

Enns, P. P. (1997, c1989). *The Moody handbook of theology*.

## PREVENIENT GRACE

Prevenient grace is the “preparing” grace of God that is dispensed to all,<sup>1</sup> enabling a person to respond to the invitation of the gospel. Prevenient grace may be defined as “that grace which ‘goes before’ or prepares the soul for entrance into the initial state of salvation. It is the preparatory grace of the Holy Spirit exercised toward man helpless in sin. As it respects the guilty, it may be considered mercy; as it respects the impotent, it is enabling power. It may be defined, therefore, as that manifestation of the divine influence which precedes the full regenerate life.”<sup>2</sup>

This leads to a belief in synergism, “working together” or a “cooperative action” between man and God with regard to salvation. Because God dispenses prevenient grace, the effects of Adam’s sin are reversed, enabling the person to respond in faith to the gospel. Man may accept or reject the gospel and the grace of God of his own free will. “Through this awakening from original sin, one becomes open to the grace freely offered in Jesus Christ. Restoration to close and uncorrupted relationship with God is there by made possible.”<sup>3</sup>

The Arminian system of grace may be summarized as follows: “(1) the inability of man as totally depraved; (2) the state of nature as in some sense a state of grace through the unconditional benefit of the atonement; (3) the continuity of grace as excluding the Calvinistic distinction between common and efficacious grace; (4) synergism, or the co-operation of grace and free will; and (5) the power of man to finally resist the grace of God freely bestowed upon him.”<sup>4</sup>

## FREE WILL

It becomes apparent that there is a relationship between prevenient grace and free will. Wiley cites four propositions in relating prevenient grace to freedom of the will.

(1) Prevenient grace is exercised upon the natural man, or man in his condition subsequent to the fall. This grace is exercised upon his entire being, and not upon any particular element or power of his being....(2) Prevenient grace has to do with man as a free and responsible agent. The fall did not efface the natural image of God in man, nor destroy any of the powers of his being. It did not destroy the power of thought which belongs to the intellect, nor the power of affection which pertains to the feelings. So, also, it did not destroy the power of volition which belongs to the will. (3) Prevenient grace has to do further, with the person as enslaved by sin....This slavery is not absolute, for the soul is conscious of its bondage and rebels against it....Thus grace is needed...to awaken the soul to the truth...and to move upon the affections by enlisting the heart upon the side of truth. (4) The continuous co-operation of the human will with the originating grace of the Spirit, merges prevenient grace directly into saving grace...Arminianism maintains that through the prevenient grace of the Spirit, unconditionally bestowed upon all men, the power and responsibility of free agency exist from the first dawn of the moral life.<sup>5</sup>

In summation, Arminianism teaches that the fall of man did not destroy the power of the

choice. Prevenient grace thus moves the person to see his spiritual need, enabling him to choose salvation. But grace, Wiley emphasizes, is prominent in the transaction.

## TERMS OF SALVATION

Saving faith involves four things: “(1) an awareness of sin; (2) a turning toward God through the prevenient grace of the Holy Spirit, who convicts and woos; (3) repentance and confession that sin has separated from the grace of God and kept the new covenant from being joined; and (4) personal appropriation of the new birth in Jesus Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

Human responsibility in salvation involves knowledge of sin, turning from sin, turning toward God, and faith in Christ. John Wesley emphasized repentance and belief as constituting “saving faith.” When Wesley preached, his message was “repent and believe.”<sup>7</sup> Repentance has the idea of change. Wesley called it a “change of heart from all sin to all holiness.” To repent means that sin must be forsaken; change has taken place. Repentance, therefore, involves action; moreover, repentance, according to Wesley, comes before faith.<sup>8</sup> Wesley says, “We must repent before we can believe the gospel. We must be cut off from dependency upon ourselves before we can truly depend on Christ. We must cast away all confidence in our own righteousness, or we cannot have a true confidence in his. Till we are delivered from trusting in anything that we do, we cannot thoroughly trust in what he has done and suffered.”<sup>9</sup>

Wesley defined saving faith in three terms: (1) to put one’s trust in the mercy and forgiveness of God; (2) to receive assurance in the believer’s life, for instance, that Jesus is the Son of God; (3) to express reliance upon Christ, turning one’s life over to Christ as Lord. For Wesley, belief is ultimately expressed in obedience.<sup>10</sup> This is in agreement with Arminians today who also emphasize the importance of works as a condition of salvation.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>1</sup>1. Steve Harper, *John Wesley’s Message for Today* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), p. 42.

<sup>2</sup>2. Wiley, *Christian Theology*, 2:346.

<sup>3</sup>3. Paul A. Mickey, *Essentials of Wesleyan Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), p. 86.

<sup>4</sup>4. Wiley, *Christian Theology*, 2:353.

<sup>5</sup>5. *Ibid.*, 2:356–7.

<sup>6</sup>6. Mickey, *Essentials of Wesleyan Theology*, p. 133.

<sup>7</sup>7. Harper, *John Wesley’s Message for Today*, p. 50.

<sup>8</sup>8. *Ibid.*, pp. 51–53.

<sup>9</sup>9. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>10</sup>10. *Ibid.*, pp. 55–57. See also excerpts from Wesley’s writings on repentance and faith in Robert W. Burtner and Robert E. Chiles, *John Wesley’s Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), pp. 151–62.

<sup>11</sup>11. Wiley, *Christian Theology*, 2:373.

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## IRRESISTIBLE GRACE

Grace is the unmerited favor of God. Calvinists emphasize the necessity of God's grace in salvation. If man can do nothing to save himself, then God must act; God must provide grace in order that man might be saved. That is the work of irresistible grace, which is also referred to as special or efficacious (because it is effective) grace. Opponents of this doctrine might suggest that if grace is irresistible then God forces someone to come against his own will. That is not the idea of irresistible grace, according to Calvinists. It does not make someone come contrary to his will. Rather, irresistible grace makes the individual *willing* to come, as is seen in Berkhof's definition: "By changing the heart it makes man perfectly willing to accept Jesus Christ unto salvation and to yield obedience to the will of God."<sup>12</sup> Irresistible grace is the supernatural work of God wherein He works in the soul of the individual, changing the entire nature by the Holy Spirit's operation.<sup>13</sup>

In the logic of Calvinism, God, through His Spirit, draws precisely those whom God unconditionally elected from eternity past and Christ died for. Thus the purpose of God is accomplished. He elected certain ones, Christ died for those very ones, and now through the Holy Spirit, God dispenses His irresistible grace to them to make them willing to come. They do not want to resist.

The scriptural basis for irresistible grace is John 6:37, 44.<sup>14</sup> Jesus said that the precise ones whom the Father has given Him will come to Him; moreover, they do not come of themselves. They cannot come unless the Father supernaturally draws them to Christ. Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, brings all the sheep to Himself; none are left out (John 10:16). Paul also affirms that the ones Christ elected He also justified and will ultimately glorify (Rom. 8:28–30). None are lost in the process.

Irresistible grace does not remove man's responsibility to believe. Man must heed the call, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved" (Acts 16:31). But when man believes in Christ, it is God through irresistible grace who enables him to believe.

<sup>12</sup> 12. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), p. 436.

<sup>13</sup> 13. *Ibid.*, pp. 437.

<sup>14</sup> 14. Palmer, *Five Points of Calvinism*, pp. 60–66.

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## The Grace of God

Although much has already been said about the grace of God, sharper focus on this glorious truth is needed.

### COMMON GRACE

**Definition of common grace.** If God is sovereign and man is depraved in his sinful estate, then God must move to bring about reconciliation between man and God. Differing categories are given to grace, but for this work the categories of common and efficacious grace will be used. Common grace is broader in scope, aimed at all mankind. In concise terms common grace may be defined as “the unmerited favor of God toward all men displayed in His general care for them.”<sup>15</sup> An expanded definition of common grace is “(a) those general operations of the Holy Spirit whereby He, without renewing the heart, exercises such a moral influence on man through His general or special revelation, that sin is restrained, order is maintained in social life, and civil righteousness is promoted; or, (b) those general blessings, such as rain and sunshine, food and drink, clothing and shelter, which God imparts to all men indiscriminately where and in what measure it seems good to Him.”<sup>16</sup>

**Explanation of common grace.** (1) General blessings to all mankind. The designation “common” stresses that all mankind is the recipient of God’s common grace. *Material provisions* are one aspect of common grace. Jesus commanded His followers to love their enemies because God exhibits His love toward all people (Matt. 5:45). God gives sunshine and rainfall to the atheistic farmer that enables him to harvest his crop just as He provides for the Christian farmer. Paul reminded the unbelievers at Lystra that God had given them “rains from heaven and fruitful seasons” (Acts 14:17), an exhibition of God’s common grace.

In Psalm 145:8–9 the psalmist exults: “The Lord is gracious and merciful; slow to anger and great in lovingkindness. The Lord is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works.” God’s grace and mercy are particularly exhibited in His delay and *withholding of judgment*. That God does not immediately judge man is an evidence of His grace. The reason is to enable man to come to repentance (Rom. 2:4).

God has provided *spiritual provisions* for all mankind. First Timothy 4:10 refers to Christ as “the Savior of all men, especially of believers.” This verse does not teach universalism, but it indicates spiritual provision has been made for everyone. If Christ is God then His death had infinite value in which He is potentially the Savior of all men and actually the Savior of those who believe. God’s common grace extends to all men inasmuch as that provision has been made for everyone through the death of Christ.

(2) Restraining of sin. God’s restraint of sin is an extension of common grace, and it functions through at least four channels. *Through Direct Actions:* Although Laban had cheated Jacob considerably, God restrained the deceit of Laban (Gen. 31:7). When Satan challenged God concerning Job’s loyalty, God put a limitation on what Satan could do to Job (Job 1:12; 2:6). *Through the Holy Spirit:* In Genesis 6:3 God said, “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever.” This text infers that the Holy Spirit does contend with and restrain man’s sinful behavior.

*Through the prophets:* The ministry of the prophets was to call the people back to obedience and adherence of the Mosaic law. In that ministry the prophets served as a restraint on sin (cf. Isa. 1:16–20). *Through human government:* In Romans 13:1–4 Paul establishes that governments are ordained by God (v. 1), and they are established as a restraint to evil.

In this present age there is a restraining force against evil mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2:6–7. In this case the restraining force is withholding the manifestation of “the lawless one.” When the Restrainer is removed, then the lawless one will be revealed. It is significant that the phrase, “what restrains” (neuter gender) in v. 6 shifts to the masculine gender, “he who now restrains” in v. 7. Moreover, the Restrainer must be strong enough to hold back the forces of Satan, leaving the suggestion that the Restrainer is the Holy Spirit. □<sup>17</sup>

(3) Convicting of sin. In the accompanying diagram, the work of convicting has a narrower focus than the material provisions of common grace. It is still classified as a narrower aspect of common grace because it is not effective in everyone who encounters it. □<sup>18</sup> The convicting work of the Holy Spirit is set forth in John 16:8–11. He “will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment” (v.8). The word *convict* (Gk. *elegchein*) is a legal term that means “to cross-examine for the purpose of convincing or refuting an opponent (the word being specially used of legal proceedings).” □<sup>19</sup>

It involves the conceptions of authoritative examination, of unquestionable proof, of decisive judgment, of punitive power. Whatever the final issue may be, he who “convicts” another places the truth of the case in dispute in a clear light before him, so that it must be seen and acknowledged as truth. He who then rejects the conclusion which this exposition involves, rejects it with his eyes open and at his peril. Truth seen as truth carries with it condemnation to all who refuse to welcome it. □<sup>20</sup>

This convicting work of the Holy Spirit is threefold. It concerns *sin* (16:9) in the refusal of people to believe in Christ (John 16:9). The sin is specifically the unbelief of the people in spite of Christ’s revelation concerning Himself through His words and works. It concerns *righteousness* in the conviction of the world whereby Christ is vindicated through His death, resurrection, and ascension (John 16:10). The fact that Christ arose and ascended to the Father demonstrated that He was indeed the Righteous One. It concerns *judgment* in the conviction of the world because Satan was judged at the cross (John 16:11). Satan rules by means of sin and death, yet Christ triumphed over both and defeated Satan. If the ruler has been judged then his followers will be judged also. The Holy Spirit will convict the world of these truths.

***Necessity of common grace.*** It is preliminary to efficacious grace. Before a person can be saved there must be a witness from God; that witness comes first through a knowledge of God. God reveals Himself to people through the avenue of common grace. When people participate in the material blessings of God (Matt. 5:45) it ought to make them reflect on the goodness of God. Additionally, God has revealed something of Himself in nature: His “eternal power and divine nature” are clearly seen by all (Rom. 1:20). All people have an awareness of their accountability to a righteous God, all the while having been participants of His blessings toward them. With that awareness in mankind, the Holy Spirit convicts persons of the righteousness of Jesus Christ who offers the solution to mankind’s dilemma (John 16:8–11). A person cannot receive the efficacious grace of God for salvation without having received and recognized the work of God in common grace. Common grace thus is preparatory for efficacious grace; it brings man to a

realization of his sin and of the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

## EFFICACIOUS GRACE

**Definition of efficacious grace.** Efficacious grace is narrower in scope than common grace and as the name indicates, it is *efficacious*, that is *effective*, in those to whom it is given. All who are the recipients of efficacious grace respond to it and become believers. Efficacious grace is also called special grace in contrast to common grace.

A concise definition of efficacious grace is “the work of the Holy Spirit which effectively moves men to believe in Jesus Christ as Saviour.”<sup>21</sup> A further definition is that “Special grace is irresistible...by changing the heart it makes man perfectly willing to accept Jesus Christ unto salvation and to yield obedience to the will of God.”<sup>22</sup> An important emphasis in this definition is that efficacious grace renders the person *willing* to believe in Jesus Christ; in other words, the individual willingly believes. He does not come against his will. Walvoord’s definition has a similar emphasis: “[efficacious grace is] the instantaneous work of God empowering the human will and inclining the human heart to faith in Christ.”<sup>23</sup> Efficacious grace is based on the “called” passages of Scripture (cf. Rom. 1:1, 6–7; 8:28; 1 Cor. 1:1–2, 24, 26; Eph. 1:18; 4:1, 4; 2 Tim. 1:9). This calling denotes the effective invitation of God whereby He woos the person through the power of the Holy Spirit and renders the individual willing to respond to the gospel.

**Explanation of efficacious grace.** Eight observations about efficacious grace help give it precise meaning.

First, not everyone is called; efficacious grace is not dispensed to everyone. It is limited to the elect. Conversely, all the elect are the recipients of efficacious grace. In Romans 1:5–6 Paul emphasizes that from among the broad spectrum of Gentiles, the select group making up the church in Rome were called. Not all the Gentiles were called; only those who constituted the church at Rome had been called by the special grace of God. This narrow focus is also seen in 1 Corinthians 1:24–28. From the broad sector of Jews and Gentiles who either found Christ a stumblingblock or foolishness, God called *some* Jews and *some* Gentiles to whom Christ represented the power of God. Note the emphasis on called or chosen (same root word as called) in this passage (vv. 24, 26–28).

Second, it is effective because it is never successfully rejected. It is irresistible. This is not to suggest that some would refuse to come but are forced and therefore come into the kingdom struggling. As already mentioned, it means God moves upon the sinner’s will to make him willing to come. As a result, he comes of his volition and does not resist the efficacious grace of God. First Corinthians 1:23–24 emphasizes that the gospel is foolishness to unbelievers, but it is the power of God and it is effective in believers.

The other side of efficacious grace is the need to believe. Thirdly, then, it does not operate contrary to man’s will. Man is still responsible to believe the gospel in order to be saved, and he cannot be saved apart from believing (Acts 16:31). Jesus admonished the unbelieving Jews, “You are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life” (John 5:40; cf. Matt. 23:37). This was a deliberate refusal and an unwillingness to believe in Christ.

Next, efficacious grace involves the drawing power of God. John 6:44 states, “No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him.” “Those who come to Christ are here described as being drawn to him by the Father...the divine initiative in the salvation of believers

is emphasized. The responsibility of men and women in the matter of coming to Christ is not overlooked (cf. John 5:40); but none at all would come unless divinely persuaded and enabled to do so.” □<sup>24</sup>

Fifth, the work of the Holy Spirit is involved in efficacious grace. Preliminary to a person responding to special grace, the Holy Spirit must convict the person of their sin of unbelief and of the righteousness of Christ (John 16:8–11; see previous discussion). The Holy Spirit is also the one who effects efficacious grace in the person as He regenerates the person (Titus 3:5).

Sixth, efficacious grace must involve the Word of God. In response to the gift of efficacious grace the person responds in faith, but faith must have content and a knowledge of truth to be believed. Efficacious grace, therefore, is not given apart from biblical truth. “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). The Word of God is living and is applied to the heart of the believer by the Holy Spirit (Heb. 4:12). Peter reminds the believers that they have been born again “through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Pet. 1:23). Both these texts from Hebrews and 1 Peter emphasize that the Word of God is *living* and instrumental in effecting the new birth. Efficacious grace and the application of the living Word of God are vital in bringing salvation to the person.

Seventh, the application of efficacious grace is toward individuals, not to groups, nor to the church as a whole. Jacob is an example of individual election and the recipient of efficacious grace (Rom. 9:11–13). God passed over Esau and chose Jacob to reveal His grace. Just as justification must be on an individual basis and not corporate (such as the entire church being elected as a distinct entity), so election through the application of efficacious grace must be individual. In Romans 8:30 the very ones God called (efficacious grace) were the very ones God justified. It is necessary for consistent interpretation to recognize the calling (efficacious grace) and the justification as applied similarly (i.e., individual, not corporate).

Finally, efficacious grace is from eternity. While the application of efficacious grace takes place in time, its plan was determined in eternity. Romans 9:11 emphasizes that God’s plan and *resolve* (Gk. *prothesis*) alone determined the object of His grace in eternity past. Before Jacob and Esau had done anything good or bad, God chose Jacob and passed over Esau to reveal His grace; it was not in accord with human works but as a result of the eternal counsel of the sovereign God. Similarly, Romans 8:30 teaches that the application of efficacious grace is as a result of having predestined certain ones to be the objects of that grace. God called by efficacious grace the ones whom He had previously predestined.

***Defense of efficacious grace.*** The necessity of efficacious grace becomes apparent as four factors are considered.

First, it is necessary because of sin. Ephesians 2:1 states the condition of the unsaved person: “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins.” □<sup>25</sup> If the unbeliever is *dead* then he cannot make the initial response to God. God must make the first move. Hence, God through His grace calls the one who is dead in trespasses and sin.

Also, it is effective because God cannot fail. In the sequence involving those whom God calls in Romans 8:29–30, none are lost. The same ones God foreknows He also predestines, calls, justifies, and glorifies. God loses none in the process. The text is clear in emphasizing, “whom He called, these He also justified.” The very ones God called by His grace were also justified, indicating that the efficacious grace was effective in every person whom God called.

Next, efficacious grace is fair because God is always just. In the discussion of God's sovereign call following the discussion of God calling Jacob and passing over Esau, Paul asks the question that would be on the lips of many, "What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there?" (Rom. 9:14). Paul answers with the strongest possible negative statement: "May it never be!"<sup>26</sup> Although the finite human mind cannot comprehend God's sovereign dealing, nonetheless, God is just in all His actions.

Lastly, this grace is fair because man must believe. The fact that God gives efficacious grace does not nullify man's responsibility to believe. Numerous Scriptures emphasize the necessity of believing (cf. John 3:16, 18, 36; 5:24). John 3:18, 36 in particular emphasize that man is lost because he willfully refuses to believe the gospel, not because he does not receive efficacious grace.

**Objections to efficacious grace.** First, responsibility is unnecessary. It appears that if man is dead in sin and God must demonstrate efficacious grace in order to save an individual, then human responsibility is unnecessary. The problem, however, relates to human inability to comprehend fully God's work and man's response in salvation. Although it is true that God must initiate the action and that man cannot be saved apart from God's efficacious grace, these truths do not absolve man from his responsibility. The solution is found in recognizing that this is one of many antinomies (paradoxes) in Scripture.<sup>27</sup> The numerous passages of Scripture commanding people to believe are sufficient evidence in showing that man is indeed responsible (cf. John 3:18, 36; 6:37; Acts 16:31, etc.).

Second, it is unjust. Romans 9:14 indicates that man cannot suggest there is injustice with God. Man may not comprehend the working of God but nonetheless, God is just. One further point should be noted. God does not owe anyone anything. If He chooses to display His grace to some and not to others it is not unfair since He owes nothing to anyone; moreover, *all people* have volitionally turned their backs on God. If He decides not to display His grace to all it is not unfair since all have rejected Him as an act of the will (Rom. 3:11–12). Ryrie's conclusion on this difficult subject is worth noting.

God does not bestow His efficacious grace whimsically and without purpose. His purpose is not only to enlighten, regenerate, and bring a sinner into fellowship with Himself but it is primarily that through this operation He may bring glory to Himself. His purpose is that sinners who have been the recipients of efficacious grace may also "show forth the excellencies of him" who called them "out of the darkness into his marvellous light" (1 Peter 2:9–10, ASV). God is glorified through the display of His efficacious grace in the redeemed life.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>15</sup> 15. Charles C. Ryrie, *The Holy Spirit* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), p. 55. See also Ryrie's *The Grace of God* (Chicago: Moody, 1963), for a comprehensive discussion of grace.

<sup>16</sup> 16. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 436.

<sup>17</sup> 17. See the excellent discussion by D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles* (Chicago: Moody, 1971), pp. 312–14.

<sup>18</sup> 18. See Ryrie's discussion in *The Holy Spirit*, pp. 58–59.

<sup>19</sup> 19. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 697.

<sup>20</sup> 20. B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Reprint. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), p. 228.

<sup>21</sup> 21. Ryrie, *The Holy Spirit*, p. 61.

[22](#) 22. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 436.

[23](#) 23. John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), p. 122.

[24](#) 24. F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 156.

[25](#) 25. The word “were” (Gk. *ontas*) is a present participle (a better translation would be “being”) that stresses their state of existence. They are in a state of being dead in sin.

[26](#) 26. *Me genoito* (Gk.) “expresses the abhorrence of an inference which may be falsely drawn from the argument.” Fritz Rienecker, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, p. 354.

[27](#) 27. Antinomy comes from the Greek *anti*, meaning “against,” and *nomos*, meaning “law,” hence, something that is contrary to law or contrary to human reason. The student is encouraged to study Ken Boa, *God, I Don’t Understand* (Wheaton: Victor, 1975) for a most helpful discussion of antinomies. An awareness of antinomies in Scripture will help resolve many tensions and also help avoid giving undue emphasis on one side or the other in an antinomy.

[28](#) 28. Ryrie, *The Holy Spirit*, p. 63.