture says the unsaved heart is “dead in transgression & sin”, “does not seek God”, “cannot please God”, and is captive to the world, the flesh, and the devil (Eph. 2, Rom. 3, etc.).

Turn to Eph. 2 which is so clear on this: Eph. 2:1-5...

In eternity past, God did not look ahead and see whether I would choose Him or not. – God chose that I would choose Him. – The Bible says, “He first loved us” (1 Jn. 4). – He did not choose me *because* I would believe; He chose me *so that* I would believe.

This is why we say that God unconditionally, unilaterally elected us, based purely on His free & sovereign grace, not on any foreseen choice or action on my part.

Repeat: 1 Cor. 15:10a!

→Here is the deathblow to all boasting; here Paul brings us down to size, he lays us face first in the dust, “that none may boast but in the Lord”!

The Bible is emphatic on this: Jn 1:13, we were “born [again], not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God!” – Rom. 9:16, “So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy”!

Thus Paul said in 1 Cor. 4, “What do you have that you did not receive?”

By grace alone, I was elected. – By grace alone, I was foreknown & loved by Him. – By grace alone, I was predestined.

By grace alone, I was called & regenerated. – By grace alone, I was convicted of my sin & shown my guilt. – By grace alone I was granted repentance & faith to turn to Christ. – By grace alone, I was converted, justified, redeemed & adopted.

By grace alone, I am being sanctified. – Only by His grace have I ever prayed one prayer, sung His praise, or persevered in my faith.

And by grace alone, I will be glorified one day and safely arrive at Heaven's golden shores! –

Thus, Eph. 2:7 (it will take all eternity to sing the riches of His grace!)...

Repeat: 1 Cor. 15:10a!...

***THREE KEY WORDS that demonstrate the power of God's grace:**

1. v. 8, LAST – God's grace saves the last & the most unlikely.

Last on Paul's list of six major eyewitnesses (or groups of) to whom 'Christ appeared':

v. 8 – Hint: This was not a compliment, calling someone "untimely born". – It's a gruesome image, the only time in all the NT that this insulting Greek word is used. – Lit., 'You aborted fetus, you miscarriage, you stillborn child, you dead baby.' –

I.e., Paul is saying metaphorically, 'Compared to Christ appearing to all these normal 'kids' (vv. 5-7), I was the vile, despicable one that should've been tossed out, buried or disposed of.'

I.e., '*For the risen Lord to appear to me was very late & very unlikely*'. – 'I never spent the 3 years with Jesus, being mentored & disciplined & prepared by Him. I never had the 40 days with Him after His resurrection. All I did was hate Him and hunt down His people!'

'No candidate was more unlikely than me – for salvation, not to mention for apostleship! Only a risen Lord could've taken me, this aborted infant, this dead fetus, and breathe life into me!'

God's grace saves the last and the most unlikely.

+ Have you noticed that God loves to surprise us with who He saves? – Some of the LAST people you ever expected to be saved? –

E.G., Book of Acts – Jerusalem, the Jewish Church, shocked that God would save Christians at Antioch, those Gentiles & pagans, without even getting circumcised or becoming Jews!

NB, God loves to take the people that seem MOST different from you – the cultures that seem most pagan, most unpleasant, that make you most uncomfortable to be around – to take those types and to save them, by the same grace that saved stinking you & me!

Repeat: v. 8...

+ Recently I heard about a son whose dad had been a sexual pervert and pedophile. – Yet when Dad was on his deathbed, he truly repented and his son got to lead him to Christ! – Repeat: v. 8..., *God's grace saves the last and the most unlikely.*

→Praise God for our prison ministry with Dean & Andy & Melt – let's keep praying for them!

→Rom. 5:20 – Expect it! – The darker the darkness, the brighter the light! – The deeper the pit, the longer & stronger an Arm it takes to rescue you! – The greater the sin, the greater the displays of God’s grace, His conquering, triumphant grace!

~ Spurgeon: “If the Lord sent me to preach the Gospel to the devil, himself, I would believe that God was able to convert even him! I know that He never will, but if there is any man who is as bad as the devil, and the Gospel is sent to him, I shall never despair of the possibility of that man being reclaimed and made to stand among the redeemed at the last!” (b/c of what he knew of his depravity, yet God saved him!)

+ Like the parable Jesus gave in Matt. 20 about the day labourers: Some were hired at early and mid-day and expected great wages. – But some were hired at the 11th hour and hardly put in an hour’s work. –

Yet all got the same wages: “The first shall be last, and the last first.” – That’s how God’s grace and the free gift of eternal life works. – *God’s grace saves the last and the most unlikely.*

+ Like the filthy thief on the cross who had been mocking Jesus moments earlier. – But then God’s grace captured him: “Today, you will be with me in Paradise.”

+ Like the two gang members wanting to know the time, and passing by an inner city church that met in an office block, they thought they would get a quick glance at the clock; but instead, they heard the preaching, and were pierced by God’s arrows of conviction and were saved!...

God’s grace saves the last and the most unlikely.

→Maybe that’s you [this AM]: You didn’t want to be here, but somehow, you’ve wandered in, or got dragged in, and here you are. In the perfect plan of a sovereign God, you are here, listening to this message about the saving grace of God. – YOU may be God’s next surprise, as one “untimely born”, His next unlikely convert!...

2. v. 9, LEAST – *God’s grace saves the least who feel most unworthy.*

v. 9 – I.e., ‘It was a perfect 12, until God added me to the circle. Gee, what’s wrong with this picture?’ – Like that kids’ game goes with the different pictures, ‘One of these is not like the other’. –

Paul says, ‘I’m the black sheep, the ugly duckling, I don’t fit in, I shouldn’t be here! If Christ had not appeared to me, I would never have served Him, not in a million years!’

Only God would turn an abortion into an apostleship (a miscarriage into a messenger of Christ)!

NB, Paul never wanted to get over his past. – Paul kept pulling those skeletons out of his closet and reviewing those old scars & wounds, if by this he could magnify the grace of God and better celebrate the gospel!

He does it in Gal. 1, retelling of what a rebel & enemy of the gospel he was. – He does it in Php. 3, speaking of his zeal as a “persecutor of the church” (v. 6).

But maybe these were just a few temporary lapses for Paul? – We all have a few regrets in life, right? – We all slip into moments of self-pity that we must shake off and move past, right? –

Not for Paul. – After writing what he does in 1 Cor. 15 (& Gal.), Paul will speak even more strongly & negatively about his past to the Ephesians. – :

Eph. 3:8, “Although I am less than the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me....” – Not just the “least apostle” (1 Cor. 15:9), but the least of all Christians, no, “less than the least”!

God’s grace saves the least, those who feel most unworthy.

But then a few years after this, Paul would put it even more severely. – The older he grew as a Christian, the more conscious he became of his wretched sinfulness outside of Christ:

1 Tim. 1:15... NB how each time, the concentric circles are getting wider for Paul. – Now he says: Not just least of the apostles, or even least of all the saints, but now chief of all sinners that have ever lived, “foremost, tops the list” of them all.

+ One of the first Malagasy martyrs in 1840 was a man named ‘Paul the Diviner’. – But his Malagasy name was actually Rainitsiheva.

He had been the local sangoma, renowned & wealthy because of his abilities in witchcraft and dark power. – But then God saved him; he repented of his sorcery, and gave his life to Christ. – When he read 1 Tim. 1:15 for the first time and heard that the Apostle Paul was “chief of sinners”, he concluded that he had to change his name to Paul.

Should that not be how we ALL feel? – I know me better than I know you. – I know my own depravity & wretchedness more than anyone else’s, so I can guarantee you that I qualify for being “chief of sinners”. (That’s an argument we should always be having! ☺)

NB also each time (in all 3 above texts): Not ‘I WAS least of all, chief of sinners, etc’, but ‘I AM....’ –

‘Left to myself, outside of Christ, I never want to forget my horrible potential, my wretchedness. I never want to outgrow my past, or ‘get past my past’. I want to live always conscious of my depravity, aware of all ALL that God has saved me from! I never want to move from this low position, this humiliating, humbling reminder of my past. That’s what makes God’s grace so amazing!’

+ Paul didn’t tear these painful pages out of his family album. – Not once did he boast in his past sin or ever glamourise it. – But he did choose to remember it and use it as the dark backdrop against which God’s grace shone all the brighter!...

God’s grace saves the least who feel most unworthy.

~ Martin Luther had a famous phrase for this: ‘I am simultaneously a saint and a sinner.’ – Because the Catholics said that infant baptism took away the stain of sin and infused righteousness into you. – But Luther realised the Bible says otherwise:

'Yes, I am a now a saint. Yes, I am now a new creation in Christ, the old has gone, the new has come. Yes, I am now accepted and justified in Christ. But my only righteousness is IN CHRIST, not in myself. Until I am glorified and perfected one day in Heaven, I will not be inherently, internally righteous. I only have Christ's imputed, justifying righteousness.

YET, *left to myself*, if ever I stopped clinging to Christ and trusting Christ alone & His work for me on the cross – left to myself, I am still a wretched sinner, a filthy worm, good-for-nothing, "stinking bag of maggots", as Luther once put it.

'Simultaneously a saint and a sinner.' – Or as another has put it, 'You are more wicked than you realise, and yet in Christ you are more loved than you can imagine.'

God's grace saves the least, those who feel most unworthy.

Back to 1 Cor. 15:9...

→Beware of today's theology of positive confession & motivational speaking. – Pulpits everywhere are saying, 'Discover your destiny. You are the head, not the tail. Claim your identity, Christian. Unlock the potential God has put inside of you. The sky is the limit to your success.' –

HOW different from the way Paul speaks here & elsewhere: vv. 9-10a...

NB, Paul seized every opportunity to REDUCE his self-esteem and magnify God's grace. – He grabbed every chance to DECREASE his self-worth and INCREASE the worth of God's grace in our eyes!...

God's grace saves the least who feel most unworthy.

3. v. 10, LABOUR – God's sanctifying grace puts us to work.

Recall back in Eph. 2, in that grace-saturated passage – recall where Paul ends up: Eph. 2:8-10...

Same here:

1 Cor. 15:10b – We could adapt the saying we use re: 'faith alone' and also apply it to 'grace alone': 'We are saved by grace alone, but the grace that saves is never alone – it will always produce works.' –

We are not saved BY good works, but FOR good works. – They are not the horse, but they ARE the cart that inevitably follows. –

→NB, There are no cartless horses in the Bible. – Even the thief on the cross bore fruit of his conversion in his final dying moments, in his changed attitude toward himself, toward Christ, and toward his fellow criminal adjacent to him. –

To have a 'cartless horse', a Christian with no fruit & no change, is what the Bible calls 'receiving the grace of God in vain'.

→v. 10b, HOW could this happen, 'God's grace proving vain'? –

Turn to: 2 Cor 6:1-2 – Receiving God’s grace in vain was a very real threat, a deadly possibility in the mind of Paul, and in any church.

+ Last week, Michelle was overhearing some other moms at a public place discussing that horrific auto accident in Pinetown where 27 were killed. – The one lady had already 1 drink too many. But she boldly declared, ‘Yep, after seeing that awful video, I said to my kids, ‘You’d better be damn sure you know where you’re going when you die!’

That’s today’s Christianity – cheap grace! – Claim your fire insurance from Hell, feel sure you’re going to Heaven, yet live however you like!’ –

Not for Paul: v. 10b...

Those who receive God’s grace ‘in vain’ are in for a very rude awakening and awful surprise on that day. – Like Mr. Vain Hope in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, these presumptuous, self-deceived souls were deluded by false assurance all their lives. –

But on the day they die (or Christ returns), they will be terrified to discover that even at the gates of Heaven you can be turned away as a pretender & hypocrite and be escorted instead straight to Hell.

→Beloved, beware, “I urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain” (2 Cor. 6:1). – Beware:

If you think that your church attendance, or even membership, makes you a Christian, without any real, vital, living, transforming relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. – *That is ‘receiving His grace in vain’.*

If you trust that some past decision (walked an aisle, prayed a prayer, raised a hand, shed a tear, had a feeling, etc.) saves you, no matter how you live – *that is ‘receiving His grace in vain’.*

If you think you can coast your way to Heaven in a plush, comfy limousine of laziness, without making any effort at killing sin and growing in holiness and working hard for the Lord – *That is ‘receiving His grace in vain’.*

→KIDS & YOUNG PEOPLE: You can grow up surrounded by God’s grace, and yet not know it! – You can be raised in a Christian home, have the Scriptures read to you daily, hear the gospel preached to you Sunday after Sunday, yet ALL in vain. –

Wave after wave of God’s loving mercy & grace in your life will prove “vain”, useless and pointless, UNLESS you “receive it”! – If you do not personally repent & believe the gospel and receive God’s grace, then all those blessings of a Christian upbringing will only increase your guilt on the last day. –

God’s final judgment will be worse for you than for those raised in pagan homes, because you had every opportunity to be saved, constant exposure to God’s grace, yet you refused....

Repeat: v. 10ab...

In contrast:

~ Milton Vincent in his *Gospel Primer*: *...I don't deserve to be a child of God and I don't deserve to be free of sin's guilt & power. I don't deserve the staggering privilege of intimacy with God, nor any other blessing that Christ has purchased for me with His blood. I don't even deserve to be useful to God. But by the grace of God I am what I am and I have what I have, and I hereby resolve not to let any portion of God's grace prove vain in me!* (p. 52)

→What has God's grace done in you? – What do you have to show for it, for all that God has done in sending His own Son to suffer & die for you? – How successful has His grace been in your life, how fruitful? – When God's grace looks for returns on its investment in you, how are the dividends?...

Look at how impactful, how useful & life-changing God's grace was in Paul's life:

v. 10c – Shew, what a shift: from (v. 9) being least of the apostles, to outworking all the apostles! – HOW can a humble man speak that way? (Has he gone from an inferiority complex to a superiority one, in just one vs.?! Has Paul suddenly fallen from boasting in God's grace to self-boasting? Nope, not at all.)

Not the only time Paul speaks this way. – Look at: Rom. 15:18-19. That's thousands of kms!

Paul's way of speaking here clashes with our age of aw-shucks false humility and uncertainty about everything. – But Paul is simply stating the plain facts: v. 10c...

The NT shows us that the other apostles stayed for a long while in Jerusalem. – But Paul was the pioneer, out on the frontiers, pushing back Satan's kingdom, pressing forward, looking outward. –

Compared to the other apostles, Paul wrote more NT books, evangelised more territory, suffering more persecution, and started more churches than any of them, and possible more than all the apostles put together.

→NB: Christianity is not socialistic; it offers no entitlements or guaranteed rewards. – There is no promise of equal outcomes, regardless of your behaviour. –

There are fruitful Christians, and there are lazy ones. – There are great saints, and there are useless ones. –

So in heaven, there will be rewards and levels of honour and dignity and enjoyment for all eternity, based on your faithfulness & effort in this life. –

1 Cor. 3 was clear: some believers will have works that prove to be gold, silver & precious stones that last; others will enter heaven with empty hands and few rewards to enjoy for eternity, wearing a T-shirt that says, 'Just barely'.

What will it be for you? – Are you storing up treasures in heaven, or here on earth? (Matt. 6).

→As Kevin DeYoung notes: *Effort is not a 4-letter word. ...Christians work – they work to kill sin and they work to live in the Spirit. They have rest in the gospel, but never rest in*

their battle against the flesh and the devil [in this life]. ...As gospel Christians, we should not be afraid of striving, fighting, and working.

→Beloved, if Satan can't make you immoral, heretical, divisive, hypocritical, greedy, or angry, it's OK – as long as he can just make you lazy? –

Fill a church with a bunch of sluggards who don't want to work hard for the Lord, and Satan is pretty happy.

Repeat: v. 10...

YET Paul is so careful to make sure the crown goes on the right head:

v. 10d – I.e., 'I am the VERY Jr. partner in this enterprise, if I can be called a partner at all. More like a tool or instrument in the hands of His grace.' – Col. 1:29...

→WHAT then does this tell us about what was NOT motivating Paul to work hard, all the wrong reasons you might be tempted by in labouring for the Lord? –

Paul was NOT working hard for the Lord b/c of: trying to pay God back; trying to earn His salvation; trying to impress others, etc.

No, this alone what was what drove him to pour out his life in such tireless, selfless labours:

v. 10d...

→NB, how ironic: The harder we work for God, the more humbled we should be. – Christians who labour the most for the Lord are often the most blown away by God's grace, because they know that they could never have done it in their own strength. – Lazy & mediocre Christians miss out on this rare discovery of the energising, empowering grace of God.

~ Luther's reply when someone asked how he got so much done: 'You forget that there are two of us.' – Me plus grace. – Php. 4:13...

→NB the sequence:

(1) v. 10a, grace TO ("toward") me (at salvation; monergistic, NOT synergistic) – *which leads to:*

(2) v. 10b, grace WITH me (in sanctification & service; synergistic)...

This is the story of our lives – as a Spurgeon book title reads, *All of Grace*. – Grace from first to last, grace from start to finish. – Grace has been our alpha & will be our omega!

*Through many dangers, toils & snares
I have already come
Tis' grace has brought me safe thus far
And grace will lead me home.*

CONCL. – Restate points...

→Are you a self-made man, or a grace-made man?

+ English Reformer John Bradford saw a drunk lying in the gutter and said, “There but for the grace of God lies John Bradford.”

Can you say that? – Do you truly believe that? – ‘There but for the grace of God go I’. – Can you trace every good and every blessing in your life back, back, back to the fountainhead of God’s grace? – Behind & beneath whatever else and whomever else God used in your life, do you see the origin & root of it all in His grace?...

→Beloved, WHERE would you be apart from God’s saving grace? – I know, for some, if you were saved young, it takes more imagining.

But in light of what Scripture says about your innate depravity, in light of texts like Eph. 2 (read earlier) that show us our true potential outside of Christ, I ask you: Where would you be if God’s grace hadn’t saved you?...

Some of us would be complete pagans, a blight on society...

Others of us might’ve still turned out moral, even religious, but still lost & dead....

Whether outwardly unrighteous, or self-righteous, the end-result is the same. – Whether you would’ve turned out successful, or suicidal (whether useful or useless, whether a purposeful or aimless life), what’s the difference in light of eternity?! – IF God’s grace hadn’t intervened, you were doomed, dead & bound (Eph. 2:1-3), hopelessly lost...

As we sing often:

*O 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!*

+ Story is told about an older Christian who stood up in church to give his testimony. – He told how his salvation was all of grace, all of God, from first to last....

But after the meeting an upset Christian marched up to him and said, ‘That was a very one-sided testimony. You’re going to give people the wrong impression. You said nothing about your part in salvation.’

‘Oh yes,’ said the older Christian, ‘I apologise for leaving that out. Here’s the part I played: I hated God, I rejected His Son, I ran away from Him, but He outran me and caught me by His grace.’ – I.e., 15:10...!

Closing song, “Grace Unmeasured”