Grace that Paves the Way

Second in the summer 2019 series: Amazing Grace

# Scripture: Titus 2:11-15

# Key thought: Grace goes before to teach and prepare the way for salvation.

# Intro:

## Grace defined

Last week we began an inspiring summer series called “Amazing Grace.” But one thing we did not do is define grace. A popular acrostic definition which I learned as a teen is this:

Grace ≡ God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense

What this simple definition means is that God grants us blessing of many kinds – revelation, conviction, forgiveness, help, comfort, joy, etc, because of and on the basis of what Jesus did on our behalf.

JoAnne’s Hebrew Greek Study Bible definition of God’s Grace is also very helpful.

God’s Grace ≡ the absolutely free expression of [God’s] lovingkindness to [people], finding its only motive in his bounty and benevolence as the giver. (Hebrew Greek Study Bible)

This definition emphasizes that God extends his gifts of favor and benevolence to us because of his character, his inherent love and compassion, not because we have somehow earned it. What we do may block his grace and prevent us from inheriting God’s blessings, but grace initially comes to us because of who God is, not because of who we are or what we do.

## Grace versus works

It seems that human beings are always trying to take credit for things that are not their doing. The apostle Paul was actually quite worried about this and wrote about the grace of God when he argued against the works righteousness of early Christians who were influenced by Jewish ideas of obeying the law as a means of salvation. Paul wrote in Ephesians.

It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. Eph 2:8,9

This same debate between grace and the good works of human free will was at the heart of a great conflict between St Augustine and another prominent priest and church teacher named Pelagius about 410 AD. Pelagius taught that the only problem we inherited from Adam was a bad example. He further concluded that God has given us the teaching we need. All that remains is for us to decide to do the right thing. And he insisted that we can do it without further assistance. Augustine countered that since the fall of Adam, humans are all fallen creatures with a bent toward making the wrong decisions and an inner love for the wrong things. To counter this situation, God has sent his grace without which we would not be able to decide to follow Jesus or successfully follow him. In 418AD at the Council of Carthage, the teachings of Pelagius were declared heretical. The gathered Church decided that Augustine’s teachings on this issue were more biblical. We are saved by grace, not by our good works.

I remember very distinctly when this same intellectual tension between grace and free will came to a head in one of my theology classes at Houghton College. It was a small discussion-oriented class under Prof. Irv Riess.

Professor Riess was pointing out the activity of God’s grace behind all our spiritual decisions. We classmates, nearly all of us, were quite united in speaking up for what we as human beings had to do and could surely do as a part of our free will.

“But we have to make a decision to follow Jesus,” we pointed out.

“By grace,” Prof Riess responded quietly.

“The Bible tells us that we have to believe doesn't it?" We pressed him.

"By grace," he intoned.

"But the gospel of John says that it's up to us to receive him," we argued.

"By grace," he rejoined.

This kind of back-and-forth went on for five or 10 minutes at least and his answer never changed. And slowly we realized that we could not refute his answer. I never forgot that class. In all my 10 or 11 years of college, it is among the most memorable. It marked the day that I nailed down in my theology a truth that comes to be expressed in many ways. “God is always the initiator.” “Grace is always prior.”

# Grace shapes and uses our circumstances.

## John Wesley’s term “preventing grace”

John Wesley called this grace that goes before us and paves the way for our response to God “preventing grace.” Theologians later called it “prevenient grace.” Both terms rely on an old English meaning of the word “prevent” –“to go before.” We do not use the word in that way anymore but think about it. If we prevent an accident, it means that we have done something ahead of time so that the accident did not happen – we have gone before and made the way safe. So, the prevenient grace of God is the grace that goes ahead of our steps to prepare the way for God’s work in our lives. Sometimes this grace opens our minds and spirits to receive the Word. Sometimes this grace has to do with the circumstances that God arranges or uses.

There is an OT verse that uses the word in this way. In Psalm 21:3 KJV David speaks of God’s blessings to him as king.

Thou preventest him with the blessings of goodness. Psalm 21:3 KJV

I looked up the Hebrew word and it means to precede, to anticipate, to meet (usually for help). Most modern translations adopt the rendering “to meet.” (Biblesoft's New Exhaustive Strong's Numbers and Concordance with Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary. Copyright © 1994, 2003, 2006, 2010 Biblesoft, Inc. and International Bible Translators, Inc.)

So, the verse implies that God anticipated the king’s needs ahead and came to meet him with blessings flowing from God’s goodness. What a great definition of prevenient grace. God goes ahead of us and comes to meet is in our circumstances with blessing coming from his goodness. Charles Spurgeon, classic commentator on Scriptures commented on this verse:

Reader, it will be a happy thing for thee if, like thy Lord, thou canst see both providence and grace preceding thee, forestalling thy needs, and preparing thy path. Mercy, in the case of many of us, ran before our desires and prayers, and it ever outruns our endeavors and expectancies, and even our hopes are left to lag behind. Prevenient grace deserves a song; we may make one out of this sentence;

## A personal illustration

Let me give a personal example of how the goodness of God often goes before us in ways we cannot see or understand at the time, using and even molding our circumstances. This last week at the picnic, JoAnne and I really appreciated the cake and the gifts in honor of the 40 years of pastoral ministry which we have enjoyed. I posted an article about the event on my blog and Facebook page. One of the people who commented was a friend that we knew while we were serving in the Navy at a naval radio station in Morocco in North Africa. This was years before I decided to be a minister. JoAnne had studied French in college for a couple years. I had a degree in physics and was serving as a young naval officer of the line. Life could’ve taken us in many directions. But despite my grumblings and praying against it, God had the Navy assign me to the naval station in Morocco. It was accompanied duty and JoAnne went with me. What we did not know, was that the grace of God was mightily at work to prepare us for a different direction. A godly Baptist chaplain’s wife found JoAnne, lonely in the hotel during our early months there while I was standing watches and invited her to attend chapel. A few months later the Navy moved us onto the small base. Now it happened that this good Baptist chaplain couldn’t sing a note. So, he needed help from laypeople to lead singing. By that time, Chaplain Harold and Lois Roberts had discovered the musical talents of the Joneses. JoAnne was soon playing choruses by ear for evening sing-alongs and Kelvin was leading singing. Soon, JoAnne was accompanying both Protestant and Catholic services, directing the choir, and organizing singing groups. Does that sound familiar? And Kelvin, was leading services when the chaplain was away because he was an officer and had the rank to do so. In addition, he led the hymns for the chaplain every week at chapel. He also was serving as Sunday school superintendent. With God at work in this way, and under the continued encouragement and mentoring of Chaplain Roberts and Lois for three years, is it any wonder that at the end of their service time in the Navy, Kelvin and JoAnne went back to college. But this time, Kelvin studied Bible, philosophy, and Christian education, while JoAnne took up music. And it was during those studies that God completed the direction change and called Kelvin to become a pastor. Grace, prevenient grace, had paved the way, had gone before and used circumstances, people, government, even unanswered prayers, to bring about something that was for the best. God had preceded us with his goodness. How has grace gone before in your life?

## Prevenient grace and infant baptism

This understanding of the grace that paves the way is crucial for understanding infant baptism. There is no doubt that when we study the NT, baptism is something that people of age to understand their decision received/participated in after they had decided to become followers of Jesus. It is to be a visible testimony of the inner work of God in conversion. If this is the case, and it is, then what can infant baptism be? There are several answers to that question. But one of the chief answers is this: Infant baptism is performed in faith as a sign of the prevenient grace of God at work in the life of children of believers, a grace that is already paving the way, shaping their lives and hearts and directing them toward that day when they will of their own will agree that they will personally follow Jesus. This shaping happens by God’s Spirit and especially involves the parents and the church who both covenant during the infant baptism liturgy to be active in God’s work of training up the child in God’s path.

# Grace teaches our minds and hearts.

## Grace teaches us

The grace of God that goes before us is constantly working to shape our minds. Paul starts our text for today by reminding us that one of the key functions of God’s grace is teaching.

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, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. Titus 2:11-14 NIV

Notice first how the verse confirms what we just discussed about the teaching role of the Holy Spirit and of God’s grace for young children. God is preparing the children to understand and respond for themselves to God’s offer of salvation. God’s grace is also teaching all of us how to be the kind of people that God wants us to be. The grace of God, using the Word of God, informs our consciences and helps us feel proper guilt for our wrong actions. The Spirit of God and the grace of God also prompt in us the “good deeds prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2:10). The result is that the grace of God cleanses out from us the impure actions so that we are increasingly ready to be presented to God “spotless, blameless, and at peace” (2 Peter 3:14) on the day of our appearing before him.

So, when you feel guilty for something that you did that was wrong, be glad. The grace of God is at work in your life. Godly sorrow for sin leads us to turn away from wrong and do the right. It provides pressure to bend us in the right direction.

Now when I speak of guilt, I need to be clear that I am not speaking of false guilt. True guilt can always be traced directly to something we did that we know was wrong in God’s sight, a violation of God’s law. False guilt feels the same, but it stems rather from a vague sense that we don’t measure up in some way to our own or some other person’s critical standards. It is more circumstantial or comparative than related to a specific action. For our mental health’s sake, we need to learn to distinguish between the two feelings. True guilt is a spiritual aid of grace, a tool of the Holy Spirit to sanctify us, to renew our hearts in God’s ways, to mold us into Christ’s likeness. False guilt is an emotional drag on our wellbeing. Insight into the causes of false guilt and then proper self-talk and labeling of it can help sufferers to be free to move on to improved spiritual and mental health.

## Grace prepares us for salvation

The wonderful purpose of grace’s teaching ministry is to bring us to God–to make us ready to receive salvation. Pastor A. W. Tozer explained it this way:

We pursue God because, and only because, He has first put an urge within us that spurs us to the pursuit. "No man can come to me," said our Lord, "except the Father which hath sent me draw him," and it is by this very prevenient drawing that God takes from us every vestige of credit for the act of coming. The impulse to pursue God originates with God, but the out working of that impulse is our following hard after Him;

In one of his sermons, John Wesley enumerates the extent of the teaching ministry of the grace of God and uses the word “preventing grace” to describe it.

"preventing grace"; — all the drawings of the Father; the desires after God, which, if we yield to them, increase more and more; — all that light wherewith the Son of God "enlighteneth every one that cometh into the world;" showing every man "to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with his God"; — all the convictions which His Spirit, from time to time, works in every child of man. (from Sermon 43 The Scripture Way of Salvation on Eph. 2:8 by John Wesley)

# Grace enables our wills.

## Grace empowers our wills

I invite you to examine our text again.

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, 14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. Titus 2:11-14 NIV

Notice that there is the clear inference here that God is giving an additional type of help by God’s grace besides teaching. Teaching involves our head. But the verse tells us that the grace of God helps not just our knowledge and discernment, but also our will power. God’s grace helps us with the power to say “No” when we need to do so.

Nothing is more common among us that to know the right course of action but fail to act on what we know. And nothing is more common when that happens among human beings that to play the victim. The scenario began in the Garden of Eden when Adam blamed Eve for his disobedience. We have all sorts of refrains. “I can’t help myself.” “It’s the fault of my terrible upbringing.” “The devil made me do it.” “My friends are a bad influence.” You can add your own favorite lines.

But the Bible says,

No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it. 1 Cor 10:13 NIV

So, the grace of God that paves the way for us is able to give us moral backbone to make the right decision when we need to do so. When we do not make the right decision, it is because we did not rely on God’s help. We have no one else to blame.

Now I need to add a caution for those who have been abused by others or betrayed by others, and somehow feel guilty about it. Remember, if you are the victim, the moral responsibility is not yours. The other person is the one responsible. It is crucial for mental health to keep the moral responsibility in the right place in such circumstances.

But for the things that we have done ourselves, we have no one else to blame. We just failed to take advantage of what the grace of God offers us. All of us have done that. And all of us can resolve to take fuller advantage of God’s amazing grace that preserves us and helps us to the right thing in the days ahead.

# Conclusion

## A good Wesley summary

In another sermon, John Wesley describes the grace that goes before in a sweeping summary of God’s work of salvation in our hearts.

Your own salvation: Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) preventing grace; including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency toward life; some degree of salvation; the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God. Salvation is carried on by convincing grace, usually in Scripture termed repentance; which brings a larger measure of self-knowledge, and a farther deliverance from the heart of stone. Afterwards we experience the proper Christian salvation; whereby, "through grace," we "are saved by faith;" consisting of those two grand branches, justification and sanctification. By justification we are saved from the guilt of sin, and restored to the favour of God; by sanctification we are saved from the power and root of sin, and restored to the image of God. (from Sermon 85 On Working Our Your Own Salvation on Phil. 2:12, 13 by John Wesley)

“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound; that saved a wretch like me; I once was lost but now am found; was blind but now I see!”

In Jesus Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding. Eph 1:7, 8 NIV