Great Power, Great Grace and Great Fear

There are three small phrases in Acts 4 and 5 that Luke used in conjunction with each other:

Great power (4:33), **great grace** (4:33) and **great fear** (5:5).

All with the adjective "great" – power, grace and fear.

The Almighty greatness of the divine dynamic

The alluring greatness of the divine delight

The aweful greatness of divine discipline

Great discipline, ***"And fear came upon all who heard it"***. (5:5)

Upon whom? The rulers, the elders and the scribes? No. It was on the believers! God suddenly let some of His terrible disciplinary judgement fall on this new growing church.

Then there is great power (4:33) with which the "workers" (apostles) were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

The third phrase is great grace. It is on this phrase that I would like to focus.

The alluring greatness of the divine delight

Sadly some of us believers are a problem to God and others are a delight. Here in Acts 4 is a group of believers filled with the Holy Spirit, united in vision and purpose and bold in their witness. God's pleasure rested on them. So how can we have "great grace" – the rich favour of God – resting on us? Let's look again at Acts 4.

To be great in grace is to be rich in graciousness – even towards our opponents. It is a great challenge to read how these believers reacted to persecution. You know the sequence in Acts 4 – the healing of the man at the Gate Beautiful and Peter and John accused of disturbing the peace. They let Peter and John go with a warning. In effect they said, "This time we will let you off but if you don't cease this propaganda we will really let you have it."

Peter and John immediately went and joined their friends and reported the threatened persecution. Note that there wasn't one single word of resentment against the authorities. They were completely free of any animosity or any bitterness of spirit. When you are under pressure like this is easy to snarl. It takes great grace to sing!

It is a great test of whether we are really filled with the Holy Spirit if, when the pressure is on, when we are heavily criticised and when persecution really hurts us and our families there is still no reaction of ill will, but rather a desire to pray and praise. This is a great sign of an unembittered graciousness towards our enemies.

Great grace means vital in prayer, (v. 31) ***"And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken."*** I would like to suggest to you that real prayer always shakes something. So to be great in grace includes being vital in prayer. We might not immediately notice the movement, but something always moves.

How we need to be getting together to pray asking for a shaking of the nations and of the influence of the "principalities and powers and forces of wickedness"!

To be great in grace means to be noble in courage. ***"Grant to Your servants to continue to speak Your word with all boldness."*** There was no suggestion in their prayer of "protect us", "save us", "spare us from pain" etc. – prayers of cowardice and prayers for security. No, what they prayed was, "Lord prepare us to meet our enemies graciously and grant us boldness in declaring the Gospel."

They prayed for courage. ***"And when they prayed … they spoke the word of God with boldness."*** So they met spiritual darkness head on – not rudely or with bitterness, but with unflinching moral courage.

To be great in grace is to be warm – hot even – in brotherly unity. ***"Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul …."*** (v. 32) We don't lose our individuality. It doesn't mean that we will necessarily agree with each other all the time. But it does mean that with all of our diversity of backgrounds, temperaments and opinions, we are totally agreed in the affirmations of faith concerning Our Lord Jesus Christ and that in love we are one in our deepest attitudes towards one another.

I have been to Kansas, but sadly was not able to go and see the great wheat-growing countryside. Apparently, as you travel across Kansas in winter, you can see lots of low fences dividing one farm from another. Apparently they are very obvious. But if you return in the summer when the wheat is tall and the farmers are ready to harvest, the fences are still there but you can't see them! What you see is not fences but "fruit".

Distinctions can get lost in our transcendent oneness in the Lord Jesus and this is especially true in the "growing season" and at "harvest time". We are all members of the Body of Christ. We belong to Him who is the Head of the Body. Where we recognise this and, more importantly, adapt our practices to this reality, then Our Lord is delighted and His **great grace** rests upon us.

This picture of the early church humbles me and greatly encourages me. We too can be:

Rich in graciousness

Vital in prayer

Noble in courage

Warm in brotherliness

And what is the secret of it all? It is never a formula, but we are given the secret! (v. 31) ***"And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit …."***

We fail unless He fills.