

The Triumph of Grace

I Corinthians 1:1-9

Introduction

Perspective is everything. Remembering God's call from the past, discerning his obvious grace in the present, and looking to our assured hope in the future is the art of discipleship.

Recall the Call

The Apostle Paul was intentional about everything he did, and his introduction is no different. Why was he writing this? What allowed him to keep going after imprisonments, beatings, lashings, being stoned, shipwrecked, assassinations attempted on his life, betrayals, hunger, thirst, exhaustion and daily anxiety for the dozens of churches he oversaw (2 Cor. 11:23-29)? The call of God (v1). Paul knew why he was doing what he was doing because he remembered how God had intervened in his life and changed everything (Acts 9). Interestingly, the Damascus Road conversion didn't just allow Paul to see God's purpose from there on out, but even working in and through his wicked past (Gal. 1:15). He not only laid hold of his own call, but the same grace extended to the Corinthian church (v2). They were definitively sanctified in Christ and called to live like it, like all the saints everywhere bearing the name of Jesus.

Seeing Grace

Remarkably, Paul gives thanks always for *this* church (v4)! Knowing which church this is, we might wonder if Paul does. Stoned one too many times? From this letter we know that at least four factions were tearing them apart (1:12). Paul thanks God he only baptized a few of them (1:14)! They were ignorant of the dwelling of the Spirit and the punishment for factionalism (3:16-17). They tolerated sexual immorality unheard of among pagans, and needed to be told about the consequences of prostitution that took place at the Temple of Aphrodite (5:1; 6:12-20). They were suing each other before unbelievers (6:1-11). They were selfish and drunk at the Lord's Supper (11:17-22)—despite what he specifically told them to do (11:23)! Paul planted this church and ministered there for a year and a half (Acts 18:1-17). More than anyone, he knew their sins, and yet more than anyone he was quick to acknowledge and be grateful for their gifts. When he looked at this church he first saw a people “enriched in [Christ] in all speech and knowledge” (v5). They lacked no gift (v7) even though they need to be instructed on how to value and use their gifts (12:12-31; 14). But he doesn't say these things together: “You're gifted, but wow, you might as well not be.” Paul will pull no punches throughout this letter, but his love for them and recognition of their God-given gifts is not dimmed by their sin. Rather, his eye for grace itself allows him to see their sin most clearly, and to effectively address it. What is known as the “critical eye” is not as wisely critical as it ought to be.

A Sustained Hope

Having seen the call in the past and discerned the evidences of grace in the present, Paul is confident that God would sustain them to the end—the resurrection from the dead (v8, 15:21-24). This hope inevitably follows the calling and gifts. Do you know where grace found you, is now, and where it is taking you? Can you find it all over the place in the most messed up Christian you know? In your spouse and children? In this church, and another one? Have you told them? Know the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), acknowledge them and be a realist like Paul, knowing and believing that grace will triumph.