

DISTINCTIVES OF GRACE
Bible Study Notes #8, October 30, 2005

IRRESISTIBLE GRACE

Special Note @ Reformation Day:

It is noteworthy that today is Reformation Sunday, the Sunday before Reformation Day on October 31. This celebrates and acknowledges the event that sparked the Protestant Reformation, when Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. He posted them there on the eve of All Saints' Day mass (celebrated on November 1), ensuring that these points of discussion would be noticed by the throngs of people coming to worship that next day. He meant these theses to be points of academic discussion, not to serve as the basis of major reform of the Roman Catholic church. However, they were quickly translated into German, copies made of the new printing presses, distributed throughout Europe, and the sparks of a firestorm that swept through the church. November 1 has traditionally been celebrated as All Saints Day and November 2 as All Souls Day; the first in honor of the deceased and departed faithful saints and martyrs of the church, and the second in commemoration of the departed souls that may have not been cleansed from venial sins (and could be helped with prayers and the mass). This was perhaps the church's response and substitution for the Day of the Dead or other pagan festivals about the dead celebrated on November 1. "Halloween" came from a contraction of All Hallows Eve as the day before this special day. (A trivial note is that the New Orleans Saints were so named because the NFL granted them their franchise on November 1, 1966.)

It is very sad that the focus of the world, including all Protestant churches, has become the celebrations related to the new meaning of Halloween, and almost no one thinks about or even knows of Reformation Day. What has become the most commercialized holiday season replaces what should be the most important Protestant celebration of the year. Without the Protestant Reformation, we would all be Roman in our doctrine and the essence of the Gospel and true Christian faith according to the scriptures would be lost.

IRRESISTIBLE GRACE

We have come to the fourth of the Five Points of Calvinism or the Doctrines of Grace, which is misleadingly named "**Irresistible Grace**". A better term may be **Efficacious Grace**.

As in our last lesson about *Grace Alone*, to understand this doctrine, we must first **define the terms** involved. The Bible is a story of salvation of a very unique and special nature. There is nothing else which gives us a perfect comparison or analogy. (No illustration of grace comes close to the real thing!) One of the many "Bible words" used so much by church goers and genuine Christians alike is **grace!** In many ways it could be called the *keyword of Christianity!* Only with it can any or all of the Biblical doctrines be understood, and without it none of the major doctrines, especially salvation, can be explained or understood.

- **“Grace”** in the Bible means a gift which causes joy, pleasure, or gratification; a kindness granted; a benefit; a favor done without the expectation of return; a gift from God! Its various related forms (as nouns, verbs or adjectives) similarly refer to gifts or gifting or favor without reason, merit or works and based upon the initiative of God alone.

“Grace” is at opposition to, in tension with, and the antithesis of **“works”** (*erga*) in the Bible. These two concepts are **mutually exclusive**. So it affirms the initiative and gift of God based upon His loving-kindness, mercy and nature; but also denies that it is based upon merit or is deserved in any way by the recipient. **Grace is simply the unmerited favor and gift of God. As discussed before, it can be said and viewed that -**

***All God does he does for His GLORY!
All God does for us, He does by His grace!***

- **“Irresistible”** may be a very misleading term, as some make it to imply that every grace or influence of God cannot be resisted. That is not what is meant by this term! In this case, “irresistible” means that God can and does overcome all resistance to His plan of salvation and make His influence irresistible.
- **Irresistible Grace refers to the Sovereign work of God to overcome the rebellion of our hearts and bring us to faith in Christ so that we can be saved.**

God is indeed Sovereign in all things (even by definition of God this must be true), but He declares it so in Scripture plainly and clearly:

Daniel 4:34-35 (NASB) "But at the end of that period I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever;

For His dominion is an everlasting dominion,

And His kingdom endures from generation to generation.

[35] "And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,

But **He does according to His will in the host of heaven**

And among the inhabitants of earth;

And no one can ward off His hand

Or say to Him, 'What hast Thou done?'

Psalms 115:3 (NASB) **But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.**

The issue here is **God’s Sovereignty in salvation**. The theological word for this field of study is called **soteriology**. If God is Sovereign at all, how much more so must He be in salvation!

- To help better understand the issue and point, many use alternate terms like “**efficacious grace**” or “**effectual calling**” to explain the doctrinal teachings of the Scripture that are related to **irresistible grace**.

Remember that “**efficacious**” means **able to effect something**: having the power to produce the desired result, especially a cure or an improvement in somebody’s condition.

- *What do we believe and teach about these things?*

The 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith (and *The Westminster Confession of Faith* similarly) states that (in Chapter 10 Sections 1 and 2):

1. At a time appointed by and acceptable to God, those whom God has predestined to life are **effectually called by His Word and Spirit out of the state of death in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ**. Their minds are given spiritual enlightenment and, as those who are being saved, they begin to understand the things of God. God takes away their heart of stone and gives them a heart of flesh. He renews their will, and by His almighty power He sets them to seek and follow that which is good, at the same time effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ. **And to all these changes they come most freely, for they are made willing by divine grace.**
2. **God’s effectual call is the outcome of His free and special grace alone**. Until a man is given life, and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is dead in sins and trespasses, so is entirely passive in this work of salvation, a work that does not proceed from anything good foreseen in him, nor from any power or agency resident in him. **The power that enables him to answer God’s call and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it, is no less than that which effected the resurrection of Christ from the dead.**

The Shorter Catechism (in answer to Question 31 “What is effectual calling?”) states:

“**Effectual calling** is the Work of God’s Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, **He doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the Gospel.**”

Perhaps we should distinguish between **efficacious (or saving or special) grace** and **common (or general) grace**:

- **Common Grace**

Common grace is the grace of God by which He gives people innumerable blessings that are **not part of salvation**. These are general influences of the Holy Spirit which to a greater or lesser degree are shared by all men, and **are capable of being resisted**. Common grace is **different** from saving or efficacious grace in 1) its **results** (it does not bring about salvation), 2) in its **recipients** (it is given to both believers and unbelievers

alike), and 3) in its **source** (as it does not flow *directly* from Christ's atoning work, since Christ's death did not earn any measure of forgiveness for unbelievers, and therefore did not merit the blessings of common grace for them either).

We see examples of **common grace** in many ways and categories, including the physical realm, the moral realm, the creative or talent realm, the societal or governmental realm, and the religious or spiritual realm. Unbelievers may be shaped and reformed by common grace, but such reformation falls very short of regeneration, transformation or sanctification. Unbelievers may know by common grace what they should or should not do, but they do not receive the power to produce a genuine change or conversion with the power and desire to do or not do them.

John 14:17 (NASB) that is **the Spirit of truth**, whom the **world cannot receive**, because it does not behold Him or know Him, **but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you.**

Jeremiah 13:23 (NASB) "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?
Then you also can do good who are accustomed to doing evil.

And, as mentioned before, **these graces** (even when it is the receiving of the Word of God) **can be resisted by men.**

Acts 7:51 (NASB) (Stephen as he was being stoned to death) "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are **always resisting the Holy Spirit**; you are doing just as your fathers did.

Even believers can resist some of God's graces in their lives, as relating to His commanded will or common grace.

Ephes. 4:30 (NASB)

And **do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God**, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

1 Thes. 5:19 (NASB) **Do not quench the Spirit**;

In fact, much of the Bible is a story of men (and even the whole nation of Israel) resistance to God!

- But, consider the **nature of grace**, even in common grace and especially in efficacious or saving grace. When we do, the expression "irresistible grace" becomes **redundant!** And the decreed will of God cannot be resisted or cancelled by men.

Romans 9:18-21 (NASB) So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.

[19] You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For **who resists His will?**" [20] On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it? [21] Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use?

When God is showing His kindness or grace to us, He is granting that grace to His **creatures!** In other words, we are His making and creations, that were created *ex nihilo* (from nothing). Is there really any likelihood that something created by God would ever eventually and ultimately defy or fail to bring God glory as it was intended from the start? How could an all powerful and sovereign God create something or someone that would or could resist or thwart His purposes?

We should note that no one ever speaks of "**irresistible creation**"! What created matter or creature could resist the power and purposes of God??? Likewise, no one ever speaks of "**irresistible birth**"! What child could ever resist his own birth???

Yet these are just two of the many analogies and expressions used to describe our salvation and change when God "graces" us as his elect children.

- As taught before, we must always remember and begin with the **natural condition of man**. If we truly believe that men are radically or totally depraved, dead in their trespasses and sin, that they are unregenerate and fallen, that they are without hope apart from God's grace; then **we must be acted upon with an "irresistible grace"**!
- We should also remember the **nature of God**. He is not a cooperative agent or helper to mankind, but Lord and Sovereign God Almighty! He does not leave His will to be compromised or confirmed by men, but accomplishes all that He desires. He did not send His Son to make salvation *possible*, but to make salvation *sure and secure!*

As B. B. Warfield said, "**Sinful man stands in need**, not of inducements or assistance to save himself, but precisely of saving; and Jesus Christ has come not to advise, or urge, or woo, or help him to save himself, but **to save him!**"

So consider how God presents this gracious action of His upon us in His Scriptures. This inward change wrought by the supernatural power of His Spirit is called:

- **taking away a heart of stone and giving a heart of flesh**

Ezekiel 11:19-20 (NASB) "And I shall give them one heart, and shall put a new spirit within them. And I shall take the heart of stone out of their flesh and **give them a heart of flesh**, [20] that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances, and do them. Then **they will be My people**, and I shall be their God.

- **a new creature or creation**

2 Cor. 5:17-18 (NASB) Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is **a new creature**; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. [18] Now **all these things are from God**, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation,

- **a new birth**

John 3:3-8 (NASB) Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is **born again**, he cannot see the kingdom of God." [4] Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" [5] Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is **born of water and the Spirit**, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. [6] "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. [7] "Do not marvel that I said to you, '**You must be born again.**' [8] "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

- **a new birth of the will of God**

John 1:12-13 (NASB) But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, [13] who were **born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.**

- **a making alive**

Col. 2:13 (NASB) And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, **He made you alive** together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions,

- **a passing of death into life**

John 5:24 (NASB) "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but **has passed out of death into life.**

- **a spiritual regeneration and renewal**

Titus 3:5 (NASB) He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of **regeneration and renewing** by the Holy Spirit,

- **a spiritual resurrection by the same power that raised Christ from the dead**

Ephes. 1:19-20 (NASB) and what is **the surpassing greatness of His power** toward us who believe. These are **in accordance with the working of the strength of His**

might [20] which He brought about in Christ, **when He raised Him from the dead**, and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places,
 Ephes. 2:4-5 (NASB) **But God**, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, [5] **even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),**

- **a calling out of darkness into God's marvelous light**

1 Peter 2:9 (NASB) But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a HOLY NATION, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has **called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;**

- **a new creation of light and knowledge in our hearts**

2 Cor. 4:6 (NASB) **For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.**

- **Illustrated in the raising of Lazarus from the dead**

John 11:43-44 (NASB) And when He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, "**Lazarus, come forth.**" [44] **He who had died came forth, bound** hand and foot with wrappings; and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "**Unbind him, and let him go.**"

Notice what part Lazarus had in this physical regeneration. Although he may have at first thought he was participating, any real examination later would have forced him to acknowledge that he was the subject of the action, not a helper. Notice also that the church's job is not to regenerate and raise, but to "unbind" them from their old dead clothes and "let them go" to live for Him.

- **All of this really points to the "*ordo salutis*," or the "order of salvation."**
This is the teaching that deals with the logical sequencing of the benefits of salvation worked by Christ which are applied to us by the Holy Spirit.

Man must receive by grace a new nature to act in faith toward God. He needs regeneration *before* he can exercise faith. Faith cannot precede regeneration and cause the new birth. Man is born again from above and then responds in faith to the grace already received. We believe *because* we have born again! This is not only logical, but Scriptural and necessary for God Alone to receive the glory!

- What does this mean for us as believers? How should this truth and understanding change us or our thinking? How should it change our attitude toward God and His grace? How should it change our attitude about our own self importance, selfishness and pride?
- What does this mean for us as the church? How should this truth understanding change us or our thinking? How should it change our approach to evangelism or sanctification? What should be our focus and weapon?