Grace

What is grace?

In the New Testament, the word "grace" is the translation of the Greek *charis* and appears about 170 times. While grace is used in several ways – for example, to denote gracefulness or loveliness (Luke 4:22) or a generous gift (2 Cor. 8:19, 9:8) – its primary meaning for our purposes is unmerited favor, a good deed done for someone with no thought of personal gain. It especially describes the attitude of God in providing salvation for sinners.

In classic Greek, grace was something one bestowed only on a friend. But the New Testament use of grace turns the entire concept on its head. God loved us and sent His Son to pay our sin debt while we were still sinners (Rom. 5:8), enemies of God (Rom. 5:10), and excluded from the life of God (Eph. 4:18; Col. 1:21). The New Testament clearly teaches that we are saved by God's grace, apart from any human merit or effort (Acts 15:11; Rom. 3:24, 11:6, Eph. 2:5, 8; 2 Tim. 1:9; Titus 3:7).

Is grace irresistible?

But does God apply saving grace irresistibly to the elect, changing their hearts so they freely and willingly believe and repent? Or is His grace applied equally to all people so that those who are willing are drawn to Him and those who are not may successfully resist Him? And if the non-elect are incapable of responding to the gospel message – that is, if they are totally depraved, as Calvinists argue – is God just in sending them to hell? Let's look more closely at God's grace.

To begin, let's look at different ways Calvinists and Arminians describe grace:

- **Prevenient grace.** Arminians use this term to describe divine grace operating on the human will prior to conversion. It is understood to be *universa*l in scope and *savin*g in intent, meaning that God makes salvation possible for everyone.
- **Common grace.** Calvinists use this term to describe divine grace that operates among all persons and that allows even the non-elect to enjoy life, create benevolent governments, contribute positively to every dimension of culture, and so on. But common grace has no saving purpose.
- **Irresistible grace, also known as efficacious grace.** This is a special inward call of the Holy Spirit to the elect that inevitably brings them to salvation. The Spirit graciously causes the elect sinner to repent, believe, and come freely and willingly to Christ. God's irresistible grace, therefore, is invincible; it never fails to result in the salvation of those for whom it is intended.

Those of the Reformed tradition are quick to point out that irresistible grace does not mean that every influence of the Holy Spirit cannot be resisted. Stephen, for example, told the Jewish leaders they were stiff-necked people, resisting the Spirit (Acts 7:51). And Paul wrote about grieving and quenching the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30; 1 Thess. 5:19). But irresistible grace means God is sovereign and can overcome all resistance when He wills. Following is a sampling of

Scriptures used to support the doctrine of irresistible grace, with brief Calvinist and Arminian comments following each passage:

Dan. 4:35 – All the inhabitants of the earth are counted as nothing, and He does what He wants with the army of heaven and the inhabitants of the earth. There is no one who can hold back His hand or say to Him, "What have You done?"

- This is a clear statement of God's sovereignty, which includes His authority to irresistibly draw the elect to Himself (Calvinist).
- This is Nebuchadnezzar's acknowledgement of God's sovereignty after the Lord chastened him for his arrogance. While it is a true statement, it says nothing about God's intention to override the will of certain people and draw them irresistibly to salvation (Arminian).

John 6:44 – No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him, and I will raise him up on the last day.

- The Greek word translated "draws" is *elkuo* and means "drag" (see Acts 16:19; James 2:6). Only those irresistibly drawn to Jesus (the elect) are saved (Calvinist).
- While *elkuo* can mean "drag," the context must determine the proper meaning. According to the standard Greek lexicon by Arndt & Gingrich, *elkuo* here is a moral "pull on a man's inner life;" it means to "draw, attract," not force (p. 251). The drawing by God is tied closely to man's coming and believing (see verses 35, 37, 40, 47). Those who come to Jesus are enabled to do so, but not coerced (Arminian).

Acts 16:14 – A woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God, was listening. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was spoken by Paul.

- God opens the heart of the elect and irresistibly draws them to Christ (Calvinist).
- God indeed opened Lydia's heart "to *pay attention*," not necessarily to repent and believe (although evidently she did both). In addition, this verse does not mean the Spirit is inactive in the hearts of others, including those who refuse to repent and believe (Arminian).

Rom. 9:19-22 – You will say to me, therefore, "Why then does He still find fault? For who can resist His will?" But who are you—anyone who talks back to God? Will what is formed say to the one who formed it, "Why did you make me like this?" Or has the potter no right over His clay, to make from the same lump one piece of pottery for honor and another for dishonor? And what if God, desiring to display His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience objects of wrath ready for destruction?

- God's power in salvation is irresistible; further, we are not to question His sovereign decision to save some and bypass others (Calvinist).
- The Hebrew mind would understand Paul's reference to the parable of the potter in Jeremiah 18 and reject a deterministic, or even fatalistic, approach to this passage. In this context, the lump of clay either will be built up or torn down by God depending on Israel's moral response to Him. Thus, the unrepentant element of Israel becomes a vessel of dishonor and the repentant element a vessel of honor (Arminian).

2 Tim. 2:24-25 – The Lord's slave must not quarrel, but must be gentle to everyone, able to teach, and patient, instructing his opponents with gentleness. Perhaps God will grant them repentance to know the truth.

- Repentance is a gift from God to the elect, as is faith; God grants these only to the elect as part of His irresistible grace (Calvinist).
- Repentance and faith are indeed gifts of God that must be exercised freely and willingly for salvation. But the context suggests that this repentance is from ignorance of, or opposition to, God's Word, and says nothing about salvation (Arminian).

Are irresistible grace and the new birth the same thing?

Calvinists equate irresistible grace and the new birth. John Piper comments: "Unless God opens our hearts, we will not heed the message of the gospel. This heart-opening is what we mean by irresistible grace. Another way to describe it is 'new birth' or being born again. We believe that new birth is a miraculous creation of God that enables a formerly 'dead' person to receive Christ and so be saved. We do not think that faith precedes and causes new birth. Faith is the evidence that God has begotten us anew" (*What We Believe About the Five Points of Calvinism*, www.desiringgod.org).

Sharing a somewhat different perspective is Norman Geisler, a moderate Calvinist: "Those who insist that God's will cannot be resisted confuse what God wills *unconditionally* with what He wills *conditionally*. God wills the salvation of all persons conditionally – conditioned on their repentance (2 Peter 3:9). Hence, God's will in this sense can be resisted by an unrepentant heart. Of course, God's will to save those who believe (i.e., the elect) is unconditional…. Election is unconditional from the standpoint of the Giver (God), but it is conditional from the standpoint of the receiver. And since God foreknows for sure who will receive it, the result is certain. Thus, in this sense God's grace on the elect *is* irresistible" (*Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election*, pp. 96-97).

In *The Screwtape Letters* C.S. Lewis writes, "The Irresistible and the Indisputable are the two weapons which the very nature of His (God's) scheme forbids Him to use. Merely to override a human will … would be for Him useless. He cannot ravish. He can only woo" (p. 128). And in *The Great Divorce* he notes, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that selfchoice there could be no Hell" (p. 69).

For us the question is: Are irresistible grace and the new birth the same thing? Generally, Calvinists say yes; Arminians, no.

Conclusion

There is no dispute between Calvinists and Arminians that God draws the elect to Himself, and that in drawing them He enables them to freely and willingly receive the gift of eternal life. The debate hinges on whether God's grace to the non-elect is *prevenient* (intended to draw them to Christ for salvation) or *common* (not intended to save). If prevenient, the Calvinist asks, then

why are so many lost? If common, the Arminian asks, then why does God not love all people the same, since He denies the non-elect the ability to repent and believe? Does God exercise *reprobation*, the "election" of the non-elect for hell?

This much we know:

- God's revelation of Himself in creation is sufficient reason to hold all people "without excuse" for their "godlessness and unrighteousness" (Rom. 1:18-20).
- The Holy Spirit convicts all unbelievers of their sinful state and need of redemption (John 16:7-11).
- People are responsible for their decisions to receive or reject Christ (John 3:18, 8:24).

As a final note, keep in mind that we are not compelled to adopt a Calvinist or an Arminian view of the grace of God – or of any other doctrine in question. The followers of John Calvin, like those of Jacobus Arminius, draw conclusions about the doctrine of divine election from their understanding of God's Word. Fine. But it is God's Word, not anyone's interpretation of it, which is inerrant. And so, we should heed Paul's urging to "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who doesn't need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).

Next week: Two views of Romans 9

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