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GOD'S BLAZING GRACE

By Jiří Moskala

Probably all Christians know the song titled “Amazing Grace,” which explains that divine grace is amazing because God is able to save broken, sinful people, especially “a wretch like me.” Bible scholars and theologians describe God’s grace as “blazing, extraordinaire, intense, living, surprising, astonishing, glorious, sacrificial, working, redemptive, or blistering.” Bonhoeffer speaks about “costly” grace in contrast to “cheap” grace that does not demand authentic obedience in following Jesus (Bonhoeffer, 1995). These different adjectives characterize God’s precious gift to humanity from various angles but do not do justice to the complexity and depth of this priceless commodity because no one term can adequately express its profound meaning.

The word “grace” is very rich with different nuances and connotations because God’s grace is a pregnant term with a vast array of meanings. The apostle Paul speaks about “the immeasurable riches of his grace” (ESV, NAB, NRS, RSV) expressed in God’s kindness toward humans (Ephesians 2:7). Translators render the Greek expression *hyperballon* (a present participle of the

verb *hyperballo*), translated above as “immeasurable,” in a variety of ways. God’s goodness is demonstrated toward us by “the exceeding riches of His grace” (KJV, NKJV, ASV, YLT), “the greatness of his grace” (CEB), “the surpassing riches of His grace” (NAS), “the incomparable riches of his grace” (NIV), or “the incredible wealth of his grace” (NLT).¹

During His earthly ministry, Christ was the embodiment of God’s grace (John 1:14, 17). The Holy Spirit is “the Dispenser of divine grace” for He is called “the Spirit of grace” (Zechariah 12:10; Hebrews 10:29) since it is He who “takes the ‘grace of Christ’ and confers it on us” (Berkhof, 1979, p. 426). It is significant that the term grace occurs in the Bible for the first time in the biblical account of the Flood. In this story, it is described that Noah found grace in God’s eyes (Genesis 6:8) in the midst of God’s judgment upon the sinful world.

The term grace (Hebrew *chen*, signifying “favor, kindness, charity, elegance, acceptance, benevolent action, goodness, charm, beauty, loveliness”) is derived from the root *chanan*, “to have mercy, be gracious,

¹ Biblical texts are quoted from the NIV unless indicated otherwise.

graciously provide, take pity on, show compassion, long for, inclined towards, or stoop in kindness to another person.” The equivalent to *chen* is the Greek term *charis*. Grace is God’s unmerited gift or favor, and it is an expression of His love toward humanity. Gruden (2020) defines it as “God’s goodness toward those who deserve only punishment” (p. 239) because they are sinners. Berkhof (1979) explains: “It is God’s free, sovereign, undeserved favour or love to man, in his state of sin and guilt, which manifests itself in the forgiveness of sin and deliverance from its penalty” (p. 427). God gives grace to humans even though they do not deserve it. His kindness is shown to all people.

God’s grace is always surprising and shocking, and it disturbs and may even offend some people. Confrontation with God’s favor humiliates because we want things we deserve and work for. Accepted grace takes our breath away, and we stand before the God of grace (1 Peter 5:10) in awe for His grace is always given in abundance. Paul explains that “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20 ESV).

There is only one grace of God, but it has many functions and flavors. God loves everyone without exception (John 3:16; Romans 5:8), died for all (Titus 2:11), and wants to save all (1 Timothy 2:3–4). He freely gives people whatever is needed. The common or universal grace is a description of God’s beneficence to all, and it may lead people to salvation when they accept God’s goodness and benevolence. Common grace sustains life in general and needs to be differentiated from special grace (Berkhof, 1979, p. 435). Let us unlock the wealth of divine grace with its multifaceted roles.

How does grace work in our lives?

1. God cares for the physical life of our world and its inhabitants by universal or common grace. God’s love is universal for He is good to everyone: “The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made” (Psalm 145:9 ESV). Jesus confirms that God provides, in His generosity, the basic blessings of life to everyone even though they are wicked (Matthew 5:45–48). Daniel said to Belshazzar: “You did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways” (Daniel 5:23). The apostle Paul underlines that our breath and movement is in God’s hands (Acts 17:25, 28). God shows His mercy and gives gifts to all people, not only to believers. Each person experiences basic blessings that come from God (James 1:17). There are many natural graces of God: we can

breathe, see, hear, smell, taste, touch, move, think, speak, feel, write, communicate, remember, love, create, reproduce, receive sunshine or rain, etc. God gives all of these and much more freely, even though humanity is sinful and in an antagonistic or indifferent attitude toward Him. Theologians have recognized different aspects of common grace besides sustaining conditions for humanity’s physical life, like God restraining His wrath, limiting evil, illuminating people with truth, goodness, and power (Psalm 117:1–2; John 1:9; Romans 1:19–21). Murray (1977) describes common grace as “every favor of whatever kind or degree, falling short of salvation, which this undeserving and sin-cursed world enjoys at the hand of God” (p. 96).²

However, when one does not reflect about physical but spiritual existence, we need to move beyond God’s beneficence, and sharply realize that without God and a conversion experience, “we are dead in our transgressions and sin” (Ephesians 2:1–3). How can we be resurrected to life and live a spiritually abundant life (John 10:10)? This is possible only because of God’s special intervention on our behalf. The apostle Paul uses the divine “but” to contrast the change: “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:4–5). We become alive only when we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. This divine “but” changes everything and gives the bright future perspective of eternal life.

The question poses itself: How does it occur, because we know that a dead person is not sensitive to any of God’s promptings? The answer is connected to God’s grace in collaboration with the work of the Holy Spirit and His Word (Ezekiel 36:26–27; 37:11–14; John 1:13; 3:5; 16:7–11; 1 Peter 1:23). Let us unfold this process by discerning the beauty and power of grace.

2. Prevenient grace is a grace that comes before salvation and enables a spiritually dead person to hear God’s voice, be awakened, and respond positively to God’s call of love. What we cannot do for ourselves, God does for us gratis. He is in search of humanity, always taking the first step in initiating our relationship with Him. His question in the Garden of Eden resonates still today: “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). Jesus states: “And I, when I am

² On common grace, see especially, Berkhof, pp. 432–446; and Gruden, pp. 803–815.

lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32 ESV). He is “the true light, which gives light to everyone” (John 1:9 ESV). God always makes the initial move. He is the source of all good things in our life, the summum bonum (Psalms 92:15; 115:3; 135:6; James 1:17), and leads us to respond properly to His desire to save everyone (Genesis 3:9; Romans 5:8; 1 Timothy 2:4; Titus 2:11; 2 Peter 3:9).

Prevenient grace (i.e., initial or enabling or awakening grace; the English word *prevenient* is derived from the Latin *praevenire*, meaning “come before, preceding, anticipating, expectant”) influences our heart and mind, and strengthens our will to respond positively to His gentle call to return to Him, to repent when His Word is preached to us (Isaiah 45:22; Joel 2:12–13; Mark 1:15; John 12:32; Acts 2:38; Romans 10:17; Ephesians 2:1–5; 1 Thessalonians 2:13). Paul explains it in a most eloquent way: “For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13 ESV). The whole of heaven is in collaboration to help humans find the right path to salvation. God sends holy angels to serve people to receive salvation (Hebrews 1:14). God’s grace grips our spiritual life.

Prevenient grace is God’s initial step, reaching each person with an invitation to respond to His offer of salvation, to be called out of sin to eternal life in Christ (1 Peter 2:9–10). It is a universal benefit of the atoning ministry of Jesus. In this sense, all “common grace is a subset of prevenient grace” (Reeve, 2018, p. 280). God does everything possible to bring people to Himself (Isaiah 45:22; 1 Timothy 2:4). God gives us the ability to respond to His call of mercy to receive His grace. However, people can harden their hearts and refuse to accept the gift of salvation (Hebrews 6:4–6; 10:26–27, 29; see also the second paragraph in the Conclusion).

Knight (2018) rightly stresses that “most people have confused free will with free grace” (p. 288). Without Christ, we are not only dead but also slaves to sin and unable to follow God. However, with the preaching of the Gospel comes power to every person to respond to the words of salvation (John 5:24; Romans 10:17; Hebrews 4:12; 1 Peter 1:23). Our will is enabled to be free to react and decide positively or negatively to God’s prevenient grace. Sinners do not have free will without prevenient grace. Reeve rightly explains: “With

the God-empowered choice restored through prevenient grace, the sinner’s role in salvation is to allow or reject the gracious gifts of God’s saving operations on behalf of each and every sinner, empowering the saved sinner to will and act in accordance with God’s law in response to God’s love” (Reeve, 2018, p. 286). Prevenient grace enables people to accept or discard the gift of salvation in Christ Jesus. The Holy Spirit awakens our conscience to receive forgiveness streaming from the cross of Calvary.

3. Saving grace proceeds from embracing prevenient grace, because prevenient grace comes before saving grace, as was explained above. Prevenient grace leads people to accept God’s saving or justifying grace after the initial affirmative reaction when they do not resist or reject it. We can stubbornly say no to God (Psalm 81:12; Isaiah 48:4; Jeremiah 5:23; 7:24). This is why every person is encouraged: “Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts” (Hebrews 3:7–8; 3:15; 4:7; cf. Psalm 95:8; Proverbs 28:14; Ephesians 4:18, 30). Repentance is not our work; it is the result of opening our heart to God and changing our mind and thinking under the influence of His Spirit and Word. God awakens the heart but never forces anyone to open their hearts to Him. Jesus proclaimed: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:20 ESV). The Greek word *anōthen* in Christ’s phrase “unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3 ESV), means “again” or “from above” (see John 3:3–8). This theological concept is further expanded in John 1:12; Romans 12:1–2; 2 Thessalonians 2:13.

When we accept God’s Word and do not resist His Holy Spirit, then new life, spiritual revival, occurs within us, and we work and do things for Christ and others because we are compelled to do it by His enabling grace, Word, and Spirit (Ezekiel 36:25–28; 37:4–10, 14; Zechariah 4:6; Romans 8:11; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23). If we do good works, we have nothing to boast about (Jeremiah 9:23–24; 1 Corinthians 1:29–31), because God has already prepared the works in advance in order for us to walk in them (Ephesians 2:10). Only the Holy Spirit enables us to be different and act in harmony with His will. Christ is alive today to intercede for us as the only and all-powerful Intercessor to save us completely and enable us to do His will

(Romans 8:34; 12:1–2; 1 Timothy 2:5; Titus 2:11–14; Hebrews 7:25). Thus, obedience is only possible for the redeemed who are empowered to do so (Ezekiel 11:19–20; 36:27). Salvific grace is amazing grace because it can save broken people, and it is blazing grace due to the fact that it springs from the assurance that Jesus loves everyone. Because of God’s saving grace repentant sinners are forgiven, saved, healed, liberated, kept, sustained, and redeemed. They now have good reasons to live with purpose. The meaning of life unfolds. God is generous, compassionate, caring, loving, and intervening on their behalf.

4. Transforming grace changes believers’ lives, including their thinking, emotions, goals, motivations, desires, imagination, direction, service, and lifestyle. God’s grace is amazing because it changes the human heart and behavior. This sanctifying grace transforms people’s behavior; if it does not change them, it means that grace is not so amazing and powerful. What is humanly impossible, what even atomic energy cannot do, God can, for He makes believers new creations in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:14). The fruit of the Holy Spirit is visible in their behavior (Galatians 5:22). Paul speaks about this transforming power of God in Romans 12:1–2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18. Christ’s followers become loving and lovable, trusting and trustworthy, changed into God’s image with a new self (Ephesians 4:22–24; Colossians 3:9–10). It completely transforms our life, gives new orientations, attitudes, and values. Grace changes everything by the power of God’s Word and the Holy Spirit (Ezekiel 36:26–17; Romans 8:4–5, 14; Colossians 3:1–17; 1 Peter 1:22).
5. Empowering grace equips believers for effective service and witnessing for God. The Holy Spirit gives them spiritual gifts to perform God’s work, to serve and minister to people. Grace is a divine enabling (1 Corinthians 12:4–11, 27–31; Ephesians 4:7–16). The closing benediction in the epistle to the Hebrews aptly summarizes this truth: “Now may the God of peace ... equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever” (Hebrews 13:20–21 ESV).
6. Sustaining grace is a power in life which keeps us in a vital relationship with Christ (1 John 2:24, 27). Thus, as we stay connected with Christ and persevere in our walk with Him, we constantly grow in

Christ’s grace and knowledge (2 Peter 3:18). This invigorating grace gives new strength to endure the pressures and hardships of life in order to empower us to be anchored in Christ and provide vitality and joy to our lives.

7. Triumphant grace is the aspect of divine grace which works miracles in life and triumphs in everyday struggles over selfishness, self-centeredness, and enables one to be unselfish and focus on the needs of others. Grace gives victory over addictions and overcomes wickedness and evil day by day (2 Corinthians 3:18) and culminates these victories in the ultimate triumph by bringing believers to their eternal home (John 14:1–3). What God started for us, in us, and through us, He will bring to the final triumph at His Second Coming. Paul emphatically states: “Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:6). Grace triumphs over sin, hatred, and death. Christ is the Victor, so He can keep us from falling: “To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen” (Jude 1:24–25).



Conclusion

God's grace is an all-present, all-comprehensive Christian experience of our human existence in the sinful world. Frame (2013) aptly expounds: "Grace appears in the benediction, the blessings of God. The apostolic greetings (Romans. 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:3, etc.) and benedictions (Romans 16:20, 24; 1 Corinthians 16:23; and esp. 2 Corinthians 13:14) always emphasize grace. ... So all the blessings of God come to us by God's sovereign grace. Without His grace we are nothing. By grace comes forgiveness of our sins, the power to do good works, and the ability to serve the people of God" (p. 246). The message of the book of Revelation begins and ends with an emphasis on grace (Revelation 1:4; 22:21). Divine grace has different facets: from common grace through prevenient, saving, transforming, empowering, and sustaining grace to triumphant grace. We have underlined these seven functions of grace, but stressed that all these roles belong to God's one and unique grace.

From this study, it is evident that the Bible does not state that it is impossible for the believer to turn away from or pervert God's grace (Galatians 1:6; Jude 4). The biblical teaching does not support the notion of irresistible grace³ as well as the concept of "once saved always saved," because one can choose to reject or fall from God's grace (see, e.g., John 3:36; Galatians 5:4; 2 Corinthians 6:1; 2 Timothy 4:10; Hebrews 10:29; 12:15; 2 Peter 1:10; 1 John 2:1–2). God's grace is not forced on anyone. The nature of grace is voluntary and free, one can refuse, deny, and betray it. Believers do not earn or deserve God's grace but receive it gratefully.

The bright colors of God's grace cannot fade and be exhausted but can be expanded with new dimensions and actions. The apostle Paul explains the practical results of accepting God's grace: "For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:11–13).

Key biblical texts underline the significance and benefits of the grace that comes from Jesus Christ: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). Paul exhorts: "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Corinthians 13:14). The apostle Peter's declaration should be our daily experience with God that we may flourish in Him and go from victory to victory: "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen" (2 Peter 3:18).



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³ The term "irresistible grace" is a favorite phrase in Calvinism and is part of the TULIP acronym (total depravity; unconditional election; limited atonement; irresistible grace; and perseverance of the saints). We also do not use the term "sacramental grace" because we do not believe that the Last Supper or baptism is a sacrament, and we also reject the phrase "infused grace" because the Lord does not infuse salvific grace into people without them accepting it first. God does nothing in redeeming people automatically, *ex opere operatum*, without the humans' consent. God respects our decisions.

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