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Salvation by the Grace of God

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Haggai 2:10-19; Zech. 4:7.

"From this day will I bless" (Hag. 2:19). That is a strange break and change in the tone, the course of things. At one moment it is all judgment, condemnation, the pointing out of failure, and then suddenly the whole thing is reversed in this way. Without any explanation, without any ground being mentioned for so doing, the Lord says, "From this day will I bless", and it is just that strange and striking change at that point that explains the peculiar paragraph before about this particular law.

The Inexorability of the Law

You will notice in your margin the law referred to. You are taken back to Deuteronomy where this law was established about the priest giving a verdict upon certain matters. The position was this: at the time of Haggai's prophecy, a company had come back from the captivity, found the land desolate, the city and temple destroyed, but after encouragement and by good leadership they had turned to build the temple. But then they had become discouraged, various things arose to discourage them, and they had stopped and turned their attention to building their own houses, planting their own vineyards, cultivating their own fields, and for fifteen years they had neglected the house of the Lord and given themselves to their own affairs. You know that the earlier part of these prophecies have to do with the result. They had said, "It is not the time to build the Lord's house!" They were challenged: "Is it time for you to dwell in your own ceiled, completed, roofed houses?" They had completed their own houses, and had left the Lord's house unfinished. The word

'ceiled' means completed, roofed. "Is it time for you to dwell in your own finished houses, while My house lies waste, unfinished?"

Then the Lord showed them that this neglect of His house had resulted in judgment upon their fields, vines and flocks and that all sorts of things had happened and misfortunes overtaken them; the whole thing was full of disappointment because of His house.

Then at length, after fifteen years, stirred up again by the Spirit of the Lord and by the leaders, they laid the foundation of the Lord's house and got to work. The encouragement of the Lord came through His servant - "I am with you, says the Lord". And they had worked and for three months they had given themselves wholeheartedly to this matter of building the Lord's house. At the end of the three months the situation was not changed at all in their fields, vines, and flocks; still the adversity seemed to rest upon their labours. They came expecting to find so much and they found very much less. They looked for much and got little, and with all their devotion to the Lord, with all their hard work in the direction of the Lord's indicated will, there was no sign of the lifting of the curse and the judgment. It still remained; and that was a perplexity. They were greatly discouraged by it, they were evidently asking questions about it. They were evidently saying things like this, "Well, when we did neglect the Lord's interests, then trouble overtook us, we can understand that; but we have repented and now for this time we have been wholeheartedly giving ourselves to those interests and it has made no difference, the trouble has not been removed; it does not pay to be out-and-out for the Lord, we might just as well be looking after our own interests for what we are getting out of it!"

Then the Lord turns them to this law as explaining the situation. It is taking them back to law. Well, the law as cited explains the situation. The ground was cursed and polluted and the people had been contaminated. The people were in a state of corruption and pollution through those fifteen years, also they were in a state of unholiness according to the law.

Now, when they had cleansed themselves and repented and got right, they expected that when they went to their field, their condition would make their field holy. They were in the position of priests carrying holy things in their garments. They expected it would become clean, but the Lord said, "No, not at all, that does not happen!" And if something that is unclean touches what is clean, it corrupts it. That is the law. It is a hard law, and the Lord is bringing back very forcibly to that. Under a reign of law, that is how things are and the whole thing is hopeless. When you reach that point just before the last sentence, you say, "Well, what is the good, where is the hope, the whole thing is perfectly hopeless, there is no way through at all, we might just as well give it up, we cannot put this situation right; it does not matter what we do, we cannot rectify the past, we cannot clear up the wrong of years gone by whatever we do now! The law written in the very nature of things means that though we may today get right with God, we cannot clear up the past years, the sin of past years still is there, no amount of good works today can atone for the wrong works of the past. It is a hopeless situation!"

That is just the point. The Lord says in effect, "Look here, all your good works do not make your bad works good. According to law, all that you are doing now does not clear up this bad situation, you cannot do anything yourself to put the wrong of the past right. You cannot, by any amount of devotion, merit a thing. You can work, labour and spend yourself utterly in My interests, but it does not merit a thing, it does not straighten out anything, it does not clear up anything. Wrong is wrong and you cannot atone for it or put it right even by a life of most utter devotion."

The Mercy of Grace

"From this day will I bless". What is that? Law goes out and grace comes in. Law says, "Hopeless!" Grace says, "A wide open door!" But it is all of grace. You have come onto the ground of the house of God and the house of God, from foundation to topstone, is grace, "...bring forth the top stone with shoutings of Grace, grace, unto it". This thing that God is doing, this house that He is building, is, from the very first to the last stone, from the foundation to topstone, a testimony to His grace, and that is borne out so forcibly in the letter to the Ephesians which brings the Church so fully into view, more fully than in any other part of the Scripture, and there fourteen times in that short letter the word 'grace' is used. And what is the sum of it all there? That we, the Church, should be to the praise of the glory of His grace. Despair of the whole situation along the line of law, and we are brought into this house of God, this great spiritual structure of His, on the ground of grace. There is a little bracketed phrase in Ephesians: "By grace have ye been saved" (Eph. 2:5). We are brought in by grace, the work goes on by grace, it is all grace, and the crowning will be grace, and it will be a great house, a great building of God standing in eternity, a testimony to the grace of God. Oh, the situation is hopeless but for His grace, and the Lord is going to keep us there.

Now, so often we have been inclined to think, if we have not actually thought, the more out and out for God we are, the more of the Divine blessing we will get. If only we are devoted to the interests of God, we will come into the line of the greatest blessing, and that kind of mentality has been behind a great deal of our disappointment and the problem of our life. Why is it that the more devoted you are to the Lord, the more out and out for the Lord, the more utter, and the more you are given to what you see to be His highest interests, the more trouble you have? It works that way, it does not work the other way. On the outside of things you are not more blessed because you are the more devoted. Have you been caught in that, is that one of your problems? Are you thinking, "Now here is the full thought of God revealed!" you are seeing something more than the average see and if you are going right on with God into all His full thought, you are going to get into the way of the greatest blessing? What is meant by the greatest blessing? We are blessed with all the blessings of the Spirit in the heavenlies (Eph. 1:3), but down here what is our experience? Not that the Lord so manifestly, obviously comes alongside and works for us and lets it be known that He is with us, on our side, and woe betide those who stand against us! We think it ought to be like that. It is not at all. There is very little, if anything of that at all, and our real experience is this, that after all it does not matter how devoted you are, how far you go, how utter, it is all to be of grace, it is all a matter of the grace of God. We are going to get nothing by reason of our devotedness, we are going to win nothing here by reason of our utterness, we are going to merit nothing at all. The Lord is going to keep us right down on this basis of grace, only grace. But then it is grace, and we know that there is another side, a hidden side, of spiritual blessings in the heavenlies. There is a great deal of spiritual blessing. There are the enrichments of our spiritual lives, there is a knowing of the Lord. We are not always alive to the greatness of our spiritual blessings, because, perhaps, we are so near to them. You go out into other realms where they are not and you at once realize that you have something of tremendous value. You move in the starvation realms of spiritual life, and you know. But that is another side.

We have the spiritual blessings, but my note of emphasis just now is this, that the Lord says, "From this day will I bless", and He says that right at a point where the situation is utterly hopeless according to law. The law says, "No hope, no way through at all." The law says that a devoted Christian is on no other ground than any other person in this matter. You may have, through months or through lifetimes, been devoted to the house of God; it does not put you on any other ground than the ground of grace, it does not merit anything.

But it does mean this, that you come on to the ground of the Lord's grace, the Lord's blessing in grace, when you recognize that you can merit nothing. When you have done all, you are an unprofitable servant. Do we want to enjoy the blessing? I think, I am quite sure, that we shall not really enjoy the blessings of the Lord until we have fully recognized that everything is of grace. Oh no, it makes no difference whether we go right on with the Lord. You see, Ephesians is deep truth. We may speak of it in that way. Some people call it advanced doctrine. It is; there are the profound things there but it does not change the position. A lot of people think that deeper teaching, advanced truth, means that you get off a grace basis on to a merit basis. Not a bit of it! Ephesians is grace, grace, all the time, just as much as Romans is, and the Lord is going to keep us there, and our greater and fuller and higher blessings come when we have got that settled. There is nothing for us, only by the grace of God.

Of course, there is a great deal more in this. I think there is an immense history behind what we have been saying. It touches far-reaching matters. It seems to me that the principles here are carried into the New Testament very fully. You will find them working out in Peter's case in Caesarea very deeply and drastically. It was really the basis of the whole crisis there. Peter was on the old legal basis, that a holy man is a holy man legally, ceremoniously. He must not touch anything unclean. If he touches something unclean, the law is that he will be made unclean and so he says, "Nothing unclean has ever entered my lips! Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common and unclean (Acts 10:14). I am not going to defile myself by touching Gentiles!" The Lord was preparing him for something. He was under law and he was not going to defile himself by contact with a dead body of a Gentile. But the Lord worked, got him to Caesarea, and what was the verdict of Peter in the long run when he reported to the legalists at Jerusalem? "Cleansing their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:9). Oh, then grace came in for the Gentiles and brought them in, cleansing their hearts, and Peter was not defiled by touching them because their hearts were cleansed. Grace has triumphed through faith and saved the whole situation. You can see by just that hint how the law was working out and principles were working out.

We simply take the message now - "From this day will I bless". The whole situation is hopeless, but "from this day will I bless". Grace finds a way where law shuts the door - that is what it means. The law does continually come back on us as to past life. You cannot do anything now to atone for that, you cannot put it right. If you are under the reign of law you are undone because of past life. All your failures legally are going to come back on you, but grace finds a way. The Lord is going to keep us right on to the end on the basis of grace and that is the basis of blessing.