

Irresistible Grace

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IN reference to all the aspects from which God's saving grace may be viewed we must always reckon with the reality and gravity of sin. The salvation God has provided is more than salvation from sin and its consequences. Its design embraces the exceeding riches of God's grace and contemplates the highest conceivable destiny that could be bestowed upon creatures, conformity to the image of God's own Son that he might be the firstborn among many brethren (cf. Rom. 8:29). But no such destiny could be envisioned or achieved without salvation from sin in all its ramifications and liabilities. In order to be salvation *to* it must first of all be salvation *from*.

We cannot assess the gravity of sin unless we probe to that which is central in its definition. If we say that sin is selfishness we do state something that belongs to the character of sin, especially if we think of self-centeredness and construe this as involving the worship of self rather than of the Creator (cf. Rom. 1:25). The iniquity of sin is thereby disclosed. Again, if we say that sin is the assertion of human autonomy versus the sovereignty of God we are saying something relevant. Sin is precisely that, and it became apparent in Eden when the sin of our race began.

But we must ask: are these analyses sufficient? To put it otherwise: does not Scripture warrant and compel a more penetrating description? When Paul says that "the carnal mind is enmity against God" (Rom. 8:7), he has surely provided us with what is ultimate in the definition of sin. Sin is the contradiction of God, contradiction all along the line of God's unique and essential glory. Nothing is more germane to God's glory than his truth; he is truth. The tempter was well aware of this and so his strategy was framed accordingly. To the woman he said: "ye shall not surely die" (Gen. 3:4). This was blatant contradiction of God's veracity. When the woman acceded to this contradiction her integrity collapsed and to sin she became captive. Our Lord's indictment of the tempter is to the effect that his own fall from integrity was of the same character as that by which he seduced Eve. "He was a murderer from the beginning and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar and the father of it" (John 8:44).

Yes, the essence of sin is to be against God (cf. Ps. 51:4); it is the contradiction of God in the whole range of its connotation and application. When Paul wrote, "the carnal mind is enmity against God," he added, "for it is not subject to the law of God" (Rom. 8:7). It is

significant that the law of God should be specified in this connection. The enmity manifests itself in insubjection to the law of God. And not only so. The insubjection may be said to constitute the enmity, the contradiction. For the law is the glory of God coming to expression for the regulation of human thought, word, and action consonant with the image in which man has been created. So sin can be defined in terms of law as “lawlessness” (I John 3:4).

The contradiction which sin offers to God and to his will, if it is not adequately described as resistance, involves and is expressed in resistance. Scripture sometimes uses this term or its equivalents to express the attitude of unbelief (cf. Acts 7:51; 13:45; Rom. 10:21; II Tim. 3:8; Tit. 1:9). It is obvious that sin consists in resistance to the will of God. If the claims of God were not resistible, there would be no sin. The claims of God come to expression in the gospel and all rejection of the gospel and of its demands is resistance. In the gospel we have the supreme revelation of the grace of God, and Christ is the embodiment of that grace. The glory of God is nowhere more effulgent than in the face of Jesus Christ. Hence unbelief is resistance of grace at the zenith of its disclosure and overture. So to say that all grace is irresistible is to deny the plain facts of observation and experience as also of Scripture teaching. Stephen was bold enough to indict his unbelieving audience with resistance to the Holy Spirit: “Ye do always resist the Holy Spirit: as your fathers did, so do ye” (Acts 7:51). This is the enormity of unbelief; it is the contradiction of sin expressing itself in resistance to the claims and overtures of supreme love and grace. “And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world and men loved the darkness rather than the light” (John 3:19).

When we speak of irresistible grace, therefore, it is not to assert that all grace is irresistible, nor is it to deny the numberless respects in which grace is resisted and resisted to the culmination of resistance in everlasting doom. In fact the truth of and necessity for irresistible grace may be most cogently demonstrated in the premise of resistible grace. The enmity of the human heart is most virulent at the point of the supreme revelation of God’s glory. So deep-seated and persistent is the contradiction that the Saviour as the embodiment of grace is rejected. It is when we recognize this that the need for irresistible grace is perceived.

In much of present-day evangelism it is assumed that the one thing man can do in the exercise of his own liberty is to believe in Christ for salvation. It is supposed that this is the one contribution that man himself must make to set the forces of salvation in operation and that even God himself can do nothing towards this end until there is this crucial decision on man’s own part. In this assessment there is total failure to reckon with human depravity, with the nature of the contradiction that sin involves. Paul tells us that not only is the mind of the flesh not subject to the law of God but also that it cannot be (Rom. 8:7). This impossibility extends to the gospel as well. It is the implication of Paul’s other word that “the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (I Cor. 2:14). But to this truth we have the most pointed and express witness

of our Lord himself. “No man can come unto me, except the Father who hath sent me draw him” (John 6:44); “no man can come unto me, except it were given to him of the Father” (John 6:65). Here is the witness of him who knows what is in man and who knows the Father as the Father knows him. And it is to the effect that it is a moral and spiritual impossibility for a man to come unto him except by the free gift from the Father in his secret and efficacious drawing.

The foregoing words of our Lord must be coordinated with another in the same context. “All that the Father giveth me shall come unto me, and him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out” (John 6:37). The giving on the part of the Father in this text has been understood as the election in Christ before the foundation of the world (cf. Eph. 1:4, 5) or, at least, in terms of giving to the Son correlative with or flowing from the election. But this does not by any means appear to be the action of the Father referred to in the text. There are two reasons for this conclusion. First, in this Gospel elsewhere, when Jesus speaks of those given to him by the Father, they are identified as those given to him out of the world, as those who had kept his word, as those who had known that all things given to him were from the Father, as those who had received the words given him and had come to know the truth that he, Jesus, had come out from the Father (John 17:6-8). These characterizations require much more than election before the foundation of the world; they involve a relation of faith. Second, in the more immediate context Jesus is referring to the effectual drawing and giving on the Father’s part (John 6:44, 65). So we must conclude that the giving is the giving that occurs in the actual operations of grace, defined more specifically as drawing and giving in the realm of consciousness. The constraints of the Father’s grace in the hearts of men are concomitant with or, perhaps, may be construed as donation on the part of the Father to the Son. God the Father draws men, places holy constraints upon them, calls them into the fellowship of his Son, and presents them to Christ as trophies of the redemption Christ himself has accomplished.

This constraint has been called “efficacious.” No other inference could reasonably be drawn from John 6:44, 45. Jesus is speaking of coming unto him, that is, of the commitment of faith and of the impossibility apart from the Father’s drawing. In making the exception it is surely implied that when the Father draws the exception occurs—the person drawn does come. Furthermore, it would offend against all that may be conceived as to the nature and intent of the Father’s drawing and giving in terms of verses 44, 65 to think of these actions as ineffectual. But John 6:37 puts this beyond all question: “All that the Father giveth me will come to me.” Jesus does not say: all that the Father giveth me are brought to me. He uses the term that denotes motion on the part of the person—“will come to me.” Coming to Christ is the movement of commitment to Christ, coming that engages the whole-souled activity of the person coming. It is not that he may come, not that he has the opportunity to come, not that he will in all probability come, and not simply that he is empowered to come, but that he will come. There is absolute certainty. There is a divine necessity; the order of heaven insures the sequence.

It is a moral and spiritual impossibility for a person to come to Christ apart from the Father's drawing. What we find now is that it is a moral and spiritual impossibility for the person given by the Father to the Son not to come. There is by Jesus' verdict the invariable conjunction of these two diverse kinds of action—"all that the Father *giveth* me *will come* to me." There is invincible efficacy in the Father's action and this means grace irresistible.

The reality of such grace is inscribed on Jesus' words. But the teaching also points to the *necessity*. The premise of our Lord's teaching is the impossibility of faith when only human agency obtains. The agency of the Father is interposed to meet this impossibility and the impossibility establishes the indispensability of the interposition.

Thus far attention has been focused upon the action of God the Father in the constraint that issues in faith. It is highly important that this emphasis of Scripture should be appreciated. Otherwise we dishonor God the Father and our view of the provisions of salvation is seriously distorted. The love of the Father is the fountain from which all the acts and processes of redemption proceed. But we must also recognize that at the inception of salvation in possession lie the operations of grace of which the Father is agent. It is he who calls effectually into the fellowship of his Son (cf. Rom. 8:28, 30; I Cor. 1:9; Gal. 1:15, 16; Eph. 1:18) and he draws men to the Saviour. When sinners first experience the invincible attraction of the Redeemer, are entranced by his beauty, and invest their all in him, it is because the Father has made a donation to his own Son and placed upon men irresistible constraint. To conceive of all this as less than irresistible grace is to deny its character and impugn the efficacy of the Father's will.

Most frequently in theology irresistible grace has been thought to find its focus in regeneration, and regeneration is specifically the act of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 3:3-8). It would be easy to say that the actions of the Father referred to above are simply different ways of expressing regeneration. This is far too simplistic and fails to reckon with the manifoldness of the operations of grace. In the design of salvation there is an economy. In the once-for-all accomplishment of redemption there is an economy. That is, there are the specific and distinguishing functions of the distinct persons of the Godhead. There is also economy in the application of redemption and we must take full account of the diversity involved. To equate the actions of the Father with regeneration is to ignore the diversity; our theology is thereby truncated and our faith deprived of the richness which the economy requires.

Regeneration is specifically the work of the Holy Spirit, and our appreciation of the economy of salvation demands that we honor him in the distinctive functions he performs.

No ingredient in the manifold of God's saving operations bears more relevantly on the subject of irresistible grace than does regeneration. Again, our Lord's own teaching is basic. "Except a man be born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God. . . . Except a man be born of water and of

the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:3, 5). The impossibility we found earlier in connection with faith appears here in connection with understanding of and membership in the kingdom of God, and birth from above, of water, and of the Spirit is the interposition that meets human impotence. It cannot be questioned that our Lord’s assessment of man’s situation is the total incapacity in reference to what is most germane to his well-being and is to the same effect as Paul’s indictment of the natural man (I Cor. 2:14).

The provision of grace appears in this connection, as in John 6:44, 65, in the exception, born from above, of water, and of the Spirit, the exception that insures understanding of and membership in the kingdom of God. And the certainty of this outcome is implied not only in the “except” of verses 3 and 5 but is expressly affirmed in verse 6: “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit,” a new person indwelt, directed, and controlled by the Holy Spirit.

It is John alone who records for us the Lord’s discourse to Nicodemus. The profound effect this teaching impressed on John’s thinking is evinced in his first epistle. On six occasions reference to regeneration occurs (I John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18). Pertinent to our present interest is the emphasis upon the invariable concomitance of birth from God and new life. “Every one who is begotten of God does not do sin . . . and he cannot sin because he is begotten of God” (3:9). “Every one who is begotten of God overcomes the world” (5:4). Every one who is begotten of God does not sin . . . and the evil one does not touch him” (5:18). So the person born or begotten of God no longer lives in sin but has the victory, in a word, is converted.

When these data are placed in contrast with the impossibility of which our Lord spoke to Nicodemus, the only inference is that the new birth is invincibly efficacious and this is just to affirm irresistible grace.

It is significant that in the prologue of John’s Gospel there occur the words, “who were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man but of God” (John 1:13). The cumulative negatives reinforce the positive and the lesson is that of divine monergism. It is not what man does but what God effects and God alone to the exclusion of all human volition or agency. The same monergism is patent in our Lord’s own teaching. In John 3:3-8 we cannot suppress the analogy on which the language of regeneration turns. When a person is begotten or born according to the flesh, it is not because he or she *decided* for this event. It was wholly by the volition and agency of others. So in the new birth. And by whose will and agency is not left in any doubt. The Holy Spirit is the agent and he alone. In terms of verse 3 the action is supernatural, in terms of verse 5 it is by radical purification and impartation, in terms of verse 6 it is invincibly determinative, in terms of verse 8 it is mysterious and sovereignly effective.

Why should there be any reluctance to accept the truth of irresistible grace? It is God’s interposition to do for us what we cannot do of ourselves. It is God’s amazing grace to meet our

hopeless impotence. Here is the gospel of sovereign mercy. In evangelism it is the only hope of its success unto the salvation of lost souls. The Holy Spirit accompanies the gospel proclamation with his sovereign demonstration and power. The lost are born of the Spirit and the fruit is unto holiness and the end everlasting life.

In concluding, may we return to John 6:37, 44, 65. When a sinner comes to Christ in the commitment of faith, when the rebellious will is renewed and tears of penitence begin to flow, it is because a mysterious transaction has been taking place between the persons of the Godhead. The Father has been making a presentation, a donation to his own Son. So perish the thought that coming to Christ finds its explanation in the autonomous determinations of the human will. It finds its cause in the sovereign will of God the Father. He has placed upon this person the constraint by which he has been captivated by the glory of the Redeemer and invests in him all his interests. Christ is made wisdom from God, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. Here is grace surpassing; and it is grace insurmountable.



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