



By Joe Crews

Oh! The Riches of His Grace

I read recently about a business executive whose work was to continually conduct interviews of people who were seeking positions in his corporation. This man insisted on having a long office with his desk opposite the door where the applicants had to enter. As they would walk across the room to take their place in front of him, he would watch them intently. By the time they were seated he already knew what he was going to do about their application.

I'm not saying this is a good way to judge and classify people—by initial impressions—but, unfortunately, most of us do it, either consciously or unconsciously. We make quick decisions, quite unfairly, based on how we respond to an individual's walk, smile or haircut.

Let me ask you a question. Does God judge us in the same way that we judge each other? Aren't you glad He doesn't? He looks at the same people we do, but the Bible says that He does everything "according to the riches of His grace." And what a difference that makes! Man looks on the outward appearance but God looks on the heart.

One of the strangest texts in the Bible is found in 1 Corinthians 1:27, 28. Paul wrote, "But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty." How is that possible? Our human reasoning says that it can never be done. How could lowly, ignorant people or things be used to embarrass the intelligence of the highly educated?

I came across the answer to these questions as I studied the manner in which Jesus called His disciples. Think of it for a moment. The Master needed men who could help Him communicate a life or death message to every country and in all the languages on earth. Suppose you had faced such a task? Where would you have looked for qualified spokesmen and personal representatives? I can't answer for others but I think I would have headed straight for the university centers where linguistics and communication skills were honed to perfection.

Jesus didn't do that. He passed by the great rabbinical schools of His day, and went down by the seaside where men were casting their nets for fish. There He called His disciples from among those who were rough and crude and even vulgar. He chose some who could not speak properly, even in their own provincial dialect! How could those uneducated peasants from the lowest levels of society ever meet the requirements of His worldwide mission? Why didn't He select scholars of Greek and Hebrew culture who would know how to relate to

people in every social circumstance? Let's see if we can find the answers.

In the little fishing village of Bethsaida one bright early morning, the fishermen were taking care of the night's catch. Among those who toiled with the nets and fish was one brawny, hardheaded fellow by the name of Simon Peter. Perhaps he was humming one of the rough folk songs of the sea as he worked at cleaning his catch for the market. Not for a moment did he realize that something would happen to him that day that would bring his name to the lips of millions down through the ages. Peter was just an obscure fisherman when Jesus of Nazareth passed by and looked at him.

What did Christ see as He looked at Peter on that memorable morning? Certainly not the same thing that everyone else saw. You see, the big fisherman was not a very lovable character. He was boastful and arrogant to such a degree that people probably avoided him whenever possible. This impulsive, bumbling man was always putting his foot in his mouth and saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. It almost seems, from the limited record, that he was the kind of man that only his mother could love. But that is not the man Jesus saw as He looked at Peter that day!

Jesus saw the real fisherman. He looked beneath that rough exterior and saw what this braggart could become through the riches of His grace. He saw a man who could stand up and preach a sermon that would bring thousands to the altar crying out "What shall I do to be saved?" And because He recognized what this diamond in the rough could become through the power of grace, Jesus loved him and called him to be a disciple. Isn't that wonderful? And that's why you and I are where we are right now. It's why we're not pulling the smelly nets of sin around anymore. Jesus passed by and looked at us. He didn't see us as we were, but as we might become through His marvelous transforming power. Oh, the riches of His grace!

The Best Out of the Worst

I wish we could know the full story of that encounter by the seaside. First of all, I wonder why Peter and his companions were so willing to follow the call of this humble Galilean stranger, who was almost as rough hewn in appearance as they were. There was nothing special about the physical features of Jesus that would make Him stand out in a crowd. We are told that He was like a "root out of the dry ground," indicating that He was not particularly handsome. His carpenter clothes and calloused hands would have identified Him as just another villager from a nearby community.

How, then, can we explain why those practical men of the sea were willing to walk away from their boats and nets as soon as Jesus said "Follow me"? Who can understand, from this future perspective, why they were drawn to make a lifelong commitment to follow this seemingly ignorant peasant? Surely there must have been something strangely irresistible about the face and voice of Jesus as He called them to leave it all that day. An aura of love and power must have beamed with such strength that they did not even ask the expected questions.

There is no record that they asked about leaving the expensive equipment behind, or how much they would be paid, or how they could leave family or friends on such short notice.

But then began the process of molding all of those clods of fractious human material into a team of powerful evangelists. What hope was there that Peter could make the transformation? I'm reminded of the story of Michelangelo as he walked down the streets of Rome one day. In a corner he observed a piece of cracked marble that had apparently been cast aside by some would-be sculptor. In spite of the ugly split seam across the face of it, the great artist stood looking at the abandoned stone for a long time. Finally he called for his assistants to haul the marble into his studio. Behind the ruined surface Michelangelo had seen something that no one else had been able to recognize. He began to work on the stone with chisel and mallet. Weeks and months passed by as the master hammered and hewed the scarred reject, until finally there emerged from under his skillful fingers the figure of a man that was said to be so perfect that it lacked only life itself. That statue of David stood for many years in the basilica of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome as one of Michelangelo most perfect masterpieces.

I believe that's what Jesus saw as He looked at that marred piece of humanity called Simon Peter. The Divine Artist had seen something in the big fisherman that nobody else had seen, and the shaping process was initiated. It took much hammering to remove all the pride and vainglory. It required blows like the night of the Transfiguration, the denial by the fireside and the night Peter walked on the sea. But slowly there came forth from under the Master's skillful influence a masterpiece.

We can understand that miracle of Peter because the same thing has happened to each of us. In our unconverted condition we were no more attractive to Jesus than the boisterous, loudmouthed fisherman. But when He passed by and looked at us, He loved us in the same way. I was following a stubborn mule through a tobacco patch in North Carolina when He called me to follow Him. My life has never been the same since. How could He bring any good out of such miserable material? And yet He has done it over and over again. He has taken the weak, foolish things to confound the wise and the mighty. Aren't you glad that He came looking for you, and did not pass you by? Praise God for His matchless grace!

My Grace is Sufficient

Consider for a moment how God has taken the weakest and the worst to turn the world upside down. Whom did He choose when He had a major earthshaking task to perform? He walked into a cobbler shop in Northampton, England, and tapped a man on the shoulder as he labored over his shoe lasts. In that humble shop God called William Carey to open up the dark Hindu land of India to the preaching of the gospel. That unknown leather worker became the father of the modern missionary movement in India, and it was my privilege, as a missionary there years later, to work with a direct descendant of the first Hindu convert won to Christianity by William Carey.

Again, Jesus passed down a side Street in Chicago and entered a shoe store where a struggling Christian lad was working as a salesman. His name was D. L. Moody, and Jesus called him that day to be a witness for Him. Dwight Moody stepped out of that little store to become one of the greatest lay evangelists since the days of the apostles. Later, he and his gospel singer, Sankey, went to England for a large evangelistic series in the city of London. On one of their slack days, they took a carriage ride through the forest outside the city, and there they came across an encampment of gypsies. Moody ordered the driver to stop so that he might preach to the ill-famed group who crowded around the carriage. After the sermon Sankey sang one of his beautiful gospel appeal songs. One earnest little gypsy boy stood by the carriage wheel and never took his eyes off the great soloist during the song. Sankey was so moved by the lad that he put his hand on his head and said, "God make a preacher out of this boy." Later, under the influence of that kindly Christian attention, that forest gypsy boy dedicated his life to the ministry and powerfully impacted the world as Gypsy Smith.

In His own day, Jesus also called two tempestuous brothers, who worked the boats and nets with their father Zebedee. James and John seemed to be even less likely candidates for the ministry than the impetuous Peter. They had hair-trigger tempers and would fight at the drop of a hat. Christ actually gave them a nickname in response to their violent dispositions. He called them "Sons of Thunder." Perhaps He bestowed that name after the experience in the Samaritan village. It was there that the brothers wanted to call fire down from Heaven to burn up the entire population because they did not show appropriate hospitality.

From all appearance, Jesus was destroying His mission by calling James and John to be His disciples. It must have been obvious to everyone that these men would embarrass the Master every time they opened their mouths. Yet, Jesus knew exactly what He was doing. He saw the glorious potential in the lives of those cantankerous brothers. One of them would become the most tender-hearted of the twelve, leaning upon the bosom of Jesus and writing unparalleled epistles about love for others. Once again God had chosen the "things which are despised to confound the things that are mighty." "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (Romans 5:20).

Then there was the time Jesus went walking in the Bowery section of wicked old New York City, and down in the filth of the street lay a drunken wretch of a man by the name of Sam Hadley. Every day he would lie in the gutter as a revolting spectacle to those who passed by, and each night he would crawl into one of the flea-bitten rooms along the Bowery to sleep it off. And that's what Jesus saw as He passed by and looked. Or was it what Jesus saw? The truth is that Christ did not see a hopeless derelict at all. He looked past the filth and corruption and saw the man Sam Hadley could become through the power of His grace. He said, "Follow me," and that seeming piece of human refuse responded. For years Sam Hadley preached the gospel along the waterfronts of New York, leading thousands to accept the life-changing grace of Christ, and proving again that God can make the best out of the worst.

Paul Before Nero

How can we describe this “much more” grace that can overpower the strongest propensities of evil? First of all, it is free and available to every soul in the world. Also, it reaches far beyond the trite definitions that we often assign to it. Grace is not a theory, or a dream, or a dead hope. The standard explanation of “unmerited favor” falls far short of describing its redemptive mission. I’d like to suggest that grace is primarily power to provide for every possible need in human life. It takes much power to chisel a chunk of dense granite into the perfect form of a man, but it requires infinitely more to transform a dissolute, immoral man or woman into the image of Jesus Christ.

Of all the writers of the Bible, Paul seemed to have a truer concept of grace and also a deeper appreciation for its dramatic performance in daily living. If the great apostle could write today he would probably not be able to give a more profound statement on grace than he gave to the church in Corinth. He wrote: “But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon 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” (1 Corinthians 15:10). In one verse Paul makes a threefold reference to the grace that was totally responsible for all his accomplishments. Constantly he preached about it and gave witness in every place to his miraculous encounter with Christ on the Damascus road.

Paul never forgot the radical events of the day that brought him face to face with the Messiah he rejected and despised. With fury in his heart he had rushed to destroy every Christian he could track down in the territory of Damascus. But then came the bright light and the voice from Heaven! The proud Pharisee was blinded during that confrontation, but he also had his eyes opened for the first time concerning the object of his intense hatred. As the scales fell away from his spiritual vision and Paul recognized the voice of the very Jesus he had persecuted, he cried out, “What wilt thou have me to do?”

Have you ever wondered why Jesus chose the most rabid religious fanatic in the Jewish community to be His missionary to the Gentiles? It is certain that all outward appearances would have precluded Saul from any possible consideration for such a mission. But Jesus made His move on the basis of grace—that divine energy that would capture the focused rage of Saul and redirect it into the missionary zeal of Paul. No wonder the great apostle wrote, “By the grace of God, I am what I am.”

How did that grace-power operate in Paul’s extensive ministry? When he found grace in the eyes of the Lord, what did it do for him? He found deliverance from the storm at sea and from the deadly venom of the viper later on the island. He was rescued from prison and saved from the mob who tried to stone him. Grace was very real to him, because it consisted of dynamic present power for every dangerous moment of his busy life. It is easy to understand why he made grace the chief theme of his evangelistic thrust among the non-Jewish cities to which he ministered. To the Ephesians he wrote, “Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Ephesians 3:8).

Did Paul find that marvelous grace adequate for all the problems and dangers that constantly beset him? In one case he became afflicted with an irritating physical disability that he designated as “a thorn in the flesh.” From other places in his epistles we gather that the problem had to do with his vision. In his letter to the Galatians he stated, “Ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me” (Galatians 4:15). Again he spoke of having to write them in large letters as though he could not see very well (Galatians 6:11).

The infirmity became so severe that Paul made it a special subject of prayer. He described the experience in his second letter to the Corinthians: “For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:8, 9). Thus God’s powerful delivering grace now became the sustaining grace that held Paul firm and unmoving even though the thorn was not removed.

To understand the strength of that sufficient grace we need to follow Paul through those final weeks and months of his ministry. He had an insatiable desire to go back to Jerusalem and proclaim the gospel where he had barely escaped from the infuriated priests and Pharisees. All his friends tried to dissuade him from the dangerous venture, warning him about the violent prejudice of the Jewish community. Paul’s answer was: “Now I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there, save that the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me. But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:22-24).

That grace which had been revealed to Paul on the Damascus road was like a burning fire in his heart. He longed to give one final testimony to the leaders of the people he loved, even though God had revealed to him that imprisonment would result.

The enemies, of course, were waiting for Paul, and they did attack him physically. He was manhandled by both soldiers and citizens, and after appraising the depth of feeling against him as revealed in the false witnesses before the governor’s court, Paul appealed to Caesar.

After months of political intrigue, as well as many miserable weeks of life-threatening storms at sea, Paul was delivered to the authorities in Rome. There he was thrown into a dark, mucky hole in the ground called the Mamertine Prison. Today, those who visit the site are conducted down brightly lighted steps into the dungeon area. I thought of Paul’s actual confinement as I walked down those stairs on my visit to Rome. He languished there for many days before they hauled him out and prepared him to stand before the emperor. I’ve tried to reconstruct in my mind how Paul must have felt as he was ushered into the throne room of the most evil, bloodthirsty tyrant who ever ruled a nation. Nero was the heartless despot who had ruthlessly persecuted the Christians at Rome and whose actions toward his own people had been

without a trace of pity or compassion.

What a moment it must have been for the eloquent Paul when he was granted permission to speak in his own behalf before the ruler of the entire world. How did he feel as he looked around that magnificent hall where ambassadors and legates from every country were assembled to honor the emperor? There is no doubt that Paul could have presented an able defense for himself because he was highly educated in the persuasive art of speech, but when he saw that vast assemblage of representatives from the ends of the earth his heart was moved within him. He realized that the words he would speak that day would be carried back to all the countries represented there. So instead of his own legal defense Paul preached one of his most powerful sermons about the riches of that grace revealed so long ago on the road to Damascus.

That sermon never died. It was no doubt repeated by those who heard it until the influence had circled the earth. But Paul was returned to the filth of the wretched Mamertine. Later, he was granted limited freedom to communicate with friends and fellow Christians, but after two years the guards came again to place the aged apostle under chains from which he would never be freed.

Was that promised grace sufficient to sustain the gallant tent maker to the very end of his life? Yes. The day came when they led him down the cobblestone street for the last time, past the emperor's palace and into the arena where his life was to be taken from him. What did Paul think as he passed the great statue of Nero that stood in front of the royal palace? History tells us that the huge image towered 110 feet into the air; It would have been impossible not to see it as the soldiers escorted the prisoner toward the coliseum.

Paul undoubtedly saw the monument that day and the inscription carved into the pedestal: Nero—Conqueror. Is it hard for us to imagine the thoughts that passed through his head as he looked up at that massive stone image and read the words on the foundation? Surely Paul's mind was taken back to the day when he sat in the prison at Corinth, writing an epistle of encouragement to the suffering saints in Rome. He had heard of their persecutions under the cruel hand of Nero, and his pen dripped with sympathy and love as he poured out his heart to them. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword? ... Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor power, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:35-39).

Paul's own inspired words now come back to comfort him as he reads the boastful inscription on the statue. Surely he must have thought, "Nero, you are not the conqueror. You are the slave of your own perverted nature. Christians are the free ones. We are 'more than conquerors through Christ our Lord.'"

Paul counted it all joy to make the supreme sacrifice for the Savior he loved. A man cannot die for a shallow cause, but something had been etched into the heart of Paul that could never be erased. God's grace was sufficient. It did not fail him. Neither has it proved insufficient for any other who has claimed it by faith. A man is never the same when Jesus passes by and looks and loves. Paul certainly wasn't, and neither was Nathaniel whom Jesus saw under the fig tree.

And what can we say about Zacchaeus, the midget millionaire, who was so eager to see the Master that he climbed a sycamore tree in order to get a better look? This man had been a professional white-collar thief, but when Jesus looked at him that day his greedy heart was transformed by grace. Have you considered the miracle of that moment when Jesus called his name and announced that He was going home with Zacchaeus for lunch? In a flash the wily tax collector slid down the tree to accept the offer, but by the time he touched the ground his devious nature had been totally changed, and he was a different person. His first words were, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken anything from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold" (Luke 19:8).

No one can deny that those words bear mighty testimony of true conversion. Zacchaeus had a lot to restore, and he still had committed to sharing half his fortune with the poor. What a fantastic heart change took place in that few seconds of conversation. Oh, the riches of His grace! How measureless and deep. One day Jesus passed by on that road and looked down and saw a poor man in the gutter. He reached out to him and met his need. The next day He passed the same way and looked up to see a rich man in a tree. He was able to meet his need also. How wonderful that He can meet the need of every individual at any social level and regardless of the problem. He can meet your need and mine this very moment.

Peter's Final Triumph

But let's come back to the biography of the big fisherman. His was probably the most dramatic change of all the rest. Yet there was another time that Jesus looked at Peter under very different circumstances. All the disciples had professed undying devotion to their Master, but impulsive Peter had spoken louder and longer than any of the others. He would go to his death rather than be disloyal to the One who had called him from his nets. Jesus, of course, knew better and warned the ardent disciple that his words would soon be tested and found wanting. "Verily I say unto thee, that this night before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice" (Matthew 26:34).

Within hours the little group of disciples were trying to stay awake while Jesus agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane. Suddenly, out of the darkness of the night, came shouts from a well-armed mob, and Peter, stirred from his slumber, leaped to his feet with sword in hand. In a rash display of bravado he swung wildly at the nearest man, whacking off an ear. Instantly, Peter was rebuked by the quiet voice of the Master, "Put up again thy sword into his place."

Then pandemonium broke out as the traitor Judas identified Jesus as the object of their search. In the resulting confusion Jesus was violently separated from His followers and dragged away for an impromptu, illegal confrontation with Pilate in the governor's judgment hall. As for the disciples, we have this simple, succinct biblical statement, "Then all the disciples forsook him, and fled" (Matthew 26:56). But then Matthew quickly adds these words, "But Peter followed him afar off unto the high priest's palace" (Verse 58).

The shameful interlude around the fire in the palace courtyard highlights the depth of Peter's instability, earlier recognized by Jesus when He added the name Cephas or Peter (rolling stone) to Simon's name. In three groveling denials Peter distanced himself from the One who was plainly visible through the open door. Those lips which had declared, "thou art the Son of God" now began to pour forth curses and invectives to avert the accusing finger of a little girl who recognized him, but his earthy denials were cut short in mid-sentence by the shrill sound of a crowing rooster. Then Peter's eyes were drawn through that open door to meet the steady, return gaze of Jesus—a sorrowful look of love and compassion that would burn in the broken heart of Peter for many hours.

As the full horror of what he had done dawned on Peter's mind he fled into the sheltering darkness. Mercifully we are not allowed to follow the pain-racked apostle as he sought out a solitary place to agonize through a seemingly endless night. But the remorse did not cease for Peter on that Paschal night, nor on the preparation day which followed.

In our own minds we can easily picture the tormented state of Peter's mind during that special high Sabbath while Jesus rested in the tomb. He struggled with the thought that he might have committed the unpardonable sin. The overwhelming guilt of his despicable deed was constantly before him.

But then it was Sunday morning and Peter forced himself to join the other disciples as they assembled to share their grief. There is shame on the part of all as they remember their cowardly conduct on Thursday night, but Peter is more devastated than any of the others. I can picture him drawing aside into a corner, still red-eyed from weeping. Suddenly the door bursts open and Mary Magdalene flies into the room, gasping out the electrifying news that she has seen the resurrected Jesus. There is a stir of excitement, but then a wave of unbelief. Excitedly Mary repeats the words of the angel that they should go to Galilee to meet the Master for themselves. But the Bible says that her words "seemed to them as idle tales, and they believed not" (Luke 24:11).

Is it hard to imagine Mary's frustration at such skepticism of her eyewitness report? But where was Peter? Surely he would believe that she was telling the truth. Seeing him in the corner she rushed to pour out her story anew. "Come," she said, "We must meet our Lord in Galilee." "No, Mary. Not me. Jesus will never want to speak to me again. I denied Him with cursing and swearing!" And then Mary's words tumble out with renewed excitement, "No, Peter, the angel said, 'Tell his disciples and Peter.' He called your name. He especially wanted

you to be there.”

Did ever sweeter words fall upon a human heart than those thrilling words of Mary? Into the darkened life of that grieving disciple the glory of heaven burst like a newly risen sun. And then Peter is running, running to tell everyone the glorious news. The narrative continues after saying “they believed not,” with these words, “Then rose Peter and ran unto the sepulcher” (Verse 12). The joyful words rang in his heart—Jesus still loved him! Jesus had forgiven him!

I need waste no further words with the story, because every one of us has passed through the same sharp-edged remorse that cut off Peter’s joy and hope. We have asked ourselves the same question that he must have screamed into the darkness—”Why did I do it? I loved Him and yet I denied Him!” And our broken hearts have been lifted and healed by the same blessed assurance that our sins have been forgiven. Jesus loves us still and responds instantly to our cry of repentance. Hallelujah! What a Saviour! How can we not love such a Redeemer? And from such an experience of restoration we may enter as Peter did into a life of constant victory and fruitful witnessing for the Master. All because He has chosen us in our weakness, through the riches of His grace, to confound the things that are mighty. Where sin abounded, let grace much more abound! Thanks be to God for the unsearchable riches of that grace!

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