

Grace. Grace is one of God's many communicable attributes. It generally means His "undeserved favor" toward sinful man. Often occurring in the contexts of blessing or salvation, God's grace may be thought of as either common (general, universal) or elective (special, saving, regenerating).

Both the Old and New Testaments emphasize "grace" as a major concept. Whether one views the central theme of the Bible as the kingdom of God, prophecy (promise)-fulfillment, law-grace, salvation-history, or any other overarching concept, grace plays a crucial role. In addition to the terminology of grace (primarily *hesed* and *hen* in Hebrew and *charis* in Greek), several passages convey a notion of grace. Concepts like salvation, sanctification, and blessing tend to portray some aspect of grace. Thus, some of the passages below do not employ grace-terminology, but the grace-truth still exists.

Common Grace. Common grace is the universal, but not saving, blessings given by God to all people. Examples for common grace abound, as seen in the following verses.

Physical Provision. First, God's common grace occurs in the physical realm, for He "causes His sun to rise on *the* evil and *the* good, and sends rain on *the* righteous and *the* unrighteous" (Matt 5:45). Also, "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. . . . You give [to all] their food in due time. You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing" (Ps 145:8-9, 15-16). God's provisions to all people of food, water, and air are acts of His grace.

Intelligence. Second, God provides intellect to all. Mankind's intellect is the distinguishing feature between him and the rest of the animal world, for "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Gen 1:27). Many scholars view God's image as the intelligence, or spiritual aspect, man was given at his creation. Moreover, God's gift of intelligence comes via His general revelation, given to all: "For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God" (Rom 1:21). Clearly, sinful man is without excuse before Almighty God for failing to believe in His Son, because God has made Himself known generally. This general revelation climaxes in Christ, who is "the true Light, which, coming into the world, enlightens every man" (John 1:9), emphasizing God's goodness to all.

Morality. Third, common grace affects morality. Although "all have sinned" (Rom 3:23), people are not as bad as they could be. One reason is because God has instilled a conscience in everyone: "For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them" (Rom 2:14-15). One only need to look at different cultures to see that "this inward sense of conscience leads people to establish laws and customs in society that are, in terms of the outward behavior they approve or prohibit, quite like the moral laws of Scripture: people often establish laws or have customs that respect the sanctity of marriage and the family, protect human life, and prohibit theft and falsehood in speech" (Grudem, 660). Of course, morality does not win favor with God, because sin still abounds; morality is, however, part of God's good gift to all.

Unique Giftedness. Fourth, God blesses people in a multitude of ways, including gifting them for non-Christian tasks. Artists, dancers, singers, musicians, athletes, and more can often out-perform believers who do the same, simply because of God's common grace. The Bible says,

“Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow” (James 1:17).

Society. Fifth, common grace is evident in society. Both believers and unbelievers bear children (cf. Gen 5:4). Such childbearing is evidence of the common grace of God, who said, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (9:1; cf. 1:28). This command occurs both before and after the Fall, so there is nothing unique in believers’ having children.

Similarly, human government comes from God, “for there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God” (Rom 13:1). Because of God’s involvement in government, He commands believers to pray “on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority” (1 Tim 2:1-2). Christians are not told to intercede only for godly leaders, providing further proof of God’s general blessings to all. Moreover, medical facilities, educational institutions, social ministries, and other businesses often improve the welfare of people. These establishments are verification of God’s common grace.

Christian Events. Finally, common grace is shown through God’s provision of salvation and Christian preaching. God’s provision of salvation is for all, for He “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” providing “Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tim 2:4, 6; cf. 2 Pet 3:9). Moreover, when Scripture declares that God “is the Savior of all men, especially of believers” (4:10) and “the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men” (Tit 2:11), it stresses God’s general provision of salvation, so that none are without excuse. This provision is not saving in itself, because man must repent from his sins and believe in Christ for salvation (cf. Act 3:17-26).

Likewise, unbelievers who hear Christian preaching benefit from common grace. Preaching rightly centered on the gospel compels sinners to respond, for through preaching “God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere should repent” (Acts 17:30). Furthermore, just as wedding invitations are sent out to many, but only some of those respond—“for many are called, but few *are* chosen” (Matt 22:14)—so gospel preaching that urges everyone to trust Christ is another expression of God’s common grace, especially to the unbeliever. Those who respond confirm elective grace, to which we now turn.

Elective Grace. Elective grace is God’s special, unmerited favor toward sinful man that results in a sinner experiencing new birth, conversion, Christian growth, perseverance in the faith, and ultimately, glorification with Christ. Instances of saving grace abound in Scripture, for every time someone is saved, elective grace is the key to such salvation.

One must notice the difference between God’s common grace shown to all and His effectual grace given to the elect—God’s children. Many evangelicals mistake the two, assuming God must show equal saving grace to everyone. Such a view of grace, however, no longer stresses the undeserved nature of God’s free gift.

One may view elective grace as the hinge upon which the gospel turns, for it focuses on Christ, who is “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14; cf. vv. 16-17), and His atoning work (Heb 2:9). Divine grace also has a role in every aspect of salvation, for sinners are “called. . . through His grace” (Gal 1:15), repent due to His grace (2 Tim 2:25), believe due to grace (Eph 2:8-9), are “justified as a gift by His grace” (Rom 3:24), and grow in sanctification as a result of God’s grace (Rom 6). At this point it may be helpful to consider the various subcategories of elective grace.

Prevenient Grace. Synonymous with common grace in the Wesleyan system, prevenient grace actually differs. Whereas Wesleyans believe the conscience is a part of prevenient grace, they also believe such grace can lead to salvation. The section above shows that common grace via the conscience is not saving.

Prevenient grace, on the other hand, is the initial aspect of God's saving grace prior to human action. The Scripture is replete with examples where the Lord initiates salvation by His grace. Jesus told His disciples, "You did not choose Me but I chose you" (John 15:16). Whenever we claim that we chose or decided to follow Christ, we must realize that our choice to follow Him came after His choice of us—it was the Lord who initiated the work in us.

Moreover, God's elective grace precedes human action in that it was established before creation, and God's election/predestination of believers results in "the praise of the glory of His grace" (Eph 1:6). Likewise, the text "we love, because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19) stresses divine initiation in salvation. The individual's responsibility to believe is not removed from this equation, but faith is a result of God's work: "As many as received [Christ], to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:10-11). Paul also accentuates this priority of grace as unconditional, because God graciously saves apart from works (cf. Rom 9:11; 11:5-6). Such grace flows out of the divine plan centered in Christ before time (2 Tim 1:9).

Finally, Old Testament prophecies reveal that God always planned to save via His grace—thus, God, prior to sending Christ, had installed salvation by grace. Ezekiel, like Moses before him, could call on the Israelites to "make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit" (18:31; cf. Deut 10:16), knowing that only God could perform this work of grace (cf. 36:26-27). This covenant of grace climaxes in the Prophets with Jeremiah's message, for God says, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. . . . for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more" (31:33-34). This new covenant centers on God's gracious work in Christ (cf. Luke 22:20).

Efficacious Grace. Grace that is effective in accomplishing its intended purpose is efficacious grace. Since God is at work, He providentially carries out redemption in performing what otherwise could not be done. Thus, God's work of efficacious grace results in such actions as bringing life to the spiritually dead, giving light to those engulfed in darkness, finding and saving the lost, and setting the enslaved free.

Quite possibly the clearest example of God's efficacious grace in Scripture occurs at the heart of Romans—Paul's exposition of the gospel of grace. Paul writes, "We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose" (8:28). This "purpose" concerns grace, because of several reasons. First, grace is at the heart of Paul's message prior to this section (3:24-6:23). Second, a related passage in Ephesians 1:3-14 also magnifies God's purpose of grace. Third, and most important, the following verses and context deal with election by grace (8:29-33; 9:11-18; 11:5-6). The immediate passage links the notions of covenant love ("foreknew," see LOVE) with predestination, calling, justification, and glorification. This work is efficacious because of the reoccurring prepositional phrase "those/these whom" which precedes the action verbs. Therefore, the recipients of God's covenant love are the same ones predestined, called, justified, and glorified by God's grace.

Elsewhere, the Bible conveys efficacious grace in the following passages: “He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:6); Jesus thanked God the Father for giving Him as the Son “authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life” (John 17:2); and God, by the gospel of grace, “effectually worked” in calling the apostles (Gal 2:8). Each text shows that God’s elective grace is efficacious.

Irresistible Grace. Irresistible grace is God’s special grace that cannot be ultimately rejected. Built upon the notion of efficacious grace, irresistible grace is the drawing work of God that will result in the sinner’s salvation through faith in Christ. Both efficacious grace (by which God effectually calls and draws sinners to Christ) and irresistible grace are two sides of the same coin.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to establish clarity about irresistible grace. The Bible clearly teaches that the Spirit’s gracious work can be opposed, such as grieving the Spirit (Eph 4:30), quenching Him (1 Thess 5:19), or directly resisting Him (Acts 7:51). Many people resist God’s grace, but *irresistible* grace simply means “that the Holy Spirit is able, when he so chooses, to overcome all human resistance and so cause his gracious work to be utterly effective and ultimately irresistible” (Schreiner and Ware, 211). This facet of grace stresses divine sovereignty in salvation, as evidenced in the following Scripture passages.

The Lord Jesus speaks to this issue when He says, “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. . . . No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws Him” (John 6:37, 44). Here one sees that God the Father must draw a sinner by grace to Christ, or else the sinner would not be *able* to come to Christ on his own. Rather than teach hard determinism (that which *must* happen), however, Jesus teaches that sinners given to Him by God *will*, at least eventually, come to Him in faith (cf. v. 40). Thus, God draws certain sinners to Christ so that they can come to Him by faith and be saved.

While some argue that this notion of drawing is simply God’s way of making salvation *possible*, John reveals that Jesus is speaking about what “makes salvation effectual. Those who are drawn will come to Jesus and believe in him” (Schreiner and Ware, 242). The fact that they “will come” to Christ underscores the ultimate irresistibility of this grace.

Moreover, this irresistible nature of God’s special grace works hand-in-hand with the efficacious aspect, because those who come to Christ will not be cast out—“This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day” (v. 39). So that no one misses the point about the divine sovereignty involved in salvation, Jesus emphasizes the certainty of the believer’s future resurrection to life (vv. 39-40, 44, 54). Jesus also underlines the eternal security of the believer when He speaks about His sheep: “I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of the Father’s hand” (10:28-29).

Sufficient Grace. When one speaks of God’s grace as sufficient, it simply means that His grace is satisfactory to save believers both now and forever (Jude 24-25). Man’s works cannot be a cause for salvation, or else salvation would not be by grace alone—that is, grace would be insufficient to save.

Undoubtedly, every believer owes his salvation to the sufficiency of God’s grace, for apart from God, the sinner is dead spiritually and “by nature children of wrath” (2:1-3). God, however, “being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were

dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)” (2:4-5). The three-fold communicable attributes of mercy, love, and grace form an unbreakable bond in saving sinners. This saving grace guarantees future salvation in heaven for the purpose of displaying “the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God” (2:7-8). Thus, elective grace is sufficient to save and is God’s gift at transforming sinners into His children.

A word must be said about the sufficiency of grace in Christ’s atonement (see ATONEMENT). First, the general gospel call about Christ’s death and resurrection must go out to all (Acts 1:8). Upon hearing the gospel, many will not repent of their sins and trust in Christ. Their failure to do so, however, does not negate the sufficiency of saving grace. Christ’s atonement is a sufficient sacrifice for all (1 John 2:1-2). Not all will be saved, however—not because God’s grace is insufficient, but because sinners fail to repent and believe (John 3:18). Those who trust Christ do so as a result of God’s grace (cf. Acts 13:48). Thus, we may conclude that the elective, or special, grace of God is sufficient to save all, but it is efficient only for God’s elect—those who believe (Eph 2:8-9).

Conclusion. Perhaps John Newton’s classic hymn “Amazing Grace” summarizes God’s grace best: “Amazing grace! How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but not I see.” The fact that sinners get to live on earth is a result of God’s common grace. That some sinners trust Christ for salvation results from God’s special grace. These truths taken together surely mean that God’s grace is marvelous, wonderful, infinite, matchless, even amazing!

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