

The Glory of the Grace of God in Salvation

A Study of the Attributes and Applications of the Doctrines of Grace in the Life of the Believer

The Guarantee of God's Salvation: Irresistible Grace (Part 2)

John 3:1-7

1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; 2 this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." 3 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 be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

Let me remind you of something that is true about each and every one of us in this room. It does not matter whether you are two, twenty, forty, or eighty. This particular truth reveals itself whether you are at home alone, at home with family, if you are in a first grade class, a high school class, a graduate school class. It is true in the workplace and on the playground. It follows you on vacation while in the car on that road trip or sitting on a plane. This truth reveals itself in your quiet times of Bible study and well as when you are being loud and silly. There is simply no escaping this truth.

What is this truth of which I speak? The truth is simply this; that each and every one of us in this room is a *theologian* – that is right, a *theologian*. What is a theologian? A theologian is not a person that has gone to seminary, who knows Greek and Hebrew. No, beloved, God created us all to be theologians. A theologian is simply a person who knows and communicates something about God. The word "theologian" simply means – "one who studies God." Our lives are being lived out as theologians and the only question is this; are you a good theologian or a bad theologian? What does your life communicate to others about God? Does it communicate the truth of God as based upon the Word of God? Or does your life communicate lies about God based upon human thought, feelings or reason?

We have been studying what we refer to as the doctrines of grace – those Scriptural teachings concerning the how's and why's of the salvation of humanity as a result of the grace of God. You might remember that there are five key doctrines of grace; these teachings that reveal the glory of the grace of God in salvation. We have examined four of the five to this point and as we begin this morning, I bring you back to last week's text; this passage in John 3, where Jesus confronts a "theologian" named Nicodemus, essentially telling him that his theology, his understanding about God and how God saves people needs an overhaul. Isn't that the way things are for us; we can believe ourselves so clever; so knowledgeable about certain things concerning God. We got God all figured out; then we read a passage, hear a sermon, or are challenged in our prayer time that God is so much bigger, so much grander, so much more infinite than we could even imagine. It is in moments like these that we either bow in awe at who God is and what He has done for us (becoming better theologians); or we can rationalize away the depth and wonder of God; making a little less awesome; a little less frightening; a little less holy (and we become bad theologians).

Let me remind you of three statements made by Jesus in this text that by clear inference reveal to us the very doctrines of grace that we have been studying. The first one is found in verse three when Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." The second statement is found in verse 5 when Jesus repeated the truth of

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verse 3 saying, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. And then, the statement of statements found in verse 7 when Jesus gives to Nicodemus a command saying, ‘You must be born again.’* Let us see now how the doctrines of grace are revealed in these texts.

The first of the doctrines of grace is the teaching of total depravity and total inability. Let me remind you that total depravity does not mean that a person is as bad as he or she can possible be; but rather that a person is as bad off as he or she can be. In Ephesians 2:1 we read that all humanity is dead in their trespasses and sins; that we lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulge the desires of the flesh and the mind and that we all were, by nature, by condition, children of wrath, deserving of God’s punishment; death; eternal separation from God. Beloved, humanity, because of sin, is in the most horrific of conditions; separated from God. And whether you want to believe it or not, we are all born into this condition (as Psalm 51:5) and we all, because of this condition, have no natural desire, inclination or motivation to move toward God. This is the total inability aspect. If left to ourselves, our own condition, we would gladly and willingly live as sinners; in rebellion against God. To be sure this manifest itself in various ways and in various degrees; but rest assured the Satan-worshipping mass murder is being no more rebellious against God than a morally good Catholic; all of have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Beloved, when I speak of the doctrines of grace, there is a bit of a conflict; for in this first point there is not grace at all. When you stop to think about man’s condition, being so dead in his sins that he cannot even appreciate God as both Creator and Redeemer; we are suddenly confronted with not with an expression of the grace of God, but for the need of the grace of God. We see this in our text when Jesus repeatedly informs Nicodemus of something that must happen to him. Jesus tells he three times that he must be born again; using the analogy of birth. Notice that Nicodemus gets it. In verse 4 he responds to Jesus’ demand that he be born again by saying, *“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?”* Nicodemus gets it. Jesus is telling him to do something that is impossible to do. There is no way imaginable for Nicodemus could accomplish what Jesus had just stated. We see the doctrine of total inability; that man cannot do this for himself. Jesus is not revealing grace here but rather is revealing the need of grace.

It is so important that we understand this because truly one’s understanding of man’s condition in sin leads to the understanding of the rest of the doctrines of grace. In other words, understand the depth and extent of sin and you will then rightly understand the depth and the wonder of the grace of God. The other four points of the doctrine of grace rest on this. And just how extensive is sin? Well, it makes you spiritually dead as we saw in Ephesians 2, and being dead is a condition that renders us unable to do anything. Romans 3:10-12 reminds us *10 “THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE; 11 THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD; 12 ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS; THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE.”* Now then, that is total, complete, and without exception. Time does not permit us to consider the multitude of verses that speak of this depravity and inability of man. But now, consider the Biblical logic. If man is really as bad off as he can be; if man really cannot do anything to save himself; if man really is spiritually dead and thus incapable of doing anything to merit God’s favor; then mans’ only hope to see the kingdom of God is to be born again; regenerated, made anew. Jesus commands Nicodemus to be born

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again and Nicodemus is smart enough to realize that this is something he simply cannot do. Thus we find the doctrine of total depravity and total inability here in our text.

Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23) and since the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23); and since there is no one who does good or even seeks after God (Romans 3:10-11); then it stands to reason, that unless God chooses to do something for one, for all, or for some of these in such a condition; then not one person could be saved; not one person would see the kingdom of God. This brings us to the second of the doctrines of grace; unconditional election – the Biblical teaching that God, motivated by grace and love toward this fallen, sinful, rebellious humanity, choose, elected some out of this condition to be the recipients of unearned, unmerited, undeserved salvation. Now, I know this bothers people. Why is it that God choose only some and not all? We might rightfully ask why did God save any at all. He is certainly under no obligation to save anyone and yet we the clay cry out to God the potter, why have you made me like this? Why did God, according to Ephesians 1:4 choose only some before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless, leaving the others to suffer their rightful and deserved judgment? According to Ephesians 1 we find the reason stated. In verses 5-6 it is *“according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.”* In verse 9 it is that *“He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him.”* In verse 12 it is *“to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory.”* And in verse 14 it is *“with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory.”*

Why would God graciously choose some out of this condition of sin and deserved eternal damnation and leave others to suffer their fate? Paul, in addressing this very question, uses the example of Jacob and Esau. In Romans 9:11, seeking to establish a reason why God choose Jacob over Esau and thus to demonstrate how God chooses people for salvation, Paul wrote: *for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls...* Then, using the example of Pharaoh to also prove point, Paul concludes in Romans 9:16 saying, *“So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.”* We might wish for a more satisfying answer, but the truth is that God unconditionally and graciously chooses to save some and to leave others in their condition of sin. If the Scripture teach that all are dead in their trespasses and sins; then it must also teach, and it does, that unless God chooses to save one, all or some, not one would be saved. And in fact, Scriptures do teach us that God saves more than one, and it also teaches that He does not save all (as in Romans 9 where Esau and Pharaoh are clearly not saved); therefore He must save some.

Where do we see this in our John 3 text? Again, by inference. When Jesus speaks of the necessity of being “born again” in verse 3 and 7, the verb there is an aorist passive. Now, what on earth is an aorist passive verb? Remember, I am trying to make you better theologians. An aorist verb is like our past tense. It speaks of a singular event that took place in a moment in time that was completed in that moment in time. If I tell you, “I took out the trash;” Then you know that the process of taking out the trash is completed; the cans are at the curb, ready to be picked up. The event is completed and over. Jesus says there needs to be this completed event of being born again take place in a person's life.

Okay, that explains the aorist; what about the passive part of the verb? Jesus does not tell Nicodemus to go get himself born again. He does not command him to make himself born again; that would be an active verb in the Greek and, as we have already noted, it would also be an

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impossibility for Nicodemus to do. Rather, Jesus uses a passive form of the verb; meaning that what must happen to Nicodemus (and thus all who would have this experience); must happen to Nicodemus, not because of him. If I tell you, "I hit the ball" that is something I did to the ball. If I tell you "I was hit by the ball" then you know that I was passive, something happened to me. It would imply that someone or something threw the ball at me, something I did not invite or control.

When Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be born again; He does so in a way that communicates this is something someone else must choose to do for Him. It is something he has no control over. Well, who chooses then? John has actually answered this question already. Look back to John 1:12-13. Here we read, *"12 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."* Notice that the reason these ones who received Christ, who had the right to become children of God, who believe on His name; did so, not because of their will or any human will, but were born – born again – by the will of God. Peter would make it clear in 1 Peter 1:3 saying, *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...* The Scripture is clear that the new birth is something that happens to us, not accidentally, but by the sovereign work and will of God. Here then is unconditional election as God chooses, by His own will, those who will be born again; those who will be brought to life. This corresponds with what Paul said in Ephesians 2:4-5, after stating that humanity is dead in their trespasses and sins and were by nature children of wrath, we then read, *"4 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)..."* Beloved, this is the grace of God, that He would choose any at all to be saved.

This brings us to the third of the doctrines of grace, limited atonement, actual atonement, particular redemption. It simply is this, that if God has indeed chosen a number of people out of fallen humanity to be the recipients of His grace to be saved, then God would have to take care of this group's deserved punishment, that is death. Again, note that if sin is really as bad as Scripture makes it out to be and really deserving of God wrath, then unless there is a wrath-bearer who can take upon Himself all that we deserve, then no one would be saved. Additionally, if there is a wrath-bearer who did actually bear the wrath that the chosen of God deserved; and having bore their wrath so that they are free from sin's curse, how could Christ's death as the wrath-bearer be said to have actually bore the wrath of those whom God had not chosen? It cannot Biblically be said to have done that.

Where is this taught in our John 3 text? Again, when Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be born again; that something had to happen to him, it is implied that God Himself would do all that is necessary to bring a person into this new condition. Remember verse 5 where we read, *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.* There is found here an allusion to Ezekiel 36:25-27 and the blessing of the New Covenant. We read, *25 Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.* Beloved, this work was accomplished by the death of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who said in Luke 22:20, *"This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood."* It is the grace of God that brought Jesus to this earth to be the propitiation, the satisfying atonement, the sacrifice

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that would turn away the wrath of God and all because of our totally depravity and total inability to anything to present ourselves before God.

This brings us to the fourth of the doctrines of grace, the teaching of irresistible grace. Irresistible grace is the work of the Holy Spirit making the dead sinner alive in Christ, granting the sinner faith to believe on Christ. And all upon whom the Holy Spirit works, which are all those chosen by the Father and atoned for by the Son, will be irresistibly drawn to faith. In other words, they will be born again by the Spirit and the Holy Spirit will never fail to bring salvation to the people whom the Father has chosen and for who the Son has died. This work of regeneration, of making that which is dead (us) alive and placing within us a desire to believe upon the Lord Jesus Christ is the sum and substance of what the Bible teaches. We must be born again, because we are born dead. This new life imparted by the Spirit of God not only enables, but also guarantees that all whom the Father has chosen and for whom Christ died will be saved.

Last week I offered you two of five truths that are the result of this work of the Holy Spirit called irresistible grace. We have already summarized the first two; namely that this work of the Spirit upon those whom the Father has chosen and for whom the Son died is...

1. **The promise of the “New Covenant” purchased by the blood of Christ (Jeremiah 31:31-34).**
2. **The promise of the Spirit of God will do for us what we could not do for ourselves (Ezekiel 36:25-27).**
There is a third promise...
3. **The promise that faith and repentance are gifts from God; not generated in man (Ephesians 2:8-9; Philippians 1:29)**

Ephesians 2:8-9 --- 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast...Philippians 1:29 -- For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake...

In both these passages, as well as many others, faith is clearly a gift (something unearned) and something that is granted or bestowed upon a person. The Philippians 1:29 passage makes a parallel between faith and suffering which actually teaches us something about faith. Suffering, like faith is a gift of God. We suffer, particularly as believers, according to the sovereign purposes of God and we believe according to the sovereign purposes of God. And like suffering, faith is not something that God does. Faith is something that we exercise. God gives us faith, yes, but faith is exercised by us, not by God. We are the ones who believe, who must believe, not God.

This is important to mention because the general objection to this doctrine of irresistible grace goes something like this: “You are telling me that even if a person wants to come to Christ, they will not be able.” Or “You are saying that even if a person does not want to come to Christ, they will anyway?” This totally misses what faith is. Philippians 1:29 tells us that the people to whom God gives faith, these all will long to exercise it by coming to Christ. And the one who has no faith, he will never exercise that which he does not have and will not long to come to Christ. Faith and repentance are gifts from God and all to whom these are given, will come to Christ willingly. There is a fourth promise...

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4. The promise that all whom the Father draws to Christ will come to Christ (John 6:37-44).

37 "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. 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.

What Jesus says here is very much related to the new birth in that it points to what the Father does (and must do) if anyone is to be saved; if anyone is to embrace Jesus Christ. It is clear that the Father's work of drawing the elect to Christ is irresistible because all who are drawn do what? Why will all that the Father gives the Son come to the Son? Because the Father actively, invincibly, and irresistibly draws them to Christ. Let us look at the final promise...

5. The promise that redemption in Christ is an act of "re"-creation (2 Corinthians 4:3-6)

3 *And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, 4 in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 5 For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake. 6 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.*

Here we find that the redemption Jesus purchased is spoken of in terms of creation; which, as I will show you, pictures irresistible grace. Paul makes a comparison between creation and re-creation; this being born again, also called regeneration. We who take the Bible literally know that God created the heavens and the earth "out of nothing" *ex nihilo*. In thinking of creation, we have no problem believing that everything exists by God's powerful Word alone. According to Hebrews 11:3, it is by faith that we understand creation was made by God out of that which cannot be seen. This is creation. Now, we do not tend to speak of the doctrine of irresistible creation, but we need to recognize that creation out of nothing, coming into existence, is about as irresistible as it gets. Let me ask you; was there any chance that nonexistent matter would defy God when He summoned the universe into being?" Paul's point in this text is this, if 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, then just like the rest of creation, our re-creation through the gospel of Jesus Christ is as irresistible as water is wet.

So then, the doctrine of irresistible grace is built upon these five promises; that 1) It is the promise of the New Covenant; 2) It is the promise of the Holy Spirit to do for us what we could not do for ourselves; 3) It is the promise that faith and repentance are gifts from God; 4) It is the promise that all that the Father has drawn to Christ will come to Christ; and 5) It is the promise that our redemption is an act of "re"-creation on God's part. In other words, Lord never fails to bring the elect to faith; His grace is powerful, invincible, and irresistible. The Canons of Dort summarize all that we have considered well:

The fact that [some] who are called through the ministry of the gospel do come and are brought to conversion must not be credited to man....No, it must be credited to God: just as from eternity He chose His own in Christ, so within time He effectively calls them, grants them faith and repentance, and, having rescued them from the dominion of darkness, brings them into the kingdom of His Son.

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Moreover, when God carries out this good pleasure in His chosen ones, or works true conversion in them, He not only sees to it that the gospel is proclaimed to them outwardly, and enlightens their minds powerfully by the Holy Spirit so that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God, but, by the effective operation of the same regenerating Spirit, He also penetrates into the inmost being of man, opens the closed heart, softens the hard heart, and circumcises the heart that is uncircumcised. He infuses new qualities into the will, making the dead will alive, the evil one good, the unwilling one willing, and the stubborn one compliant.

What we call here “irresistible grace” is also amazing grace that saved wretches like us! Beloved, without the irresistible grace of God that overcomes our inability and resistance, we would be left for dead in our trespasses and sins. All would perish in our sins. But once your eyes are opened to the reality of who Jesus is, the eyes of your heart, you cannot help but believe in Him. Once our inability and resistance are overcome by the invincible (irresistible) grace of God, we do not saunter, we do not lazily or haphazardly walk, but rather we run to Jesus in saving faith; to Him who is our Strong Tower. Once the eyes of our hearts have been opened, our lives are changed completely and forever. It’s kind of like being born again...no...it is actually being born again.

Charles Wesley was so moved by this overpowering grace of God that caused him to be set free from sin to trust in the Savior that he spoke of it in a favorite hymn of mine. He penned...

***Long my imprisoned spirit lay Fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
Thine eye diffused a quick’ning ray, I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.***

This is amazing love, amazing grace, irresistible. May we heed the words of the framers of the Canons of Dort when they wrote, “[T]hose who receive so much grace, beyond and in spite of all they deserve, ought to acknowledge it with humble and thankful hearts.”

Soli Deo Gloria

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