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Introducing His Letter

(2 Corinthians 1:1, 2)

HIS GREETINGS (1:1, 2)

When I write to a fellow-Christian, I usually end my letter with the words, 'with warmest Christian greetings'. Many Christians do something similar. From whom did we learn this? Probably from each other, but there can be little doubt that this kind of greeting comes ultimately from the New Testament writers, whose salutations always have a strongly Christian tone. In the New Testament letters, however, the greetings normally come at the start rather than the finish, although you sometimes find them at the end as well, as a glance at 1 Corinthians 16:21-24 or Philippians 4:21-23 will show.

This feature is just one indication that the Christian faith, which in Paul's day was so new, transformed everything it touched, as it still does today when it is taken seriously. This applied even to something as standardized and habitual as the forms of greeting people used in their letters. Here, as in most of his other letters, Paul was taking traditional forms and adapting them in new ways, putting them to the service of Christ's gospel. There is probably much we can use in the service of the gospel, provided the way we seek to serve transmits the gospel's authentic content, for we must not cloud or alter it.

In our own culture, it is customary to start every letter, 'Dear ...', whether it be informal or formal, even when it is a letter of complaint. This form is followed even when the writer is

penning a letter to someone he or she dislikes. I wonder what Paul would have done with this form of words if it had been part of his culture? Perhaps it would have become the basis for some beautiful thoughts on Christian love and its source in God's love expressed so movingly in the death of Christ.

First of all, Paul does a completely normal thing. He gives his name and identifies those to whom he is writing. He does this in all his letters, which is one of several reasons why scholars of all schools treat the Epistle to the Hebrews as separate from the Pauline corpus. This is very helpful, because however many other issues scholars have to face (such as the date of particular epistles and the reason for their writing), these two basic facts are already given to us clearly and plainly. His Jewish name, of course, was Saul, but those who were Roman citizens, as Paul was, also had a Roman name, and it was understandable that he should use this in work for Christ that took him well beyond the bounds of Israel and the Jewish people.

Most cultures have standard ways of expressing a greeting, and Paul combines terms ('grace' and 'peace') which came respectively from Greek and Hebrew culture. Both Paul and Peter normally use this greeting at the start of their letters, with occasional variations, for instance in Paul's two letters to Timothy; so also in 2 John and Jude. This suggests that the formula, 'grace and peace', although frequently used, was never completely standardized in the New Testament church.

He does not simply employ the word of greeting that was standard in Greek letters, but rather modifies it. This was *chairein*, which is connected to *chara*, meaning 'joy'. The basic meaning of *chairein* is 'to rejoice', although in greetings it signified 'hail' but probably still with a touch of its basic sense, rather in the way you might say 'Cheerio!' (with its suggestion of cheerfulness) to a friend in most circumstances, but would hesitate to use this word if he or she had been recently bereaved or was moving off to face something distressing. Why does he alter this? Is there no joy in the Christian life? Of course there is and Paul himself asserts this very plainly in Galatians 5:22, when he says, 'The fruit of the

Spirit is ... joy'. In fact in this present letter he refers very soon to 'your joy' (1:24) and then to 'my joy' (2:3). It is not however as fundamental to the Christian life as grace. Paul, a very clear Christian thinker, was never in danger of confusing root and fruit. Grace is the root, and joy a fruit of what God has done in graciously bringing us to himself. So he changes *chairein* to the somewhat similar-sounding *charis*, 'grace'.

What then is grace? Simply 'unmerited favour', and this is the basis of everything Christians enjoy in Christ. It is for Christ's sake we are accepted by God and there is nothing we have done, or are doing, or even promise or hope to do which can be a substitute for this. Acceptance with God is to be received by faith, not earned by works that we mistakenly think meritorious. This is made abundantly clear in a passage like Ephesians 2:8 and 9, where Paul says, 'For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no-one can boast.' It is vitally important for each of us to grasp this clearly and put our faith in Christ and in him alone.

Paul thought of grace as both glorious and immensely rich (Eph. 1:6, 7), because it was the source of every blessing of the Christian's life in Christ. He follows his use of the word here with another very rich word, the normal term employed by Jews when greeting each other. This would remind the readers of the historical roots of their faith, which were in the Hebrew Scriptures. This word *eirene*, usually rendered 'peace', is actually so full of meaning as to be almost untranslatable by one word or phrase, although the often-suggested 'well-being', would not be too wide of the mark. It sums up the very practical difference Christ and the salvation God has given us through him have made. We are no longer outsiders, estranged from God because of the barrier our sin has erected between us and him. Instead, we have now been welcomed into a place of peace, love, security, warmth, fellowship and plenty, a place of sure and certain hope.

In the whole of chapter 1, verses 1 to 11, as in so much he says later, Paul constantly reminds his readers of the Source of all the blessings Christians receive. That Source is 'God'

(v. 9) or 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (v. 3) or 'Christ' (v. 5). In verse 2, he articulates this Source in the double phrase, 'God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ'.

We need to ponder these words and take seriously what they reveal about Paul's view of Christ. Clearly he saw him as an equal Source of divine blessing, equal, that is, with God himself. This is quite staggering. Who is he writing about? A Man who died at thirty-three on a Roman scaffold! Remember too that Paul, as a Jew, was a monotheist through and through.

Could we have misunderstood him? Is he simply indulging in a kind of literary short-cut, so that all he really means is that grace comes from God and peace from Christ? Even if this were so, the implications of this would be colossal, given the fulness of meaning we have already seen in that word *eirene*. This can hardly be his intended meaning, however, for at the end of this letter, he ascribes grace specifically to Christ in what is probably the most-quoted verse in the New Testament, 'May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ ... be with you all' (13:14). Clearly he viewed his Lord as fully divine. To him the Jesus of Nazareth who had lived and taught and suffered and died and risen from the dead and who was exalted in heaven was as truly God as God the Father. There is just no way in which the great significance of his words here can be reduced.

It may even be significant that he uses the word 'our' of the Father but not of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul was a most exact writer and what seem to be small matters of phrasing like this often have considerable import. Because the Father is God he may seem remote, but this possessive pronoun adds a note of intimacy. On the other hand, because Jesus is truly human, we may be tempted to forget his divine majesty. God is not just the Father, but our Father; Jesus is not just our Lord but the Lord. We might compare this with John's phraseology when he writes that 'we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One' (1 John 2:1). 'Father' may seem a gentler designation than 'God', and yet we need Someone to speak to him in our defence. We think of Jesus as gentle (and Paul alludes to this gentleness in 10:1), and yet 'righteous' suggests strict moral standards. This kind

of language in both the Pauline and Johannine verses should warn us against thinking of the first Person of the Trinity simply as majestic and morally exacting and the Second simply as gentle and near. All three Persons of the Trinity share the same qualities, for They are all equally and fully divine.

One further point needs to be made about this greeting. If a group of words requires a verb to make it a sentence, then verse 2 is not a proper sentence, for there is no verb in it as Paul wrote it. We do normally recognise a sentence, however, when a verb is not stated but is clearly assumed. Here it seems to be some part of the verb 'to be', but which part? Is Paul making a statement or is he expressing a hope? Without doubt, it is the former. For 'grace', this is settled decisively when we find that, in writing his first letter to the Corinthians and using exactly the same form of words, he immediately goes on to say, 'I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus' (1 Cor. 1:3, 4). In his letter to the Romans, probably written not long after 2 Corinthians, he was to join grace and peace together in a way that shows Christians to possess both: 'Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand' (Rom. 5:1, 2).

So then, he is reminding the Corinthians that these blessings are undoubtedly theirs, with perhaps an implied exhortation to ponder them and to live in the good of them. It would not do any harm for us to do this, too, whenever we read this greeting at the start of one of the epistles. Certainly the words become very familiar to readers of these letters, but their very frequency should prompt us to give them a lot of thought.

What kind of status did Paul's letter have for its first readers? It came to them with divine authority, for Paul's reference to God's will in his apostleship (1:1) was probably intended as a signal to them to take everything he wrote seriously as the word of God. Apostles were persons sent on a mission by the authority of another, in this case Christ. Paul was not 'pulling rank' in writing in this way, for it was customary at that time for writers to indicate their standing or their occupation in the introductions to their letters.

We will now go back to look more fully at verse 1. When Paul started out on his journey to Damascus (Acts 9:1, 2), it was his own will that was uppermost in his mind. He was strongly opposed to the messianic claims of Jesus and so was antagonistic to his followers. This will of his was reinforced by the will of the Sanhedrin, for he took with him letters from that august Jewish body authorizing him in the course of action he was determined to follow. But God had other plans and the Damascus Road encounter with the risen Christ led to a total reorientation of Paul's life and programme and brought him into line with God's purpose for him. This was anything but his own devising. No doubt when he penned the words 'by the will of God' he will have thought, at least momentarily, of that great saving encounter with his Lord. This epistle contains an unusually large number of passages where Paul must have been reminded of the great Damascus Road encounter of Christ with him. See 4:6 and 5:17 and the comments on them. (It may be that this is not unconnected with the fact that his apostleship was under attack at Corinth, for it was on the Damascus Road that he received his commission from Christ.)

If Paul wrote this letter out of his apostolic consciousness, what are we to make of the assertion often made that the writers of Scripture did not know they were writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit? This is at least too sweeping, as we can see here. The fact is that in the New Testament period, apostleship and inspiration went together. When Christ addressed the original apostles shortly before his death, he promised them the Holy Spirit. The Spirit would come to them as the Spirit of Truth to aid them supernaturally in their communication of God's truth. These promises are set out in John 14:23-26; 15:26, 27; 16:12-15. A study of these passages certainly shows they covered the kind of exposition of the significance of Christ and his person and work which we find in Paul's letters. Here the Holy Spirit was taking of the things of Christ and bringing out their meaning. Paul was not, of course, there at the time these promises were given, but, as an apostle appointed later by the risen Christ, the very same Christ who gave these promises, he would have come into all the good of them.

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