

# Irresistible Grace

Jacob Moseley

Published in *Sound of Grace*

Volume 5 – Number 2

The Godhead, all members of the Holy Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—work together in perfect harmony to initiate, effect, and complete the salvation of sinners. God the Father did from eternity past choose those that he would give to God the Son (cf. Eph. 1:4–5; John 17:2). In the fullness of the time God the Son came into the world and earned their redemption (cf. Gal. 4:4–5). But alone these two great achievements—election and redemption—do not complete the work of salvation. There remains the work of God the Holy Spirit to give life to dead sinners and apply the benefits of Christ's perfect obedience, his propitiatory death and his resurrection (cf. John 3:6–8; 6:63–65). The doctrine of irresistible (or efficacious) grace is concerned with this facet of salvation, that is, the application of grace by the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of irresistible grace or effectual calling may be defined as the most gracious work of God by which he, according to his eternal purpose and electing grace, does sovereignly and powerfully conquer the sinner's rebellion thereby enabling him to turn to Christ in genuine repentance and saving faith.

Whenever the gospel is preached there is proclaimed an invitation, indeed a command, for all without distinction to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thereby gain eternal life (cf. Mark 1:15; John 8:24; Acts 16:31). This invitation, or outward, general call will not alone bring sinners to the cross of Christ. This is because man is dead in his sins and unable and unwilling to respond to this general call (cf. Eph. 2:1; John 5:39–49; 6:44; 6:65). No amount of pleading, threatening, or cajoling will ever affect a change in a blind, rebellious, deaf sinner or bring a dead person to life. Apart from an effectual work of grace it is entirely contrary to the unregenerate sinner's will, desire, and nature to acknowledge that Christ is the sovereign Lord of the universe and trust him and him alone for salvation.

God, for reasons known only to himself, (cf. Matt. 11:25–26) gives an inward, effectual call, in addition to the outward invitation, to the elect in Christ. This inward call is accompanied with the very power of God (cf. Eph. 1:19–20), and with it comes a new birth, life, willingness (cf. Psalms 110:3) to look unto Christ, and a desire to love and obey him. This results in a new nature, one that is now in willing subservience to Christ, a nature that is no longer in bondage to the prince of this world. With the new nature comes the ability to receive the truth of the gospel. Thus the "born of the Spirit" (cf. John 3:7–8) sinner freely and willingly turns to Christ as Lord and Savior. The Spirit of God gives faith and repentance to this child of God.

The gospel invitation can be and often is resisted and rejected. We read of this in Acts 7:51, where the people are described as being "uncircumcised in heart and ears." These are unregenerate and still dead in their sins. But God (such beautiful words) regenerates and gives life by removing the stony heart and replacing it with a heart of flesh. The discriminating, inward, effectual, call of the Spirit is never finally and fatally rejected (cf. John 6:45). This effectual call is not made to all sinners but is made to the elect in Christ only (cf. John 6:65)! This efficacious, invincible, irresistible call can never fail to accomplish the purpose designed and intended by the Triune God. This call never fails to give true faith and never fails to cause the sinner to whom it is given to turn to Christ for salvation and eternal life.

An erroneous view, Semi-Pelagianism or Arminianism, will be contrasted with the biblical view of irresistible grace in order to make even clearer just what the doctrine of irresistible grace is.

Augustinianism, or Calvinism, (the biblical position) teaches that man is totally depraved and can do no good (in God's sight) apart from the irresistible work of the Holy Spirit. To quote R.C. Sproul:<sup>1</sup>

For Augustine man can no more move or incline himself to God than an empty glass can fill itself. For Augustine the initial work of divine grace by which the soul is liberated from the bondage of sin is sovereign and operative. To be sure we cooperate with this grace, but only after the initial divine work of liberation.

Augustine did not deny that fallen man still has a will and that the will is capable of making choices. He argued that fallen man still has a free will (*liberium arbitrium*) but has lost his moral liberty (*libertas*). The state of original sin leaves us in the wretched condition of being unable to refrain from sinning. We still are able to choose what we desire, but our desires remain chained by our evil impulses. He argued that the freedom that remains in the will always leads to sin. Thus in the flesh we are free only to sin, a hollow freedom indeed. It is freedom without liberty, a real moral bondage. True liberty can only come from without, from the work of God on the soul. Therefore we are not only partly dependent upon grace for our conversion but totally dependent upon grace.

Semi-Pelagianism or Arminianism holds that man has some good in him, some innate ability to please God and to believe on Christ. True enough this system teaches that man cannot believe without God's help. But the Semi-Pelagian and Arminian and most Roman Catholics and Liberals say that this faith does not come from God in an irresistible way. Man must exercise his will and cooperate with God. God does his part and man must do his part; they work together. The excellent tract, *God's Part and Man's Part in Salvation*, by John G. Reisinger elaborates on and provides clarification on this issue.

At the root of the disagreement between the two views is the understanding of the Arminians that *responsibility* necessarily denotes *ability*. The cry is that it is unfair for God to require of man that which man is unable to accomplish. This view totally

denies the effects of the fall of Adam with its attendant corruption. Because of Adam's disobedience and the resultant depravity of mankind, man has lost forever all right to cry "Foul!" The issue of man's responsibility and God's sovereignty is difficult to rationalize and perhaps a clear understanding will not be possible this side of Glory. As with all views this one too must be left with the clear teaching of Scripture. It must be recognized that man belongs to and answers to God and not vice-versa. God has the right by virtue of who he is and by creation to require of that creation whatsoever he desires. Man must bow before the will of the Almighty God. As Abraham rhetorically asked in Genesis 18:25b:

Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?

Further from the words of Christ as recorded in Matthew 20:15–16:

Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good? So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.

And as addressed by the Apostle Paul in Romans 9:19–21:

You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?" But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?" Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?

There are those who believe that the Bible does teach that man has the ability in and of himself to respond rightly to the invitations of the Gospel. They usually point to the *whoever* verses such as John 6:37b:

....the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.

But the whole verse teaches effectual grace! John 6:37:

All that the Father gives Me [decree of election] will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.

Probably the most oft-quoted verse in the Bible is John 3:16:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

This verse clearly states that all that believe in Christ have eternal *life*. It nowhere states that all have the *ability to believe* or to *receive* the truth of God. John addresses this question further in the very same chapter:

John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven (John 3:27)"

John Calvin in commenting on John 3:16 has well said:<sup>2</sup>

Let us remember,... , that while *life* [italics his] is promised universally to *all who believe* [italics his] in Christ, still faith is not common to all. For Christ is made known and held out to the view of all, but the elect alone are they whose eyes God opens, that they may seek him by faith.

Paul clearly teaches that man is unable (dead) to deliver himself from the bondage of sin and death.

And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:1–10).

... and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:19–20).

In one of the most definitive (with regard to irresistible grace) verses in the Bible Jesus himself says:

"No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:44).

Notice the use of the auxiliary verb *can*. Can denotes mental or physical ability. Also notice the verb *draws*. The word *draws* is from the Greek word *helkuo* which means to drag. This same word is used in John 21:11: "Simon Peter went up and *dragged* [italics mine] the net to land, full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not broken." It does no injustice to the verse to understand John 6:44 thusly: "No one has the ability to come to Me

unless the Father who sent Me drags him...." See also John 6:65; 1 Corinthians 2:14; 12:3; paying particular attention to the verb *can*.

Now let us consider what the Canons of Dort (circa 1618–1619) had to say regarding irresistible grace. Under the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine, *Of the Corruption of Man, his Conversion to God, and the Manner thereof*.<sup>3</sup>

It is not the fault of the gospel, nor of Christ offered therein, nor of God, who calls men by the gospel, and confers upon them various gifts, that those who are called by the ministry of the Word refuse to come and be converted. The fault lies in themselves.

But that others who are called by the gospel obey the call must be wholly ascribed to God, who, as he hath chosen his own from eternity in Christ, so he calls them effectually in time, confers upon them faith and repentance, rescues them from the power of darkness, and translates them into the kingdom of his own Son, that they may show forth the praises of him who hath called them out of darkness into his marvelous light; and may glory not in themselves but in the Lord, according to the testimony of the Apostles in various places.

Faith is therefore the gift of God, not on account of its being offered by God to man, to be accepted or rejected at his pleasure, but because it is in reality conferred, breathed, and infused into him; nor even because God bestows the power or ability to believe, and then expects that man should, by the exercise of his own free will, consent to the terms of salvation, and actually believe in Christ; but because he who works in man both to will and to do, and indeed all things in all, produces both the will to believe and the act of believing also.

With such a plethora of evidence that emphasizes the powerful working of God in man should we not thank God for his effectual grace? Should we not ascribe to God and to God alone the credit, the praise, the honor for the salvation of sinners? Let us understand clearly that salvation from first to last is of the Lord. Let us stand on the truth of God's Word in spite of being almost completely outnumbered in this present dark age. Let us acknowledge with the writers of old that it is God who works in us both to will and to do for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:13). Modern Evangelicalism is leading many astray and down the path to destruction by placing man on the throne of his own salvation. To quote R.C. Sproul again:

Modern evangelicals repudiate unvarnished Pelagianism and frequently Semi-Pelagianism as well. It is insisted that grace is necessary for salvation and that man is fallen. The will is acknowledged to be severely weakened even to the point of being "99 percent" dependent upon grace for its liberation. But that one percent of unaffected moral ability or spiritual power which becomes the *decisive* difference between salvation and perdition is the link that preserves the chain to Pelagius.

That one percent is the "little something" Luther sought to demolish because it removes the *sola* from *sola gratia* and ultimately the *sola* from *sola fide*. The irony may be that though modern Evangelicalism loudly and repeatedly denounces Humanism as the mortal enemy of Christianity, it entertains a Humanistic view of man and of the will at its deepest core.<sup>4</sup>

We will now consider some practical applications of the doctrine of irresistible grace.

1. Having heard the voice of the true shepherd, our ears will be closed to the voice of strangers (John 10:5–8).
2. By a demonstrated faith in Christ and walking in newness of life we may be confident that we have been effectually called and we may be most certain of eternal glory (Romans 8:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24). We should strive to live a life of joy as our calling gives evidence of God's everlasting love for us (Jeremiah 31:3; Romans 8:29–30).
3. Our lives should be characterized by humility as we realize that the only thing that distinguishes us from the vilest sinner in hell is the free and sovereign grace of God that has called us to life in Christ (1 Corinthians 4:7).
4. The truth of effectual grace should cause us to recognize our total dependence upon God's grace in the salvation of sinners. We are to faithfully and diligently proclaim the gospel and prayerfully relay upon God to give the increase (1 Corinthians 3:6–7).

A cautionary note is deemed necessary in closing. The Scriptures teach that man is responsible for rejecting the proclamation of the gospel (cf. Acts 13:46; Romans 2:2–6). Edwin H. Palmer has stated it thusly:

Without denying for a moment the truth of irresistible grace...nevertheless it is true that the Bible does not want us to reason in an unbiblical fashion and say that we will wait until the Spirit moves us before we believe. The Bible never allows that. It comes with only one command: Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, if you do believe, then you can know from the rest of the Bible it is because of God working in you both to will and to do according to His good pleasure. So believe. God commands you to. But if you do, thank God for causing you to do so.<sup>5</sup>

The Apostle Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit proclaimed:

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?" "Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him?" For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen (Rom. 11:33–36)

*Soli Deo Gloria*—to God alone the glory.

Endnotes:

1. Sproul, R.C. *Augustine and Pelagius*, *Tabletalk*, June, 1996, p. 13

2. Calvin, John. *Calvin's Commentaries*, Vol. XVII, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House) p. 125
3. Schaff, Philip, editor. *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. 1, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996) p. 522
4. Sproul, R.C. *Augustine and Pelagius*, *Tabletalk*, June, 1996, p. 52
5. Palmer, Edwin H. *the five points of calvinism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1972) p. 66