

## FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT.

Text: 2 Corinthians 13:14

Readings: John 17:1-5, 20-26, 2 Cor 13.

Belgic Confession Articles 8-9

Theme: The blessing of salvation comes from our triune God.

Purpose: To explain the relations among the Trinity and their work of salvation for us.

These words we have just read will be very familiar to you. They are words of benediction - that word comes from Latin and it means *blessing*. We often conclude our worship services with these words of blessing from the Lord. As we leave the worship service God sends us on our way with his blessing ringing in our ears.

The benediction is a fitting close to the service: we have given our thanks and praise to God, then he gives us his blessing; as we prepare to go out into another week of labour and service he gives us words of reassurance, comfort and hope.

There are other benedictions and blessings we use to close worship, but today we focus on this one because it is trinitarian. It describes "the grace *of the Lord Jesus Christ*, the love *of God*, and the fellowship *of the Holy Spirit*." The three persons of the trinity are mentioned by name.

As we look at this we will first consider a brief explanation of the doctrine of the trinity and then look at the three parts of this benediction.

**The biblical doctrine of the trinity** is that God has revealed himself as one God in three persons. This is not something we would have discovered by ourselves; we could not have thought this up on our own or figured it out by our own reason. God has revealed this to us. He has explained this in his Word.

We also need to recognise that here we are dealing with one of the great mysteries of the Christian faith - a mystery in the sense that we cannot fully understand it, we cannot grasp it properly. We are only human and so we will never fully comprehend who God is.

However, this doesn't mean we can't understand it at all. We should not give up too easily or too quickly; we should make every effort to grasp as much as we can of the truth about God.

The Bible tells us there are *three persons* in the Godhead - the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit - and these three are distinct from each other. But they are not separate from each other; they are not independent, not isolated, not out on their own, not functioning by themselves. They are three distinct persons who function very closely together.

Some of the church fathers of the fourth century compared the relationships within the trinity to a society of three persons, like that of Peter, James and John. Those three were a close community, a small society. In a similar way the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are a society of three persons.

But these three persons are *one God*. This is because each of them shares the same divine essence or substance. Each of them is God, but there are not three Gods, but one God.

We could compare this with us here today. All of us here today have one thing in common - we are all human. We are all distinct individuals but we share the common essence or substance of humanity.

In the Godhead there are three divine beings who share a common essence of being divine - they share the substance of "Godness". These three are of one kind, one class, and they are the only three in this class.

They are a tri-unity, united in everything - in all they think and do; in thought and mind, in purpose and direction, in goal and will, in their plans and desires, in their love and knowledge.

When you put three humans together there is always going to be some disagreement, tension, difference of opinion, a conflict of ideas.

But in the trinity there always complete harmony, total agreement, full co-operation. They are completely one in all their relationships and in all their activity.

So they are a trinity, three-in-one; three distinct persons but inseparably connected and fully united. Three persons who are together in the most intimate of relationships, so intimate it is a mystery to us.

This benediction describes some of the blessings that come to us from this triune God. Sometimes theologians and ministers describe the doctrine of the trinity in terms that are complex and detailed. Some of that is necessary because we need to be precise and accurate. But here the Bible describes their work in practical terms; these verses describe their relationship to us. The grace of Jesus, the love of God and the fellowship of the Spirit are all directed towards us and our salvation. So let's consider this blessing that comes to us from this triune God.

### **1. THE GRACE OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST** is mentioned first.

a. This order is a bit unusual; usually God the *Father* is placed first, then God the *Son*.

The Apostle Paul mentions the Son first because he is considering the Trinity from our perspective - we know the Father through the Son, who was God and man, divine and human - so Jesus is listed first.

b. The word "grace" is used broadly here to describe the entire work of salvation - all that Jesus has done for us and gained for his people, our entire redemption.

Grace also means that this salvation is a gift of God. We don't deserve God's favour, we can't earn salvation, we can't gain forgiveness by our own effort or work; salvation is a gift of God out of his mercy. Grace is the unmerited favour of God shown to the completely undeserving. It is God's love and mercy shown to people who don't deserve it and cannot repay him.

c. This phrase is also unusual in that "grace" is connected with the Lord Jesus rather than the Father. We usually think of the grace of *God*.

This teaches us another important truth about the Trinity; that is, they all share in every aspect of their work.

For instance, the Father is primary in the work of creation but he created all things through the Son and with the power of the Holy Spirit. They co-operate in all the work they do.

It is entirely appropriate to connect *grace* with the *Lord Jesus* because he gained this salvation for us. He did this through his suffering and death and resurrection.

d. Notice that this grace is for *you*; the "you" is plural. Paul wrote this to the church in Corinth; "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ...be with *you all*." This is his prayer, his desire, his request for them. He wanted this local church to enjoy the grace of Christ.

This is our desire for ourselves as a church, that as a community of God's people we too might receive and enjoy the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But our Triune God also addresses us as *individuals*. God addresses you personally. He wants you to enjoy the grace, the favour, the blessing of the Lord Jesus and all the benefits of his salvation. "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ...be with *you*."

### 2. Through the grace of Christ we come to know **THE LOVE OF GOD**.

a. This is the love of **God the Father**.

He is the first person of the trinity. He is "the cause, origin, and beginning of all things visible and invisible" (BC Art 8).

He is the originator of the work of our salvation. Before the foundation of the world he chose us in Christ; he predestined us to be adopted as his sons (Eph 1:1-5).

But he did not do that on his own; this was planned out by all three persons. Even before they created the world they designed a plan for the salvation of those they had chosen; theologians call this "the covenant of redemption."

b. This plan of redemption was motivated and prompted by **love**. God the Father initiated the work of salvation because he loved us, and he put that love into action by sending his Son into this world. That means that the *love* of God is prior to the *grace* of Christ.

"For God so loved the world he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

"This is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." (1 John 4:10).

c. The Bible is very clear that "**God is love**" (1 John 4:8). Some people, however, don't want to say anything more about God than this - they want to talk only about his love.

But the biblical picture of God is much bigger and broader and deeper than just this one attribute of God. He is also righteous, and holy, and just, and because of that he cannot tolerate sin.

Yet because he is love he has worked out a way to rescue his people from the punishment we deserve while, at the same time, upholding his justice. He did that, as we have seen, through the Lord Jesus.

d. Notice again that this love of God is addressed to us as the body of Christ in this place; "may the love of God... *be with you all*." In this way it is also addressed to each one of you personally. God wants you to know his love, to accept it, to receive it, to live in it, to enjoy it. He wants you to enjoy a full relationship with himself with all the joys and privileges of such a relationship.

May you *know* this love of God, may you *experience* it in your life, may you be assured that God loves you in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

3. This brings us to consider the **FELLOWSHIP OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**.

a. The Father *planned* the work of salvation in love; the Son *achieved* that work and shows us God's grace; and then the Holy Spirit **applies** this work of salvation to us. This is his particular work as the third person of the trinity.

The Belgic Confession says, "The Holy Spirit is the eternal power and might, proceeding from the Father and the Son" (Art 8). He has been sent by the Father and the Son. He is their agent; he takes the grace of Christ and the love of God and puts that into action. He makes sure that all God's people receive all the benefits and blessings won by Jesus.

b. The Spirit's work is to bring us into fellowship with **the Triune God**.

He does this by working in our hearts and minds so that we come to know God the Father through His Son. We experience this spiritual union with Jesus himself through his Spirit.

c. The Spirit also unites us in fellowship with **each other**.

i. He does this by working in us the *fruit* of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience and so on. As we show these fruits in our lives we are able to live in fellowship with each other, in unity and harmony as a church community.

ii. He also does this is through the *gifts* he gives to the church. He gives gifts to each one of us, gifts of teaching, giving, administration, mercy, faith, hospitality.

But these gifts are not for our own benefit or praise or glory; they are for the common good, for the mutual benefit of the members, for the building up of the body of Christ until we reach maturity in Christ.

Just as the three members of the trinity never function independently, so too we, as members of the church, ought not to function independently or in isolation. We live in fellowship with each other.

iii. This fellowship of the Spirit was important for the church in Corinth because their congregation was marred by arguments, bitterness, factions and envy. Paul prayed that they would know the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives so that they would be at peace with each other.

This is the desire of the Lord for us too. "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace" (Eph 4:3).

d. The unity of the church is vitally important because the church is a **visible illustration** of the trinity.

i. People have thought of all sorts of ways to illustrate the trinity but all of them fail at some point or other.

eg. There is the illustration of an egg with its shell, white and yoke - but that over-emphasises the oneness.

eg. There is the illustration of the three states of water - ice, fluid and steam - but that tends towards modalism, the error of thinking that the one God has presented himself in three different modes of being.

ii. Jesus himself gave us an illustration of the trinity in his high priestly prayer when he prayed for all of us as believers "that they may be one Father, just as you are in me and I am in you" (John 17:21). Jesus compares the unity within the church to the unity between the Father and the Son.

We are to be one as they are one: one in knowledge and love, in purpose and direction, in aims and goals, in mind and thought.

Just as there is no separation in the trinity, so too there should be no separation amongst us, no division, no disharmony.

As we leave this place of worship to go to our homes and families and work during this week we go with the assurance that our Triune God loves us and goes with us.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,  
and the love of God,  
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit  
be with you all.

Amen