

# A Constant Grace Part I

a sermon in the series  
Hebrews: An Epistle of Encouragement

A sermon delivered Sunday Evening, May 4, 2002  
at Oak Grove Baptist Church, Paducah, Ky.  
by S. Michael Durham  
© 2002 Real Truth Matters

## Hebrews 13:18-25

*Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly. 19 But I beseech you the rather to do this, that I may be restored to you the sooner. 20 Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, 21 Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. 22 And I beseech you, brethren, suffer the word of exhortation: for I have written a letter unto you in few words. 23 Know ye that our brother Timothy is set at liberty; with whom, if he come shortly, I will see you. 24 Salute all them that have the rule over you, and all the saints. They of Italy salute you. 25 Grace be with you all. Amen.*

“All good things must come to an end.” So we say. But that it is just not true with our God or His Gospel. The angel said to Mary, “And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end” (Luke 1:33). He is the Christ, the Eternal One, the Ancient of Days, the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End! There is no end to His reign or His kindness to us who have been made alive by His Holy Spirit. Forever and ever we will receive His unimaginable goodness. Think about it, we will continually, without end, enjoy the loving-kindness of the Lord.

But for the Epistle to the Hebrews there is an end. The writer of Hebrews brings to a close his letter to the Hebrew Christians, and although it is the end of a letter, he reminds them of an ongoing truth. This truth is about this eternal and non-ending loving-kindness of our Lord toward us. God is not going to stop being good to you. There may seem like there are times when God’s goodness is not so good or that it is absent. But faith must lay hold of the unseen realities and trust God. When Peter was tempted to deny His Lord it must have seemed to him that God was far from helping him. But Jesus was praying. “Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.” (Luke 22:31-32) Even though Peter did not feel the presence of the Lord during his temptation, Christ’s meditorial and intercessory work was present with Peter.

Paul, diminished in body and spirit because of an angel of Satan buffeting him or in other words afflicting his body, cried out to God for deliverance. He did not see God in his situation. But the

answer to his prayer was that God had been there all the time and would continue to be there. The Father said to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for thee.” Oh no, friend, when it seems God is a million miles away, His grace is with you and it is sufficient!

God’ goodness never ceases. The dear saints to whom the writer of Hebrews was writing had endured difficult times. From the very first sermon in this series I told you that this letter to the Hebrews was an epistle of encouragement as the series title reflects. Although some of the most terrifying warnings of all of Scripture are found in the book of Hebrews, it is still an epistle of encouragement. We started this series November 2000. We have had several interruptions but now we come to the end of this great epistle, and I pray it has been an incredible journey for you. How shall we end such a book? How would you close the letter to the Hebrews if you had written it? Would you congratulate them and bolster their pride by telling them what wonderful Christians they were? Would you compliment them and tell them how much they mean to you? Would you pen your love and affection for them? How do you close such a book as this?

Notice how this inspired author does it. In verses eighteen and nineteen he asks for their prayers for him. He especially asks that they would pray that he soon would get to journey and be with them. In verse twenty-two he urges them to endure his exhortation. Even though he says he has written a few words, he knows that he has placed a great deal on them and that it would take a while to plow through all of it. Look at us. It has taken a year and a half to go through it, and we did not stop and look at many details. We essentially gave treatment to the prominent points and left the not-so-minor points for your own private consideration. He tells them to bear up under this weighty exhortation and not to be overwhelmed. In other words, obey this sermon. This is what he is saying.

In verse twenty-three he makes some more personal remarks about his coming to them and Timothy. Here we discover that shy Timothy, who was somewhat timid, has endured imprisonment for the gospel’s sake. This is good for us to know and should be an encouragement to us. We should be strengthened to know that Paul had to exhort Timothy to be bold and not ashamed of his bonds, and now Timothy has grown in the faith. He is suffering for Christ, and has his own bonds. In verse twenty-four he gives personal greetings to the leaders and greetings from the Italian Christians.

But the heart of this closing paragraph is verses twenty and twenty-one.

*Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, 21 Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

In essence and summary, the writer is saying to these saints, “God is going to keep working in you and for you. God’s will, will be done. That’s how I am praying for you.”

Let's look at this benedictory prayer and glean encouragement from it.

## I. THE EQUIPPING OF THE SAINTS

*"Now the God of peace . . . Make you perfect in every good work to do his will"*

The first thing I want you to see in our text is the equipping of the saints. In verse twenty and twenty-one we see a message here that the saints of God are being equipped. He says, "Now may the God of peace" and then he goes into a parenthetical phrase in verse twenty. The phrase is "that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant." He is speaking on a certain line of reasoning but is carried along by the Spirit of God to add this very important insertion. We will talk more about this tonight. But now look at verse twenty-one; he picks up his thought again, "Make you perfect." The word "perfect" comes from a Greek word that means to equip. In other words, "may God equip you in every good work to do His will."

Here is an eternal principle. It is a principle we find all through the Bible from the Old Testament to the New Testament. When God calls a person, He gives him the necessary tools to do the job. So often when people today are called by the Holy Spirit to serve in a way in which He has gifted them they say, "I am not capable of this. I can't do this. This call is bigger than I." The apostle Paul said it best for all of us, "Who is sufficient for these things?" None of us are. But where God has called you, God has equipped you. He has given the necessary tools that you need to do exactly what He wants you to do. Therefore, you are without excuse. If God has tapped you on the shoulder and said "This is what I want for you to do," He means for you to do it, and He has guaranteed your success by giving you the proper tools that you need to do the job. Dear friend, we are called to follow God and we are called to do His will.

What is God's will? That we glorify Him by our works. The will of God for every one of us is that we would use our lives to bring glory and honor to Him. There is nothing more spectacular, nothing more wonderful than this, that you glorify God, and that is your calling. It is not about professions of faith; it is not about ministries; it is not about how large our church is. The calling of God for each one of us is to glorify Him with good works.

What are good works? Good works are the works of righteousness in a Christian's character. This work is achieved first God by working Himself in your character by transforming your thinking and attitudes, and then secondly, as a result of the change in thinking there is a change in behavior. In Ephesians chapter two and verse ten Paul says "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works." God is fashioning you and me to do good works, which God has before ordained that we should walk in them before He ever made the world.

It is wrong to think good works are not a part of the Christian life. While good works do not save us, good works are integral to Christianity. We are living in a time where there is so much confusion about this. There are some who make the whole of Christianity a social gospel of do-

ing of good works. Their whole idea of Christianity is doing good to other people. Many social organizations actually began as gospel agencies preaching Christ. An example is the Salvation Army. The Salvation Army began in a great revival movement with William Booth preaching the gospel to the poorest of the poor. They also ministered to the physical needs of humanity. But now that organization is not known for the preaching of the gospel. It is known for its charity and ministering to the suffering of society. What happened? They began to believe that the whole of Christianity is in what a man does, not in a relationship with God. The heartbeat of Christianity is not our good works; the heartbeat of Christianity is relationship with God. That is what Jesus said when He prayed, "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3). It has nothing to do with your works.

Surely we should minister to the afflicted, and we should relieve the suffering, touch the hurting, and give to the poor. But a man does not have to be a Christian to do that. There are many good organizations that do exactly that, and they do not profess the name of Christ. They do not acknowledge His Lordship over their lives or over the organization. So the gospel is just not about doing good works nor can a man be saved by his works. This is a fundamental truth of the gospel that our generation seems to have thrown aside to adopt new measures. But they are not really new. Since the beginning of time man has tried to earn his way to God.

So the gospel is not saving yourself by doing good works, but now listen to me, you cannot have the gospel without good works being a product of grace. There are some who believe that Christianity is having an experience with God without works coming into the equation at all. This is perhaps more dangerous than the misunderstanding of being saved by works. As we have said up to this point, we are not saved by works, but this is not the whole of the gospel and therein lies its danger. It is true that works cannot save a man; good behavior and conduct do not merit God's favor. You cannot be forgiven and gain Heaven as your eternal destiny by doing good things. Therefore, the man who says that salvation is an experience with God without works is telling the truth. But press the man and ask him "what about holiness?" "Oh," he says, "don't bring holiness into this. None of us can be holy and righteous. We are saved by grace, and grace alone." He is partly right, but this is also not the whole of the gospel; this is its deception and it's one of the greatest deceptions that has come upon the evangelical world that I know of. If I believe that somehow by my good works I earn some type of acceptance or righteousness from God, then I have believed a lie. On the other hand, if I believe that simply having an experience with God with no resulting behavioral changes, I have equally believed a lie. Neither is the gospel. You see the gospel of grace is this; there has been a change first of all in a man's character. He doesn't love the things he used to love. He doesn't pursue the things he used to pursue and that translates into a change in lifestyle and behavior. There is no gospel of Christianity where a man has relationship with God without a change in the conduct and character of that person.

Can the all-powerful God inhabit the human soul and be dormant? Can God, who by His spoken word throws worlds into existence and creates everything that can be seen, be in you and be silent? Could the energy source of the universe be in the soul of a man and the man have no energy or power to live a holy life? Absolutely not! To believe that is to believe that an apple tree

cannot produce apples, or a rose bush no flower, or a vine no grapes. What would you do if an apple tree would no longer produce apples, or the rose bush would no longer produce roses, or the vine no more grapes? Why, you would pluck it up and remove it, and replace it with something that is going to be productive. That is the same principle of our Lord. He said in Matthew chapter seven and verse nineteen, "Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire."

God demands of those of us who believe in Him corresponding works of righteousness. If God is in us, then God is to be seen. One of the most powerful passages of Scripture that teaches this truth of good works following grace is a parable we referred to a couple of weeks ago. Jesus said the judgment was going to be based upon works. He divided the sheep from the goats. The sheep were those who fed the hungry, visited the sick, clothed the naked, and ministered to the imprisoned. You cannot say works are not important. The change in the life of a person who has been saved will result in a life of holiness and righteousness. Christianity affects conduct and character. So, dear friend, we have been called to good works. Don't let a man or a woman in this audience be deceived into thinking that Christianity is just professing and praying a prayer.

Experiences are insufficient if they don't change the character and the conduct. If your experience has not changed you, you are as lost as you were prior to your experience, if not more so, as you have been deceived on top of your being lost. We are called to good works. Titus chapter two and verse fourteen says that Christ "gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works." There is no argument against the fact that an integral part of salvation is being forgiven of sins. But Paul speaking to Titus says that salvation includes zealous of good works. God has so changed the sinner that he is zealous, he is hungry, he desires to glorify God in how he lives and in how he thinks.

God is creating us to be workers of good, and that is the call that necessitates God equipping us. Let us now ask a different question, what is the equipment that God gives us? In Second Timothy chapter three and verse seventeen we read, "That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." Once again, as in our text in Hebrews the word "perfect" means to be equipped. And again, as in our text, the purpose is for good works. In Second Timothy we discover what it is that equips the man of God. It is the Word of God. "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). God's equipping the believer begins with the Scriptures. A Christian without consistent study and meditation of God's word is a handicapped Christian. He is a tool-less Christian. A Christian who is so handicapped is trying to do a job without the proper equipment.

May I say to you, we are not just talking about reading God's word. I am a firm believer in scripture memorization. You ought to memorize God's word. Some of you will say, "If that is the requirement, I am in bad trouble because I don't have a good memory." My dear friend, even the poorest of memories can develop a method and routine to memorize Scripture. It all depends upon desire to do so. There is no disputing that David prayed, "Thy word have I hid in mine heart,



that I might not sin against thee” (Psalms 119:11). The Apostle Paul says in Colossians three and verse sixteen, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” How does the word of Christ get in you? There is only one way—meditation and memorization.

There are many ways to memorize scripture. You can purposefully rehearse each word, or you can read it several times and meditate on it. There are many ways in which to get the word in you; the key is to get it in you. If I had a fancy table here with beautiful, delicious food, scrumptious food, I am sure I wouldn’t have to show you how to eat it. Some of you would be more proper in your execution of consuming the meal, while others might forget about etiquette and just dive in. But in the end the job will be done and the same results will occur; you all will have eaten the meal.

Dear friend, the word of God is your meal, and it is a table spread from Heaven. Even Christ referred to Himself as the bread of heaven. We must feed upon Him and not expect to be spoon-fed.

It is the Word of God that gives me the inspiration, the Word of God that gives me instruction and insight into life’s greatest difficulties. Not only does He give us the Word, but He gives us grace. “And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work” (2 Corinthians 9:8). It is the grace of God given to us that empowers us. It is a tool for us unto every good work. Everything God has called you to do is supplied by grace.

Now that is our equipment. But the writer of Hebrews doesn’t stop there, he goes on to tell us that not only has God equipped us, but He has also empowered His saints. In verse twenty-one he says not only will God equip us but He will,

*Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom [be] glory for ever and ever. Amen (Hebrews 13:21).*

The writer specifies that it is God who is working in us “that which is wellpleasing in His sight.” We have been given the necessary equipment to do the will of God, and every believer has what it takes to do what God wants him or her to do. We do not need special classes. All you need to do is what God has told you to do and quit saying “I don’t have the necessary tools to do it.” Either you have it or God is a liar. If this is a lie then we might as well throw out the whole Bible because if God has lied in this text, He cannot be trusted in any other part of the Book.

But He didn’t lie. If you are called, then you are equipped. God has given us the equipment to do His will. However, tools need power. A power tool must have some type of force such as electricity, gasoline, or some other source. The Father not only gives us the necessary equipment, but He supplies the power to operate it. The author says it is God working in you. He prays that God would be working in the Hebrew Christians. It has to be God in us. And so we see the effectiveness of grace because everything God does in and through a believer is by grace. It is all a product of grace.

In Ephesians chapter three and verse sixteen the Bible says, "That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man." The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ and He lives within you.

This is the good news of Christianity: what man cannot do, God can. It is God at work in you. When Paul talked about his ministry he talked about how through the grace of God he labored more than the other apostles. To many today grace is very one-dimensional. They see grace as merely a means by which God makes one a Christian. In other words, the initial salvation experience is by grace and that is all the grace that you will ever get. You get it all right then. But that is the false theory of salvation that I mentioned a moment ago—a one time experiencing of God. Thank God the Bible does not teach this. James says that God gives more grace. The true saving grace of God continues to work in the believer's life. If you have really been saved, then God's grace is going to continue.

How does this grace work? First, God's grace continues to work in us as a constant influence. One of my most favorite verses is Philippians chapter two and verse thirteen. "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." Notice the word "will" which means desire or motive. Did you know you cannot choose without desire? Nobody has ever chosen, or made a decision, without desiring what they chose in some form or fashion. Even the things that you really did not want, you chose because the alternative was even more unfavorable. Desire is an influence that works to help us choose. God has supplied grace in every believer as an influence in them to help them make the right choices in life. It is a constant motivation in the new person. There is a new nature, and the Holy Spirit indwells that new nature. He is there constantly supplying the influence you need to do God's will.

Let me give you an example in Second Chronicles chapter thirty and verse twelve. The Bible says that God and His influence can be so powerful that it will help and influence people as a motivation to do things that they may not otherwise have done. In Second Chronicles thirty, Hezekiah has put forth an edict to all the Israelites to come to Jerusalem to keep the Passover. It had not been kept for many years. When some of the tribes got the command to come to Jerusalem, they scorned it. They laughed at it and they rejected it. But the Bible says in chapter thirty and verse twelve, "Also in Judah the hand of God was to give them one heart to do the commandment of the king and of the princes, by the word of the LORD." In other words, God's hand so moved upon the hearts of the people of Judah that they didn't reject Hezekiah's commandment, but rather they observed it. They did all that God had commanded through Hezekiah. This was in fact grace moving on their hearts. The grace of God influenced them and they obeyed the Lord.

Now there is a question in Christian circles about a term called "irresistible grace." Can you resist grace? Well, it depends on what kind of grace you are talking about. There is a common grace which God gives to all men. Jesus refers to it in His Sermon on the Mount. He says that the sun and the rain both shine and fall on the good and the evil. That is a common grace. God gives goodness and mercy to the whole world. The world doesn't deserve such goodness but receives it only because of God's common grace. Can common grace be rejected? Absolutely.

But there is another kind of grace that men have called “effectual grace.” It is this kind of grace that effects or causes our justification, sanctification and, one day, glorification. This is the grace that is irresistible. It is a grace where God has purposed to do something in the heart of a man or a woman that they will not want to reject. It is not like they are kicking against God and deploring this mercy. They do not cry in resistance “No, I don’t want to do this. God, this is not fair. You are bigger than me and you are too strong for me.” Rather this grace works as an influence on the heart and bestows a greater desire to do it than to rebel against it.

God is constantly moving in the life of a believer with a grace that influences him to want to follow God. This is exactly what the writer of Hebrews outlined in the eighth chapter. We are part of a New Covenant, and this New Covenant has as one of its promises an inward law written on the heart and in the mind of the child of God. The law of God has been written on my heart that I might love it. It has been written in my mind that I might know it.

Now someone might ask “If this is true, why do we sin; how can we sin if grace is irresistible? How can we sin if this constant grace is influencing us to obey God?” Well, I would answer that there is a counter influence that is also working in us; it is called the lust of our flesh. Galatians chapter five and verse seventeen says, “For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.” The flesh is the desires and appetites of our mind and body. You are born with these desires and passions, and you will die with them. These thoughts, appetites, and passions are innate and natural. In fact, they were instilled in us and in and of themselves they are not evil. However, without the Spirit of God they will overrun a man or woman and will be indulged in a way God has forbidden. These are the things that war against this constant grace of the Holy Spirit who is to be our constant influence, motivating us to obey God.

Paul not only says the flesh is warring against the Spirit, but the Spirit against the flesh. “And these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.” Oh, how often have there been times when you knew what you were supposed to do, that which would please God, but you didn’t do it because something was raging on the inside that gave you a stronger desire to disobey rather than to submit? That was the flesh. When you combine our flesh with the influence of the devil, who is the tempter, a spiritual stronghold can develop. So what is our hope? It seems there is a stalemate. Who shall win?

We need not despair because, according to Paul in the twenty-fourth verse of Galatians five, we who belong to Christ “have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts.” Although the flesh does war against the Spirit in us, there has been dealt to the flesh a massive blow that has weakened its power. That blow is the repentance that occurred at conversion plus the deliverance that we received from the death of the old man, or in other words, the ruling power of sin that manipulated the flesh. That is gone.

But why do we sin? If the Holy Spirit is working in Christians to put to death the desires and the influences of this flesh, why and how do Christians still commit sin? If the ruling principle



of sin is gone, should we not readily obey God? Yes, we should and we can, but that does not minimize the powerful allurements of the flesh, the devil and the world. When you sin it is not because God wasn't there to help you, it is because you rejected His influence. God does give us a certain latitude and we can disobey. We can resist grace for awhile, if you please. But, if we are truly His children, then we cannot exceed the boundaries He has placed around us. In other words, it is like a parent who has fenced the backyard so the children can play safely. The children are allowed to do as they please as long as they stay within the safety and shelter of the fence. However, if one or all of the children decide to leave the confines of the backyard the parent immediately stops any such notion. Our heavenly Father allows us at times to ignore His grace but He will not allow us to permanently fail of the grace of God. This should not satisfy us though. We should desire to be children that desire not only to not leave the fenced in perimeters but obey within their walls at all times.

The good news is that with time, as the Holy Spirit and the believer put to death the deeds of the body, the easier it is to overcome temptation. Will I conquer it and master it completely in this life? No, that is what glorification and Heaven is all about. But there is progress, and that is what the author of Hebrews is praying for here in these believers' lives, that this grace will continue to conquer the flesh. Sometimes we give in to it, but if you are really a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Bible says that you obey God more than you disobey God. You and I always see what we do wrong and often we don't recognize our obedience. Bad news always grabs the headlines. But the truth is that the Christian life is sin becoming the abnormal and holiness becoming the normal.

That is one of the major themes of Hebrews, as it is the New Testament and the entire Bible. Grace is evident in the Christian by an ongoing process by which the believer is putting to death the deeds of the flesh. Dear friend, have you seen victory over your fleshly desires? Can you go back five years and see how God has blessed you with victory over certain ungodly attitudes and actions? Can you see growth; can you see, one by one, areas where God has delivered you? There were brutal conflicts and sometimes you were wounded, and sometimes you failed, but God brought you through and you are stronger today. If you can't see such progress, then friend, you must examine your heart to see whether you are really in the faith.

How can those of us who are redeemed dare accuse God of not being good to us? He has been there all the time working in us after His own image, shaping us, molding us, and working out His will in our lives. Why if He stripped me of everything and left me with nothing, He has and will continue to be good. Having nothing is still far better than what I deserve. For Him to give me the life of Christ and justification is enough for me. This is the source of true and lasting joy.

Here is what we forget as Christians, we forget the cause of our joy is not the blessings of God, it is the work of Jesus Christ. When you make your joy centered in how God is blessing you, sooner or later, you are going to look around and you will find somebody who is getting more blessed than you are, and your joy will begin to diminish. You cannot determine God's goodness by physical or material blessings. That is not to be the source or the basis of our joy. The basis

and source of our joy is the finished and accomplished work of Jesus on the cross. Nothing more! Do not add anything to the reason for why you should have joy and peace. You must not forget this all important but all too often forgotten fact.

The accomplished work of Christ on my behalf is the source of my life as well as my joy and peace. It is my life and nothing can diminish or erode the finality of our Lord's redemptive work. The devil cannot take it from me nor can any other power or force. The fact is the work of the Savior is complete and lacks nothing, and it is on this basis that I have access and communion with God. Should God allow my family to be taken from me, or what little wealth I might possess to escape me, there is one thing He will never take from me. He may allow the tempter to destroy my body or He may scatter my ministry to the four corners of the earth, but I have this truth to anchor my soul and that is He will never take my Jesus away from me. That is why I say to you God is good. I didn't deserve Jesus, therefore if my life is stripped of everything but Jesus, I got more than I ever deserved!

So, dear friend, today I want you to be encouraged in this last paragraph. We haven't even finished it yet; you will have to come back tonight to find out the great conclusion. But God is good, and has always been good, and He is going to continue to be good. If you come to me and say "This is happening to me, or this bad thing is happening; my world is falling apart." I am going to look at you and tell you that God is good. Your joy is not to be riveted to your circumstances; it is to rest in the unchangeable fact that Christ died on the cross and was resurrected and you are a joint-heir to all He accomplished. That is to be your joy. That is to be your confidence. It is the grace of that truth that God is going to continue to work in you until you stand perfected before Him. Amen.