“I thank him that enabled me, even Christ Jesus our Lord, for that he counted me faithful, appointing me to his service; though I was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: howbeit I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord abounded exceedingly with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. Faithful is the saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief; howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me as chief might Jesus Christ show all his longsuffering, for an ensample of them that should thereafter believe on him unto eternal life. Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen” (1 Timothy 1:12-17).

These words form one of the most personal passages in all the letters of Paul. Whenever a person of note lays bare his real feelings, he immediately has our attention. These verses reveal Paul’s heart. We are able to see what he felt during some of the events recorded in Acts.

Three truths leap up at us from this portion of Scripture. We see guilt, great guilt. We see grace, great grace. We see gratitude, great gratitude.

Paul begins by reflecting upon the fact that Christ had counted him faithful, putting him into the ministry. He looks back upon his past life and then, as the passage comes to its close, he breaks into a doxology of praise, the kind of praise frequently found in the letters of Paul.

If we can capture the spirit of this passage, our own lives will never be the same. The service seen in Paul’s life will also be in ours. Gratitude will impel us to give ourselves more fully to Him.

I. GREAT GUILT (1:12, 13, 15)

Great guilt is mentioned in verse 13: “Though I was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: . . .”

The word blasphemer means “to speak against, to rail against, to speak sacrilegiously of deity.” Paul himself denied for a time the deity of our Lord. The early verses of Acts 9 reveal that he compelled saints to blaspheme. He thus was a blasphemer and one who caused others to blaspheme.

He describes himself, too, as a persecutor. In Galatians 1:13 Paul said, “I persecuted the church of God, and made havoc of it: . . .” One translation has it, “I persecuted the church savagely or beyond measure.” In fact, when we are first introduced to Paul in Acts 7:58, he is holding the garments of the murderer of Stephen. The next chapter begins, “And Saul was consenting unto his death” (Acts 8:1). Acts 8:3 says Paul persecuted Christians, men and women, and made havoc of the church. Acts 9 continues the same story: “But Saul, yet breathing threatening and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, . . .” Paul, therefore, was a blasphemer and a persecutor.

Paul also adds a third term: “injurious.” This term is from the Greek word hubristan, which suggests violent action. J. N. D. Kelley, in a commentary on the Timothy-Titus letters, translates it, “bully.” It is a word for heavy-handed, violent action. William Barclay suggests that the violent action sometimes carried with it shame which attached itself not to the persecutor but to the persecuted. Paul was saying, “I was guilty of violent action against the church, a kind of action that even brought shame upon the persecuted.” Paul was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and injurious. But Paul says, “Howbeit I obtained mercy.”

Another verse in this paragraph which belongs with the thought of great guilt is verse 15. It is one of the five faithful sayings in the letters to Timothy and Titus. Three are in 1 Timothy, one is in 2 Timothy, and one is in Titus. This is the first one we encounter in these letters. Paul says, “Faithful is the saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to
save sinners; . . .” Paul uses a citation, a quotation, an adage that apparently was in fairly common usage. The saying is this: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” Then Paul adds “Of whom I am chief” Paul was foremost or first. He was first, of course, not chronologically, but in terms of great guilt.

This same awareness comes out in other letters. It is always an interesting truth. For example, in Ephesians 3:8, 9 Paul writes, “Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints; was this grace given, to preach unto the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; and to make all men see what is the dispensation of the mystery...” Paul had an awareness of his past guilt. He speaks of himself as the least of the apostles in 1 Corinthians 15:9, though elsewhere he will insist he is not one whit behind the chiefest of the apostles. It is rather paradoxical that Paul will make statements like these concerning great guilt and other statements that glow with great assurance. The answer to the seeming contradiction, the apparent paradox, is that Paul recognizes from the standpoint of human weakness, he certainly sank to the deepest depths, but he has been forgiven. He understands a continuing human frailty, but he has an unshakable confidence in power of his Lord in his own life. We can easily see his great guilt.

But let me just say here there is no other kind of guilt. The only kind is great guilt. Jesus said to Pilate, “Therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath greater sin.” (John 19:11). Some wrongs are greater. Some matters are weightier (Matthew 23:23). But there are no little sins because there is no little God to sin against. The sins of my life and yours are against the same God against whom Paul sinned. It is great guilt, not just from the standpoint of the immensity of the wrongs, but from the standpoint of whom we sin against. Any sin, all sin, every sin is against God. Paul’s guilt was great guilt but the same is true of yours and mine. Paul said, “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

Clyde R. Eatherly flew a reconnaissance mission over Hiroshima prior to the dropping of the bombs at Hiroshima. He was not on a plane that actually dropped a bomb. He simply flew a reconnaissance mission. Before this experience he had been a personable, affable, very well-adjusted kind of person. After that reconnaissance mission his behavior became extremely erratic. He was indicted for certain felonies. He spent time in various institutions. Apparently, his whole outlook and attitude was changed by that one experience in his life. Seemingly, the change was the result of guilt. It is not my purpose to argue whether or not he really should have reacted in that way but simply to illustrate what guilt can do to the human personality. I mentioned this illustration in a meeting in Corpus Christi, Texas, some years ago, and a doctor came out and said, “I know Mr. Eatherly. I have treated him. I know personally about what you have said.”

We need to recognize the immensity of the sin problem. Sin is our basic burden. I was reading in a newspaper just yesterday where a noted national figure said that these assassination attempts have become the bubonic plague of our twentieth century. We could zero in on many symptoms. We could talk about a lot of problems, but the real plague which may express itself in numerous symptoms is the sin problem. All sin is grievous because it is against God. There is no little God to sin against. There is no wrong that really is little though some wrongs are greater, some matters are weightier. Paul has an awareness of the immensity of his guilt.

II. GREAT GRACE (1:13, 14, 16)

Great grace is seen in these verses too. Two truths must be seen. The grace in this passage provides pardon for the past and an enabling, activating, and energizing force for the present. Grace, as viewed by Paul, is pardon and present power.

The word grace means unmerited favor. In Greek it sounds like a word which meant greeting. Chairein is the word for greeting; Charis is the word for grace. Where the unbeliever or the pagan used the word chairein in his personal correspondence, Paul used this beautiful word, which is somewhat similar in sound and spelling but different in meaning. It originally carried with it the idea of gracious, graceful, winsome, or beautiful. It came to mean the undeserved and unmerited favor that God bestows through Jesus Christ. It refers to God’s eager love reaching out through Christ to give to us what we could never earn or deserve. Thus, Paul affirms in Ephesians 2, “By grace have ye been saved” (v. 5). He also
says, “For by grace have ye been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, that no man should glory” (Ephesians 2:8, 9). Titus 2:11 says, “For the grace of God hath appeared, bringing salvation to all men, . . .” Over and over Paul declares that it is by grace, unmerited favor, that we are saved.

I remember sitting in a class taught by Frank Pack as a college student. I have to frankly confess that, at that time, I hadn’t really understood much about grace at all. I had a conception which emphasized the good outweighing the bad. Of course, it didn’t square with what the Word teaches about salvation through Christ. No amount of good can remove the guilt of wrong, sin, and bad. We sing a truth when we sing,

Not the labor of my hands
Can fulfill the law’s demands.
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin cannot atone,
Thou must save and Thou alone.

When we do right, we do no more than what we ought to do. Doing right doesn’t atone for having done wrong. There has to be some cleansing agent to take care of that past debt. This is why we need the cross, the ultimate expression of god’s grace. We need Jesus “in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our sins according to the riches of his grace” (Ephesians 1:7). I remember sitting in that class and it slowly began to come through to me that it is not a matter of our achieving in our human strength but obediently believing. It is not by achievement or attainment but by atonement. The emphasis in the word is not really upon what we do or what we have done but upon what He does and has done. This is certainly not to say that we have nothing to do. We do. Peter said, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation” (Acts 2:40). Paul said, “Work out your own salvation . . . for it is God who worketh in you both to will and to work, for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12, 13).

I remember sitting at a desk in a bank across from a man who was a successful businessman and banker. His dad was a great teacher in the church, and he confided in me that for years he simply felt a sense of great spiritual futility. It seemed to him that there was very little hope. It appeared to him, in his conception of it all, that the responsibility was weighted so heavily on the human side, that it was hopeless. Certainly we aren’t saying anything that should diminish our service. In fact, I am quite convinced that when we come to see what grace really is we will try to react as Paul did in giving ourselves more fully in service. But the Word makes it very clear that unmerited and undeserved favor is at the base of our justification. Great grace is certainly seen in verse 14: “And the grace of our Lord abounded exceedingly with faith and love . . .” Paul has a word, huper, a kind of prefix that he puts on other words which could be translated super-abundant. He uses an expression here which is saying that the grace overflowed. It was just super-abundant. This is not, of course, to say that God’s grace is a cheap grace. Paul guards against that concept when he writes, “Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? God forbid. We who died to sin; how shall we any longer live therein?” (Romans 6:1, 2). It is to say that despite my sin, despite our present weaknesses, there is hope for everyone of us. There is no need for any of us to be lost because it is not a matter of human attainment. It is a matter of divine atonement. Our part is obedient faith, but the obedience is not the meritorious ground of our justification. It is the necessary condition. The ground is God’s grace. Paul said Jesus came “to save sinners; of whom I am chief; howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me as chief might Jesus Christ show forth all his longsuffering, for an ensample of them that should thereafter believe on him unto eternal life” (v. 16).

Grace, however, is not only pardon for the past but also power for the present. Grace is activating, energizing, spiritual power. In verse 12 Paul said, “I thank him that enabled me, even Christ Jesus our Lord, for that he counted me faithful, appointing me to his service.” Paul sees grace, not simply as that principle related to cleansing from past guilt, but as that which enables me to serve right now.

A good illustration of this would be 2 Corinthians 8 where a very strange kind of spiritual arithmetic is seen. The Macedonians, out of deep poverty and a great trial of affliction, abounded unto the riches of their liberality. Put in equation form it reads like this: great trial of
affliction plus deep poverty equals riches of liberality. This is a kind of spiritual mathematics seen all too seldom today. But what does Paul call it? Paul starts the chapter, as our Bibles are divided, by saying, “We make known to you the grace of God which hath been given in the churches of Macedonia.” What do you call it when poor, afflicted people give generously? Paul said it is God’s grace bestowed upon them. What do you call the ministry to the Gentiles that God gave Paul? It is the grace of God.

Paul said God counted him faithful. When God forgives, He doesn’t say, “Now wait a minute. You must stay back in some inconspicuous place until you have proven yourself.” When the prodigal comes back, the father says, “You sit up here at the head of the table.” In Paul’s case, though one time a persecutor, God counts him faithful and the Lord Jesus enables him by His grace to serve in this great ministry.

We need this concept of grace. Paul said at 1 Corinthians 15:9, “For I am the least of the apostles, than am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” Then, in verse 10, he said, “But I labored more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.”

III. GREAT GRATITUDE (1:12, 17)

Great gratitude is also seen in this passage. In verse 12, Paul says, “I thank him that enabled me, even Christ Jesus our Lord, for that he counted me faithful, appointing me to his service; . . .” Then in verse 17, he said, “Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.” A doxology is an ascribing of praise and an expression of gratitude, thanksgiving, and adoration. It could be said of Paul that there was a “geyser of gratitude” whelming up in his heart and life. What was back of the experience he described in 2 Corinthians 11 when he said, “Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, . . .”? He is not serving out of some legalistic sense of duty. He does not say, “These are the bare, irreducible, minimum, legal requirements, and I have to fulfill them.” Love never says, “This far will I go and no further.” Love never says, “Where does it say I have to give so much?” But love, gratitude, thanksgiving, and appreciation move us to give ourselves to the Lord.

What is the problem in our lives? It is not a giving problem; it is a gratitude problem. It is not an attendance problem; it is an affection problem. Many of us really do not realize what He has done for us. We never had much sense of being lost and, therefore, we have very little sense of being saved. If we could see what it means to be lost, we would see how beautiful salvation is. We need something in our own lives which is closely akin to what Paul had. Paul, in effect, is saying, “I certainly didn’t deserve it; I didn’t earn it. I was the chiefest of sinners. I was going in the wrong direction with all of my might. But my life was turned around and He has given me what I could never earn. In turn I have given Him my heart and life.”

Paul says, “Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever.” Corot the French painter would always paint first the sky because this gave the color, the tone, to everything else in those great landscapes he painted. Even so, we need to start with the King, eternal, immortal, invisible. We need to start with an awareness of His grace. We cannot bootstrap our way to glory. We are not earning or merit- ing our way. But we are gratefully, in faith and obedience, accepting what He has done for us in Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “You are saved by grace through faith.” When I read the nineteenth chapter of Acts about these Ephesians, I find they believed, confessed, and showed their deeds. They burned their books of witchcraft. It is said that they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19:5). To people then who had believed and confessed, who had demonstrated repentance, who had been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, Paul said, “You are saved by grace through faith.” Let us realize that God’s grace is the underlying factor. At the same time let us never think that obedience to the gospel is not essential. It is critically essential because it is by our obedient faith expressed in repentance and baptism that we accept God’s undeserved favor.
When Paul came to the crossroads and Ananias told him, “Saul, why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins,” Saul arose forthwith and was baptized (Acts 22:16). He was thus saved by grace through faith. Grace, though, continued to work and enabled him so that even his great ministry to the Gentiles was called, “the grace of God, which was given me.”

I sound an appeal to you today. I plead and strongly urge that you allow God’s grace to become a reality in your own life, in your own conceptions, in your own awareness of the nature of the gospel and that you be moved by gratitude to serve Him more fully than ever before.