

Recently I preached a sermon about Karl Barth and his theological thinking. The following is one of his sermons, which he preached to the inmates of Basel prison, Switzerland on August 14, 1955. By our modern standards the sermon may be a bit long, but the sermon communicates very well, some of this famous theologian's thinking. (Fr. Robert)

### **Prayer before the sermon**

*O Lord, our God! Through thy Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, thou hast made us thy children. We have heard thy voice and have gathered here to give thee praise, to listen to thy word, to call upon thee and to entrust to thy care our burdens and our needs. Be thou in our midst and be our teacher—that all anxiety and despair, all vanity and defiance within us, all our unbelief and superstition may diminish and thy greatness and goodness may show forth;—that our hearts may be open to one another, that we may understand each other, and help one another;—that this hour may be an hour of light wherein we may catch sight of the open sky and thus of the dawn on this dark earth.*

*The old has passed away, behold, the new has come. This is true, and it is true for us, as certainly as thou art in Jesus Christ the Saviour of us all. But only thou canst truly tell us and show us that this is so. Speak and show then the truth to us and to all those who pray with us this Sunday morning. They pray for us. And we are praying for them. Grant their requests and ours! Amen.*

## **Saved By Grace (A Sermon by Karl Barth)**

My dear brothers and sisters, I now read a passage from the Letter of the Apostle Paul to the Ephesians (2.5): ***By grace have you been saved.*** This, I think is brief enough for it to be remembered by all, for it to impress itself upon you and, if it be God's will, to be understood.

We are gathered here this Sunday morning to hear this word: *By grace you have been saved!* Whatever else we do, praying and singing, is but an answer to this word spoken to us by God himself. The prophets and apostles wrote a strange book, called the Bible, for the very purpose of testifying to this fact before mankind. The Bible alone contains this sentence. We do not read it in Kant or in Schopenhauer, or in any book of natural or secular history, and certainly not in any novel, but in the Bible alone. In order to hear this word we need what is called the Church—the company of Christians, of human beings called and willing to listen together to the Bible and through it to the word of God. This is the word of God: *By grace you have been saved!*

Someone once said to me: 'I need not go to church. I need not read the Bible. I know already what the Church teaches and what the Bible says: "Do what is right and fear no one!" ' Let me say this at this point: If this were the message at stake, I would most certainly not have come here. My time is too precious and so is yours. To say that, neither prophets nor apostles, neither Bible, Jesus Christ nor God are needed. Anybody is at liberty to say this to himself. By the same token this saying is void of any very special or exciting message. It does not help anyone.

I have never seen a smile on the face of a person reassuring himself with this kind of talk. As a rule, those who use it are a sad-looking lot, revealing all too easily that this word does not help them, does not comfort them, does not bring them joy.

Let us hear therefore what the Bible says and what we as Christians are called to hear together: By grace you have been saved! No man can say this to himself. Neither can he say it to someone else. This can only be said by God to each one of us. It takes Jesus Christ to make this saying true. It takes the apostles to communicate it. And our gathering here as Christians to spread it among us. This is why it truly news, and very special news, the most exciting news of all, the most helpful thing also, indeed the only helpful thing.

'By grace *you* have been saved!' How strange to have this message addressed to us! Who are we, anyway? Let me tell you quite frankly: we are all together great sinners. Please understand me: I include myself. I stand ready to confess being the greatest sinner among you all; yet you may then not exclude yourself from the group! Sinners are people who in the judgment of God, and perhaps of their own consciences, missed and lost their way, who are not just a little, but totally guilty, hopelessly indebted and lost not only in time, but in eternity. We are such sinners. And we are prisoners. Believe me, there is a captivity much worse than the captivity in this house. There are walls much thicker and doors much heavier than those closed upon you. all of us, the people without and you within, are prisoners of our own obstinacy, or our many greeds, of our various anxieties, of our own mistrust and in the last analysis of our unbelief. We are all sufferers. Most of all we suffer from ourselves. We each make life difficult for ourselves and in so doing for our fellowmen.

We suffer in the shadow of death and of eternal judgment toward which we are moving. We spend our life in the midst of a whole world of sin and captivity and suffering. But now listen. Into the depth of our predicament the word is spoken from on high: *By grace you have been saved!* To be saved does not just mean to be a little encouraged, a little comforted, a little relieved. It means to be pulled out like a log from a burning fire. You have been saved! We are not told: you may be saved sometimes, or a little bit. No, you *have been saved*, totally for all times. You? Yes, we! Not just any other people, more pious and better than we are, no we, each one of us.

This is so because Jesus Christ is our brother and, through his life and death, has become our Saviour who has wrought our salvation. He is the word of God for us. And this word is: *By grace you have been saved!*

You probably all know the legend of the rider who crossed the frozen Lake of Constance by night without knowing it. When he reached the opposite shore and was told whence he came, he broke down, horrified. This is the human situation when the sky opens and the earth is bright, when we may hear: *By grace you have been saved!* In such a moment we are like that terrified rider. When we hear this word we involuntarily look back, do we not, asking ourselves: Where have I been? Over an abyss, in mortal danger! What did I do? The most foolish thing I ever attempted! What happened? I was doomed and miraculously escaped and now I am safe! You ask: 'Do we really live in such danger?' Yes, we live on the brink of death. But we have been saved. Look at our Saviour and at our salvation! Look at Jesus Christ on the cross, accused, sentenced and punished instead of us!

Do you know for whose sake he is hanging there? For *our* sake—because of *our* sin—sharing *our* captivity—burdened with *our* suffering! He nails *our* life to the cross. This is how God had to deal with *us*. From this darkness he has saved *us*. He who is not shattered after hearing this news may not yet have grasped the word of God: *By grace you have been saved!* But more important than the fear of sudden death is the knowledge of life imparted to us: 'By grace you have been *saved!*' Therefore, we have reached the shore, the Lake of Constance is behind us, we may breathe freely, even though we still are in the grip of panic, and rightly so. This panic is but an aftermath. By virtue of the good news the sky truly opens and the earth is bright. What a glorious relief to be told that there I was, in that darkness, over that abyss, on the brink of death, but there I am no longer. Through this folly I lived, but I cannot and I will not do it again, never again. This happened, but it must not and it will not happen again.

My sin, my captivity, my suffering are yesterday's reality, not today's. They are things of my past, not of the present nor of the future. I have been *saved!* Is this really so, is this the truth? Look once again to Jesus Christ in his death upon the cross. Look and try to understand that what he did and suffered he did and suffered for you, for me, for us all. He carried our sin, our captivity and our suffering, and did not carry it in vain. *He carried it away.* He acted as the captain of us all. He broke through the ranks of our enemies. He has already won the battle, our battle. All we have to do is to follow him, to be victorious with him. Through him, in him we are saved. Our sin has no longer any power over us. Our prison door is open. Our suffering has come to an end. This is a great word indeed.

The word of God *is* indeed a great word. And we would deny him, we would deny the Lord Jesus Christ, were we to deny the greatness of this word: He sets us free. When he, the Son of God, sets us free, we are *truly* free. Because we are saved by no other than Jesus Christ, we are saved *by grace*. This means that we did not deserve to be saved. What we deserved would be quite different. We cannot secure salvation for ourselves. Did you read the newspapers the other day that man will soon be able to produce an artificial moon? But we cannot produce our salvation. No one can be proud of being saved. Each one can only fold his hands in great lowliness of heart and be thankful like a child. Consequently we shall never possess salvation as our property. We may only receive it as a gift over and over again, with hands outstretched. '*By grace* you have been saved!' This means constantly to look away from ourselves to God and to the man on the cross where this truth is revealed. This truth is ever anew to be believed and to be grasped by faith. To believe means to look to Jesus Christ and to God and to trust that there is the truth for us, for our lives, for the life of all men.

Is it not a pity that we rebel against this very truth in the depths of our hearts? Indeed, we dislike hearing that we are saved by grace and by grace alone. We do not appreciate that God does not owe us anything, that we are bound to live for his goodness alone, that we are left with nothing but the great humility, the thankfulness of a child presented with many gifts. For we do not like at all to look away from ourselves. To put it bluntly: we do not like to believe. And yet grace and therefore faith as I just described it is the beginning of love of God and neighbour, of great and assured hope! And yet grace and faith would make things so very simple in our lives!

Dear brothers and sisters, where do we stand now? One thing is certain: the bright day *has dawned*, the sun of God does shine into our dark lives, even though we may close our eyes to its radiance. His voice *does call* us from heaven, even though we may obstruct our ears. The bread of life *is offered* to us, even though we are inclined to clench our fists instead of opening our hands to take the bread and eat it. The door of our prison *is open*, even though, strangely enough, we prefer to remain within. God has put the house in order, even though we like to mess it up all over again. *By grace you have been saved!*—this is true, even though we may not believe it, may not accept it as valid for ourselves and unfortunately in so doing may forego its benefits. *Why* should we want to forego the benefits? *Why* should we not want to believe? *Why* do we not go out through the open door? *Why* do we not open our clenched fists? *Why* do we obstruct our ears? *Why* are we blindfolded? Honestly, *why?*

One remark in reply must suffice. All this is so because perhaps we failed to pray fervently enough for a change within ourselves, on our part. That God is God, not only almighty, but merciful and good, that he wills and does what is best for us, that Jesus Christ died for us to set us free, that by grace, in him, we have been saved—all this need *not* be a concern of our prayers. All these things are true apart from our own deeds and prayers. But to believe, to accept, to let it be true for us, to begin to live with this truth, to believe it not only with our minds and with our lips, but also with our hearts and with all our life, so that our fellowmen may sense it and finally to let our total existence be immersed in the great divine truth, *by grace you have been saved*, this is to be the concern of our prayers. No human being has ever prayed for this in vain.

If anyone asks for this, the answer is already being given and faith begins. And because no one has ever asked for this in vain, no one may omit praying like a little child for the assurance that God's truth, this terrible, this glorious truth, is shining even today, a small, yet increasingly bright light. *By grace you have been saved.* Ask that you may believe this and it will be given you; seek this, and you will find it; knock on this door, and it will be opened to you.

This, my dear friends, is what I have been privileged and empowered to tell you of the good news as the word of God today. Amen.

### **Concluding prayer**

*O Lord, our God! Thou seest and hearest us. Thou knowest each one of us far better than we know ourselves. Thou lovest us without our deserving it. Thou hast helped us and dost help us still, although we are ever again inclined to spoil thy work by wanting to help ourselves. Thou art the Judge, but thou art also the Saviour of the poor and perplexed human race. For this we give thee thanks. For this we praise thee. We rejoice in the prospect of seeing with our own eyes on thy great day what we already now may believe if thou makest us free to do so.*

*Make us free to believe! Give us the true, honest and active faith in thee and in thy truth! Give it to many! Give it to all men! Give it to the peoples and their governments, to the rich and to the poor, to the healthy and to the sick, to the prisoners and to those who think they are free, to the old and to the young, to the joyful and to the sorrowful, to the heavy-laden and to the light-minded! There is no one who does not stand in need of faith, no one to whom the promise of faith is denied. Tell*



*all our people, ourselves included, that thou art their merciful God and Father and ours! This we ask thee in the name of Jesus Christ who commanded us to pray: 'Our Father...'*

\* Karl Barth, *Deliverance to the Captives* (New York, Harper & Brothers SCM Press, 1961), 35-42.