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## HOLINESS TODAY

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GOES BEFORE

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**THE WAY**  
prevenient grace



**THE TRUTH**  
saving grace



**THE LIFE**  
sanctifying grace



# GOD GOES BEFORE

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## A PEEK INTO DIVINITY

**W**hat is God like? Countless books on this subject line library shelves, written by scholars in multiple languages from diverse cultures around the world. Speculation abounds with possible answers. Jesus Christ answered that question plainly for all to understand during His earthly ministry. He often spoke in parables: stories with word pictures that describe spiritual truths in practical ways.

One of my favorite parables, offering a word-picture peek into divine realities, is found in Luke 15:3-7. The story of the lost sheep focuses more attention on the heart of the shepherd than the absence of an animal.

Notice the admirable qualities of the shepherd:

- He demonstrated great concern for every single member of his flock.
- He focused attention on details as he counted individual sheep entering the fold of safety.
- His deep concern for the one absent sheep caused him to rearrange his schedule and go on a search-and-rescue mission.
- His restless heart refused to allow him to return empty-handed, continuing the search until he located the lost one.
- His compassion reached out and rescued the vulnerable loner.
- His loving embrace carefully placed the sheep over his shoulders for the journey home.
- His deep emotion gathered friends and neighbors together for a time of celebration.

Verse 7 indicates that Jesus intended His listeners to apply this story to spiritual realities. Perhaps Jesus had Ezekiel 34:31 in mind as He spoke: "You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Sovereign LORD." If that is the case, the shepherd represents our heavenly Father. The lost sheep represents every man, woman, youth, and child lost in sin. Thus, to this day we refer to individuals held in sin's grip as "the lost." The flock represent God's children already safely in the fold. The restless, searching heart of the shepherd represents God's prevenient grace longing, seeking, and reaching out to every least, last, or lost one.

Some in contemporary culture imagine God as disconnected from our reality: irrelevant; an out-of-touch doting grandparent; a relic of a primitive, ancient faith. Others describe a stern cosmic law enforcement officer waiting in the shadows to condemn anyone who breaks a moral law. Jesus, on the other hand, set the record straight with the authority

of One who knows the Father intimately. Jesus said our heavenly Father cares deeply for both the community of faith and for lost individuals. His care manifests itself in daily involvement in the lives of all who remain outside the fold of safety.

God's involvement does not end when He rescues and restores those who are lost. These acts of God throw the door wide open to personal, daily relationship with Him. Restoration opens channels of conversation and fellowship between God and His children that give new meaning to life on earth. Beyond that, it anticipates a deepening of those conversations and that fellowship for all eternity. Luke 15 reminds us that the prevenient nature of God's grace to us is simply one aspect of a divine grace so magnificent and abounding that we will grow to understand it more and more, not only in this life, but forever when we reach our eternal home. "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen" (2 Peter 3:18).

**Frank Moore** is editor in chief of *Holiness Today*.

# PROVIDENCE AND PREVENIENCE

There is a difference between providential grace and prevenient grace. Providence is how God provides for the sustenance and provision of His creation.<sup>1</sup> God “sees to” (Gen. 22:8, 14) what is needed to sustain the world and to provide for individual persons. How God’s providence affects each person’s life is profoundly mysterious. When and where and into what family one is born is a question of providence. Why one person is born into a Hindu family in India in 1765, while another person is born into a Christian family in Canada in 2015 are matters of providence. God’s providence carries varying degrees of spiritual responsibility. One born into a devout Christian family will be held to more stringent account than one born into a Buddhist environment. One who is given opportunity to hear the Gospel throughout their life will be judged differently from someone who has never heard the name of Jesus.

Jesus’ parable of the faithful and wise servant is about more than material possessions; it involves stewardship of God’s grace. “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Luke 12:48). Not all are given equal opportunity and the same ground on which to stand. Some are given more and some are given less. With the gift of ‘more’ comes an increased requirement for return and response. These are matters of Divine providence.

If providence is where God places us, prevenience is the multifaceted ways God meets us. Everyone receives the same grace that goes before salvation. But opportunities for response differ. Nevertheless, God extends Himself to everyone, persistently and patiently. This distinguishes Christianity from other world religions that teach that if humans first move toward God, God will respond. Christianity reverses the order; God always acts first, thereby enabling response. God initiates the good work of grace and peace. Redemption and new creation always begin with God’s initiative. Nothing reveals this more than the conviction that the Father sent Jesus Christ into the world. God always acts first. The Holy Spirit awakens persons to their need for salvation, convicts them of sin, and applies the atonement of Christ as they respond in faith. For John Wesley, spiritual awakening is more than mere conscience.

There is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly devoid of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called natural conscience. Every man has some measure of that light ... which lightens every man that comes into the world. And every one ... feels more or less uneasy when he acts contrary to the light of his own conscience. So that no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath.<sup>2</sup>

An uneasy conscience, an increasing awareness of right and wrong, and awakening spiritual awareness are God’s gracious gifts to everyone. This confidence has important implications for evangelism in the Wesleyan spirit.

**David Busic** is a general superintendent in the Church of the Nazarene.

1. The word providence comes from two Latin words: *pro*, which means “forward,” or, “on behalf of”; and, *vide*, which means “to see.” Providence is sometimes distinguished into two categories of “general providence,” or God’s care for the universe, and “special providence,” God’s intervention in the life of people.

2. John Wesley, *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley* (Kansas City, MO: Nazarene Publishing House, n.d.; and Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958, concurrent editions), VI, 512.

NOTE: This is an excerpt from “Providence and Prevenience,” a chapter of a forthcoming book, *The Grace That Goes Before: Prevenient Grace in the Wesleyan Tradition*. Used with permission from The Foundry Publishing, [www.thefoundrypublishing.com](http://www.thefoundrypublishing.com).





# THE INITIATIVE OF GOD

PREVENIENT

GRACE

AND THE

ATONEMENT



OUT OF HIS FULLNESS WE HAVE  
ALL RECEIVED GRACE IN PLACE  
OF GRACE ALREADY GIVEN.

JOHN 1:16

by T.A. NOBLE

**THE TERM “PREVENIENT GRACE” IS NOT IN THE BIBLE.**

Indeed, this whole way of speaking of different kinds of “graces”—“prevenient grace,” “saving grace,” “sanctifying grace”—is not the way the biblical writers speak of grace. Where then did this language and phraseology come from?

The answer historically is that it was the great Augustine who was most influential in promoting this way of speaking in the church. And Augustine was influenced in turn by Platonism. The great Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus was a pantheist who thought of “grace” as a kind of force or influence that flowed down from God and spread throughout the universe. That idea influenced Augustine. He similarly seemed to think of grace as a kind of force or influence or medicine. It flowed particularly into the human soul from God and it was *gratia praeveniens* (“prevenient grace”), the grace that “goes before,” ensuring that the human soul would respond in faith.



## ARE THERE MANY “GRACES”?

In medieval Catholicism, theologians developed the thought of many different kinds of grace infused into the Christian soul through seven sacraments. Baptism infused regenerating grace into us. The Eucharist or mass infused sanctifying grace into us. Confirmation strengthened baptismal grace. Penance infused the grace of absolution for sin. They thought of ordination as a sacrament that infused grace into the priest to enable him to transform the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Marriage infused grace into the husband and the wife. Extreme unction infused grace into the Christian soul to persevere through sickness and death.

During Reformation, the Protestant reformers rejected all this as unbiblical. They recognized only two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. However, the language of different types or kinds of grace survived. Protestants such as John Wesley continued to use the traditional language, differentiating “prevenient grace” from “saving grace” and “sanctifying grace.” In Wesley's view, prevenient grace *enabled* but did not *compel* us to believe.

In a way, this is biblical: “For by grace you have been saved through faith” (Ephesians 2:8). But in the Bible, “grace” is not some kind of agent or influence or force, and the Bible never uses the word in the plural, implying that there are different kinds of “graces.” Instead, this text says that it was *God who took the initiative*. We do not save ourselves through the quality and strength of our faith. Indeed, we would not be able to

have faith in God if God had not taken the initiative in coming to us. To speak of the “grace” of God is not to refer to some “thing” or entity or substance. It is to refer to God's *generosity* shown in *action*. It is to say that God has acted graciously toward us. Perhaps it is less misleading to use the adverb, *graciously*.

Scripture does not speak of God sending some impersonal “thing” or substance called “grace” into us. Rather, God has acted *personally*. He has *graciously* taken the initiative in coming to us so that we might respond. That is God's *singular* grace, “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 13:13). And it is God the Holy Spirit, *one* with the Father and the Son, who works within us, turning us around to come toward God instead of walking away from Him in our sin.

## CORPORATE BEFORE INDIVIDUAL

However, there is a further point. Augustine and the medieval Catholic theologians tended to speak of grace as something that operated through the sacraments *within the individual soul*. So too, Protestants since the Reformation have tended to think of grace in this Augustinian way as active within the *individual*. Indeed, Protestantism reflects its context within modernity in that it tends to be highly individualistic.

Nevertheless, this is not just a matter of the experience of the individual. The gracious work of God does not have its first beginning within the individual. We must learn to think biblically of the grace of God as God's initiative in *the whole narrative*

*of salvation*. When God called Abraham from Ur of the Chaldeans, that was grace. When God called Moses to deliver Israel from Egypt, that was grace. The whole history of salvation is the history of grace. And in time, fulfilling all His gracious action in the history of Israel, God sent His Son to save the world. That was grace—the gracious act of God. Grace—that is to say, God's gracious action—does not begin when God calls us each personally. Before the Holy Spirit ever works within each of us as we hear the gospel message and repent and believe, God was at work in the history of salvation. In His gracious action, God called not merely individuals such as Abraham and Moses but *a people*. He called the people of Israel to be a *corporate* body—a kingdom of priests. In fulfillment of that, He came in the Person of His Son that His people might be the *Body* of Christ united in Him the Head.

God's grace—that is to say, God's gracious action—does not begin when the message of the gospel comes to you or me. God's gracious action has been and is *historic* and *corporate*. God climaxed the history of Israel when He came in the Person of His Son, not merely to die for isolated individuals but to die for the whole human race *corporately*.

## THE ATONEMENT

That brings us to the Atonement. The word “at-one-ment” was coined by William Tyndale when he first translated the Bible into English. Its first and basic meaning is to make two into one—to unite, to reconcile. God took the initiative to do that when God and humanity were *united* in the Person of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. The word “flesh” is vitally important here. In the Old Testament, it refers to the



human race as a *corporate body*: “All flesh is grass” (Isaiah 40:6), meaning that humanity corporately is mortal and perishing. So when the Word became “flesh,” He, the Son of God, united Himself irrevocably to this perishing corporate body of the human race. Was that not the supreme act of “prevenient grace”?

But that was not the completion of God’s action of Atonement. The reason why humanity was perishing *corporately* was because our sin had severed our relationship with the Creator God who was the Source of our very being. In our suicidal folly, we had rebelled, rejecting our loving Creator in order to make ourselves “gods.” By uniting Himself to our flesh, therefore, the Son of God committed Himself to crucifying our old sinful humanity (Romans 6:3-11), “bearing our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24). The Incarnation had to lead to the cross. As He made clear, the Son of Man had to die (Mark 8:31; 9:31).

The supreme act of the *prevenient grace* of God, therefore, was not just to come in the Person of the Son to unite Himself to our sinful corporate humanity by becoming one of us. It was also to *sanctify* that human nature in His own sinless body and soul throughout His life of compassionate service. It was also to offer Himself as the representative human being in the supreme act of love to the Father, thus completing the at-one-ment between God and corporate humanity.

Since every human being who has ever lived is included within that *corporate* humanity, we rejoice to sing with Charles Wesley, “He suffered once *for all*.”<sup>1</sup> But we must first think of that *corporately* rather than

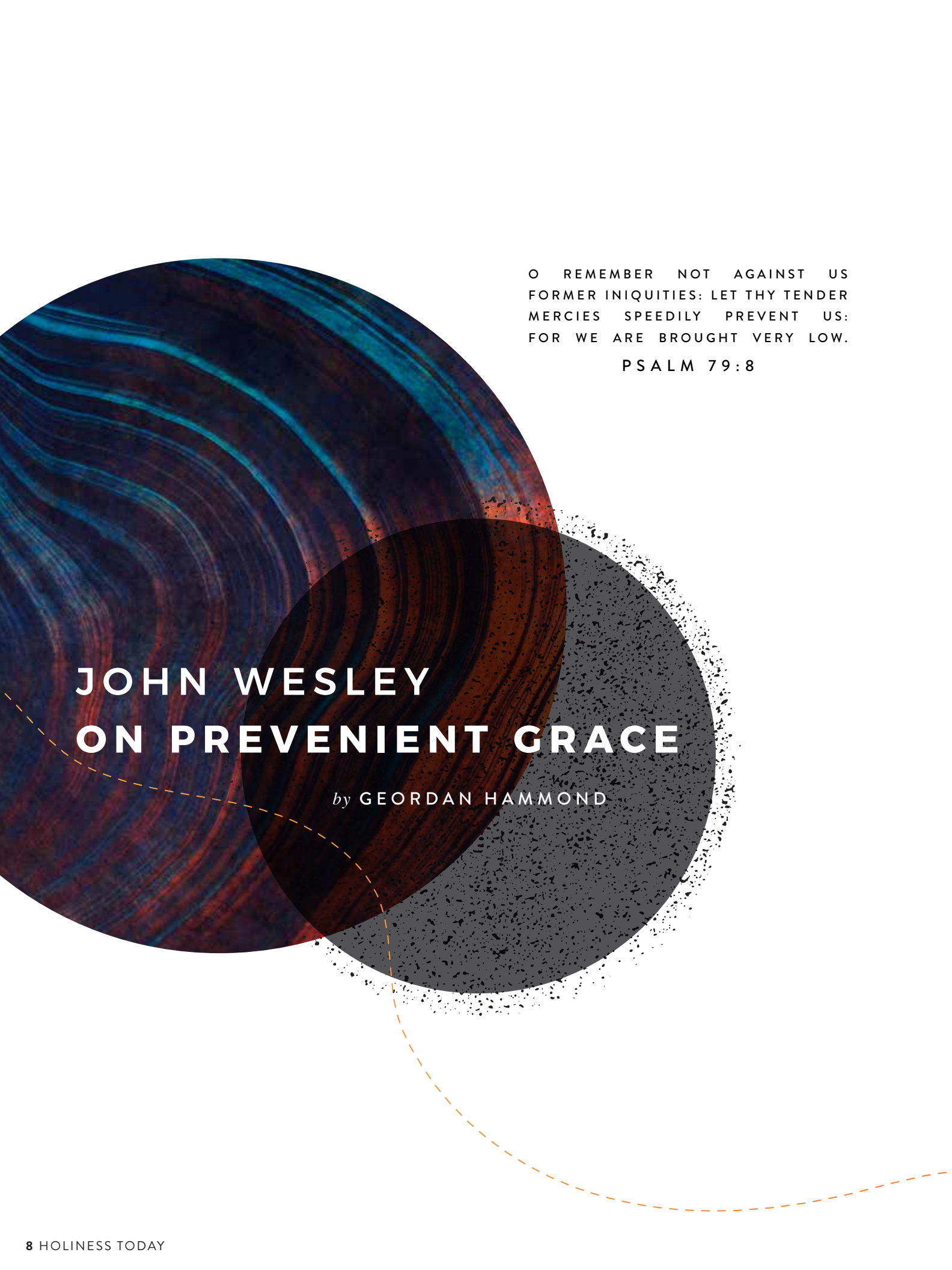
*individually*. When Christ died and rose again, the whole human race died and rose *corporately* with Him and in Him. The cross changed everything. That became clear on resurrection morning. Thinking corporately, the cross did not merely provide the *possibility* of salvation. It actually changed the relationship of the human race *corporately* to God. The Atonement or reconciliation was accomplished once, and for all. That is why we can confidently believe that infants throughout the world and throughout the ages are “covered by the blood of Christ.” But here we must be clear. Sadly, this does not mean that every human being will be saved. In His prevenient grace, God has made salvation secure for humanity *corporately*. Each believer may, therefore, say that Christ died for him or her *personally*. Like Paul, we may each rejoice in “the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). But since God has not created us as puppets to be programmed but wishes to redeem us as fully personal beings in the image of His Son, He will not force His love on any of us. That would be abusive.

God calls us in the gospel of His Son. And in and with the call comes the Holy Spirit who alone makes it possible for us to respond. That too is the *prevenient, gracious* action of God.

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1. *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley* (London, 1968) 1:311.

BY UNITING  
HIMSELF TO OUR  
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THE SON OF GOD  
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ON THE TREE.”



O REMEMBER NOT AGAINST US  
FORMER INIQUITIES: LET THY TENDER  
MERCIES SPEEDILY PREVENT US:  
FOR WE ARE BROUGHT VERY LOW.

PSALM 79:8

# JOHN WESLEY ON PREVENIENT GRACE

*by* GEORDAN HAMMOND



## PREVENIENT GRACE HAS A FOUNDATIONAL PLACE

in John Wesley's theology. Why is this so? Because salvation is central to the Christian faith. Wesley stated, "salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) 'preventing grace.'"¹ Prevenient grace, as a crucial aspect of Wesley's doctrine of grace, needs to be set in the larger context of that doctrine and his theology as a whole.² This enables us to have a clear view of prevenient grace and its functions in Wesley's theology and, hopefully, to avoid misunderstandings. For Wesley, prevenient grace was not his innovative contribution to Christianity but an essential, gracious gift of God to fallen humanity revealed in Scripture and rooted in and reflected upon in the Christian tradition.

Because of borrowed words from other languages into English and the resulting changes in word meanings, the term prevenient grace, like Christian perfection, can appear odd and even confusing. Prevenient is from the Latin *praevenire*, meaning to precede or come before. Wesley, as was common in his day, usually used the term "preventing" grace in a sense that was in harmony with its Latin root word. This is very different to the common meaning of "prevent" in English today (as stopping something from happening). If defined in line with Wesley and classic Christianity, alternative terms such as "preparatory grace" or "enabling grace" may be used. Prevenient grace can be described as the work of the Holy Spirit in drawing us to God.

While the term prevenient grace is not found in the Bible, the concept is, nonetheless, deeply embedded in it. In Scripture and in the life of the believer, grace is supremely revealed and embodied in the incarnation and atonement of Jesus Christ. Reconciliation with God is made possible by the prevenient work of the Holy Trinity in sending to us the Son of God.

Wesley saw the incarnation of Christ—"the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world" (John 1:9)—as a gift of prevenient grace to all people. Prevenient grace can also be implicitly linked to God's work in directing "his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Wesley framed prevenient grace in reference to the Trinity: it is the drawing of us to the Father, the light of the Son, and the work of the Spirit in convicting us of sin. As this suggests, salvation is a supernatural, divine work enabled by the grace of God.<sup>4</sup>

In relation to the history of Christian thought, Wesley's view of prevenient grace was drawn especially from the early church and the Church of England. As with the Church of the Nazarene's Article of Faith Seven, grace/prevenient grace is found in the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England. Article Ten addresses grace and free will stating that "after the fall of Adam . . . we have no power to do good work . . . without the grace of God by Christ preventing us." This understanding of the relationship between grace and free will was fundamental to the Protestant Reformation. It highlights both human inability to turn to God apart from grace, and, more importantly, the power of God's grace to save us, personally and corporately.<sup>5</sup>

It is not uncommon to hear Wesleyans today discuss free will in such a way as to suggest that we can simply choose to be saved. Wesley denied this view of "natural free will," yet he believed "that there is a measure of free will supernaturally restored to every man."<sup>6</sup> This restoration by

God's prevenient grace allows us to cooperate with that grace and to move to repentance, justification, regeneration, sanctification, and ultimately glorification.

As God's initiative, prevenient grace enables us to respond to God—in Wesley's terms to "co-work" or "cooperate" with God. While the doctrine can be found in many of Wesley's writings, the single place in which it is most clearly expressed is his sermon "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," which uses Philippians 2:12-13 as its text: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God that worketh in you, both to will and to do of his good pleasure." Wesley memorably sums up this teaching as "first, God works; therefore you can work. Secondly, God works; therefore you must work." Here Wesley underscores the universality of prevenient grace; therefore, "no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath."<sup>7</sup>

In reference to salvation, prevenient grace is "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."<sup>8</sup> Although it should be remembered that there is only one united grace of God, for the purpose of explaining how God's grace progressively operates in human experience, Wesley described a fourfold process of grace. Being awakened by prevenient grace, convincing (or convicting) grace is the movement and desire toward repentance. Justifying grace allows us to trust in Christ for our salvation. Sanctifying grace brings our salvation to its fullness—salvation from the power and root of sin and restoration in the

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image of God. Wesley asserted, “all experience, as well as Scripture, shows this salvation to be both instantaneous and gradual.”<sup>9</sup>

For Wesley, our conscience is a supernatural gift given by God through which prevenient grace works. This teaching is present in “On Working Out Our Own Salvation” and built upon in his sermon “On Conscience,” where Wesley defines conscience as “that [universal] faculty whereby we are at once conscious of our own thoughts, words, and actions, and of their merit or demerit, of their being good or bad, and consequently, deserving either praise or censure.”<sup>10</sup> Recognizing that God’s Holy Spirit speaks to us through our conscience is another way of comprehending Wesley’s conception of the working of prevenient grace.

Prevenient grace, while part of the broad Western Augustinian tradition, came to Wesley particularly through the Arminian

and Anglican traditions. Wesley, as an inheritor of and contributor to these traditions, stressed that God’s grace is “free grace.” That is, it is an unmerited gift of God preveniently given to us “while we were yet sinners” and it is a universal, supernatural gift given to all people. This is distinguished from any doctrine that limits God’s saving grace to a select few. For Wesley, every person is enabled to cooperate with God as they are convinced, justified, and sanctified.

In summary, “prevenience” is a reality of all manifestations of God’s grace. By its very nature, God’s grace is prevenient grace. Therefore, prevenient grace is not a stage of grace that we leave behind once we respond to it; we need God’s grace continually throughout our lives, and God graciously extends it to us so that we might be born again having our affections, mind, and will transformed by God, leading us to “go on to perfection” (Hebrews 6:1).

Prevenient grace suggests that we

should hold unconditional love as central to ministry. A pastoral and evangelistic task of all Nazarenes is to preach the gospel in word and deed as a means of awakening people to the prevenient work of God already present in their lives. The Holy Spirit enabling us to see the work of God’s prevenient grace in the lives of those around us should activate the call to discipleship in the church. When we heed this call, we co-work with God to help people encounter God’s free grace that leads to liberation from sin and the joyous life of holy living.

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*All Scripture quotations in this article are taken from the King James Version.*

1. John Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation” (Sermon 85), The Wesleyan-Holiness Digital Library, <http://whdl.nbc.edu/working-out-our-own-salvation-sermon-85> (accessed June 15, 2020).
2. For example, for Wesley, grace/prevenient grace is intimately related to and at times indistinguishable from God’s love and God’s providence.
3. See Wesley’s sermon “The Scripture Way of Salvation.” Prevenient grace should be seen as the Holy Trinity’s gracious action, not a substance that God places within us.
4. There is wide consensus among Wesley scholars that grace is the center of Wesley’s theology. In Albert Outler’s oft-cited phrase, it is the “axial theme” of his theology. This has been refined by Randy Maddox as “responsible grace”: God’s grace and our grace-empowered and willing participation co-operate in the *via salutis* (way of salvation); by Kenneth Collins as the conjunctive of “holiness *and* grace”; and by Henry Knight as “the relationship between love and grace” with an emphasis on Wesley’s “optimism of grace,” and “grace as the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.” This should underscore that it is crucial to place prevenient grace within Wesley’s doctrine of grace as a whole. Prevenient grace is a useful way of thinking about God’s grace as long as it is understood that there is only one unified grace of God. It is not a separate grace from the grace of God that enables repentance of sin, salvation, and sanctification.
5. Throughout this article, “us” refers both to us personally *and* corporately as the body of Christ.
6. Wesley, *Predestination Calmly Considered*.
7. John Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation” (Sermon 85).
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. John Wesley, “On Conscience” (Sermon 105), The Wesleyan-Holiness Digital Library, <https://www.whdl.org/conscience-sermon-105>, (accessed June 15, 2020).



# A COMMUNITY CALLED BY GRACE

*by* TIMOTHY GREEN

THEN THE MAN AND HIS WIFE HEARD THE  
SOUND OF THE LORD GOD AS HE WAS WALKING  
IN THE GARDEN IN THE COOL OF THE DAY,  
AND THEY HID FROM THE LORD GOD AMONG  
THE TREES OF THE GARDEN. BUT THE LORD  
GOD CALLED TO THE MAN, "WHERE ARE YOU?"

GENESIS 3:8-9



**INTERWOVEN THROUGHOUT THE FABRIC OF THE OLD TESTAMENT** is the life-giving and hope-filled confession of faith: “The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Psalm 145:8, ESV). From narratives (Exodus 34:6-7; Numbers 14:18) to prophets (Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2), from psalms (Psalm 103:8 145:8-9) to sermons (Nehemiah 9:17, 31), this testimony to God’s grace undergirds the faith of the Old Testament. The Lord’s freely-given, non-coerced favor was no mere afterthought in the testimony of our biblical ancestors. It was the life-giving breath that enabled them to walk with God and each other.

The Lord had uniquely revealed this grace through the deliverance of our ancestors from Egypt and the establishment of covenant with them at Sinai. God’s act of “birthing” the covenant people out of the waters of the sea and into a covenant family (Exodus 15) was neither God’s obligatory response to human performance nor an outcome of human manipulation. It was pure, untarnished, freely-given grace. This divine grace, however, did not first appear in the momentous birth of God’s people. It had long preceded God’s mighty acts at the sea and at the mountain. This grace that “came before,” this preceding or prevenient grace, had in fact brought the people to the very point of their birth as a community.



## A COMMUNITY CALLED BY GRACE

The notion of the Lord's preceding grace often appears in the Old Testament as divinely-initiated calls that occur before any human action or response. These calls take place in the lives of individuals such as Moses (Exodus 3:1-12), Joshua (Joshua 1:1-9), Samuel (1 Samuel 3:1-11), Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-8), and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:4-10). They occur in invitations for the community to choose the path that they will travel (Deuteronomy 30:11-20) or to choose the deity that they will serve (Joshua 24:2-18; 1 Kings 18:21). They fill prophetic challenges for God's people to return to Him. They appear in words of law that teach faithful practices and in wisdom's invitation to choose the way of life and blessing (Proverbs 8:1-21; 9:1-6). In all of these calls, before a human step is taken toward God, God steps toward humans. While God initiates these calls, He refuses to force or manipulate the responses of communities and individuals.

Among the many divinely-initiated calls in the Old Testament, a particular one foreshadows all that follow. This defining divine call involves the first patriarch and matriarch, Abram and Sarai (Genesis 12:1-3). Subsequent generations would remember the calling of their barren grandmother and nomadic grandfather. As if they were looking in a mirror, they saw the reflection of their own call and journey, purpose and future, victories and failures. Through this couple, they witnessed God's grace that was already present and active before Sarai and Abram ever took their first step toward God.

Barren and landless, this couple had no hope for their future. Regardless of how they might have used their meager resources to survive, their endeavors were futile. Into this common human struggle for survival, the Lord spoke blessing, promise, and hope. In their incapability to produce and survive, God's grace abounded more than the stars in the sky and the sand on the shore. God's word of blessing, promise, and hope was accompanied by a call: "Go..."

How does this empty, barren, and landless couple ever begin to step out of their settled and predictable world in Ur of the Chaldees and step into a world that makes no sense? How could this couple ever begin to imagine having descendants? How could they journey toward a homeland that they had never seen? One might say that they had to have an intuition, a holy intuition, a God-initiated intuition. Our biblical ancestors would testify that the Lord appeared and graciously called their names. This couple did not first come to God—God first came to them.

God's grace that was present and active before Abram and Sarai ever took their first step was by no means a coercive or manipulative force that played them as if they were pawns on a divine chessboard. It was a wooing and compelling grace that pursued them, called them, and guided them. From the beginning, the Lord's call was an invitation to participate fully with God in His presence. This couple did not stand by passively or unresponsively. Their walk with God was synergistic (working together) and bilateral (mutual and consensual). God was present and active in their lives, and they willingly participated

**INTO THIS COMMON**

**HUMAN STRUGGLE**

**FOR SURVIVAL,**

**THE LORD SPOKE**

**BLESSING, PROMISE,**

**AND HOPE.**





as instruments of God's grace to all humanity. God blessed them, and they became God's blessing to the world.

Along the way, this couple encountered struggles in fully trusting the God who had called them. They spoke falsehoods for self-preservation. They objectified and used their Egyptian servant, Hagar, only to discard her in the wilderness. They doubted and feared and questioned. They responded to God's promise of a child by laughing. Nevertheless, the God who called, promised, and guided never stopped pursuing them. God's divine grace continued to be present and active in every step of their journey, a journey in which their very identities were transformed as God renamed them Abraham and Sarah.

#### FOR THE SAKE OF THE WORLD

To stop with Abram and Sarai could lead us to conclude that in God's divine sovereignty, He chose this couple and their descendants *alone* to be children of God and had rejected and abandoned all other members of the human race. However, this conclusion emerges only if we ignore what comes before Genesis 12, thus overlooking the sole purpose for which God had called and blessed this couple. God's divine call upon their lives was certainly not to illustrate His sovereignty by means of saving one family and condemning the rest of humanity—showing grace on a few but wrath on everyone else. The reason for this “grace that comes before” in the life of Abram and Sarai was solely that they themselves might, by grace, *become* grace for all humanity.

The Lord's “preceding grace” certainly did not begin in the story of a chosen couple in Genesis 12. It began “in the beginning” when God created the heavens and the earth. Well before God ever extended grace to Abram and Sarai, God extended grace to all creation and to all humanity. Long before God ever called this couple, God called another couple: *Adam* the human and *Eve* the mother of all living. Even in their guilt and shame as they covered themselves and hid from God, God *called* out their names and asked, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9).

The preceding grace of God that *called* Abram and Sarai has always been present and active for the sake of all humanity. No human being dwells outside of this freely-given, non-coerced prevenient grace of God that called humanity “then” and that calls humanity now.

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**EVEN IN THEIR GUILT**

**AND SHAME, GOD**

**CALLED OUT THEIR**

**NAMES AND ASKED,**

**“WHERE ARE YOU?”**

# THE GOOD

## NEWS

by SVETLANA KHOBNYA

I WILL NEVER FORGET YOUR  
PRECEPTS, FOR BY THEM YOU  
HAVE PRESERVED MY LIFE.

PSALM 119:93



## **THE TASK OF ESTABLISHING THE IDEA**

of “prevenient grace” from a New Testament perspective may be challenging because the term itself does not appear in the New Testament or in the whole Bible for that matter. The term is theological and presents a Wesleyan understanding of God’s grace that goes before, enabling (but not forcing) sinners to respond to faith. In other words, while Christians generally believe in God’s initiative of grace, Wesley opposes the idea that prevenient grace irresistibly brings a person to faith in Christ.

Wesleyans believe that God’s grace is available to all and not just to a select number He has elected, and all are free to either respond or not. Does this mean that prevenient grace is a non-biblical idea? Not at all—it conveys a biblical principle or a concept that is clearly perceptible in some tangible ways in the text. So what are these tangible indications that the New Testament provides to support the idea of prevenient grace?



## THE PRIORITY OF GOD'S GRACE

Although we do not find the use of the words "prevenient grace" in the New Testament, we find plenty of examples that explain God's initiative in every action in relationship with humanity. The Old Testament draws a picture of God's constant and creative activity toward creation. God was working in and through Israel, but His plans from the very beginning included all nations (Genesis 12:1-3), for "all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God" (Isaiah 52:10; Jeremiah 31:10). God's promises to bless the nations and restore the world are carried out in the New Testament.

All the Gospels testify to the fact that Jesus fulfills God's promises. Mark announces the arrival of the Kingdom of God and the fulfillment of Scripture when Jesus came (Mark 1:14-15). Luke says that "the scripture has been fulfilled," when Jesus reads from Isaiah in the synagogue (Luke 4:21; Isaiah 61:1-2; 58:6). For Matthew, Jesus is Emmanuel, which is "God with us" (1:23). John is particularly helpful in explaining God's plan for humanity: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). The rest of the New Testament connects Jesus with the God of Israel and the Jewish scriptures that contain the mystery of God's plan for humanity from the beginning; and now it is revealed in Christ to all (Romans 16:26).

The New Testament writers describe God's initiative in Christ not only as the uniquely divine action to draw sinful

humanity back to God but also as a gracious gift. This is another scriptural idea that supports the doctrine of God's prevenient grace. In Romans, Paul writes that Christ died for the ungodly while we were still sinners (Romans 5:6-8) and, through Christ, we have obtained access to God's grace (Romans 5:2). In 2 Timothy, he makes the same point that God's grace is given in Christ Jesus before the ages began (1:9). In His mercy, 1 Peter assures us, God has provided a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1:3). This means that God's grace is not offered on the basis of receiving something in return. It is not obstructed or constrained by prior circumstances or conditions. God's grace is extended even when there is no promise that it will yield human obedience.<sup>1</sup>

## THE PRIORITY OF GOD'S LOVE

God has decided in our favor apart from our ability to reciprocate, gracing us with love prior to and independent of any response we might give, for no reason other than love. Love is the very nature of God—God does everything in love. His perfect (complete) love encompasses space and time.

Johannine literature is the most explicit source for understanding God's priority of love. God is described by John simply as *love* (1 John 4:16). God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent His only Son into the world so that we might live through Him (1 John 4:9). God is always the first One to love, "Not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son" (1 John 4:10).

Further, Ephesians 2:4-5 links God's mercy and love in an inseparable knot: "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses." For Paul, God's grace is related to the Christ-event "as the definitive enactment of God's love for the unlovely, and to the Gentile mission," when he proclaims to the nations that God's gifts are not restricted and are accessible beyond "the Torah-based definitions of value."<sup>2</sup>

## GRACE TO ALL

While the Gospels focus more on the life and ministry of Jesus as God's Son who reveals the coming of God's kingdom, Paul and other New Testament writers refer to Christ as the source of gracious redemption for all people, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all" (Titus 2:11). The theme of the universal applicability of the gospel of Jesus runs throughout the writings of Paul (Romans 1:5; 16:26; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Ephesians 2:8-9).

In Romans, Paul announces the good news is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16). Throughout other epistles, Paul describes this power penetrating the entire person, the entire community, and the entire world (Galatians 6:14-15; 2 Corinthians 5:17). It enables people and communities to restore relationship with God and each other and creates conditions for making choices in relation to God. This power drove Paul on a mission to announce to all that the same grace that he received in Christ is offered to all the races and nations. The apostle Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost,



GOD'S GRACE IS  
EXTENDED EVEN  
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WILL YIELD HUMAN  
OBEDIENCE.

also announced that “God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us” (Acts 15:8); so “we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 15:11).

The purpose of Jesus’ ministry—His life, death, and resurrection—is not only to call Israel back to their God but also to reconcile the world to Him. The whole world has come under God’s new rule in Christ (Ephesians 1:18-22) with the possibility of coming to participate in God’s life through Christ. This cannot be provided by anyone or anything else (Ephesians 1:22; Colossians 1:18; 2:10).

#### GOD’S OFFER FOR US TO RECEIVE

God’s constant loving activity and His sacrificial action in Christ is His offer to all to believe, to be reconciled, and to have hope. This offer is received through faith (Romans 3:21-26). In Romans 11:16-24, Paul draws a very powerful picture of the olive tree and branches grafted in the root. The root most likely represents Christ; the branches are the various believing and non-believing Jews and Gentiles that can be either attached or broken off or grafted in on the basis of faith. The point is that God’s offer in Christ may be accepted or rejected/resisted although the possibility to be a part of the people of God remains open. Since the power of sin is broken in Christ and we have obtained access to God’s grace, we are free to *respond* to God’s grace.

Perhaps Peter may help us to understand this nuance when he says that through Christ we have come to trust in God. Moreover,

God raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that our faith and hope may be in (or literally in Greek, “toward”) God (1 Peter 1:21). Jesus draws us to Himself (John 12:32). In other words, God in Christ reveals His faithfulness and prepares a way for us to see that and trust in Him. But it is up to us to exercise trust.

Often, Jesus is described as the light drawing or attracting people to Himself out of darkness. He leaves us with the Holy Spirit, who will continuously work in the world to convince it of sin, bringing righteousness and judgement (John 16:8-11), or to enlighten people’s hearts so that they may have hope (Ephesians 1:17-18). In Romans 5:12-21, we are reminded that although all have sinned and all have access to the gift of grace, only those who respond to God’s grace in Christ or “receive the free gift” (Romans 5:17) reign in life. Those who accept are invited to participate in the destiny of God’s grace in Christ to reconcile divided humanity to Himself and to bring the whole created order to its original and intended goodness (Ephesians 1:3-14).

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1. John M. G. Barclay is noteworthy here because of his extensive research on God’s grace as the gift in Christ, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 76.
2. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 566.



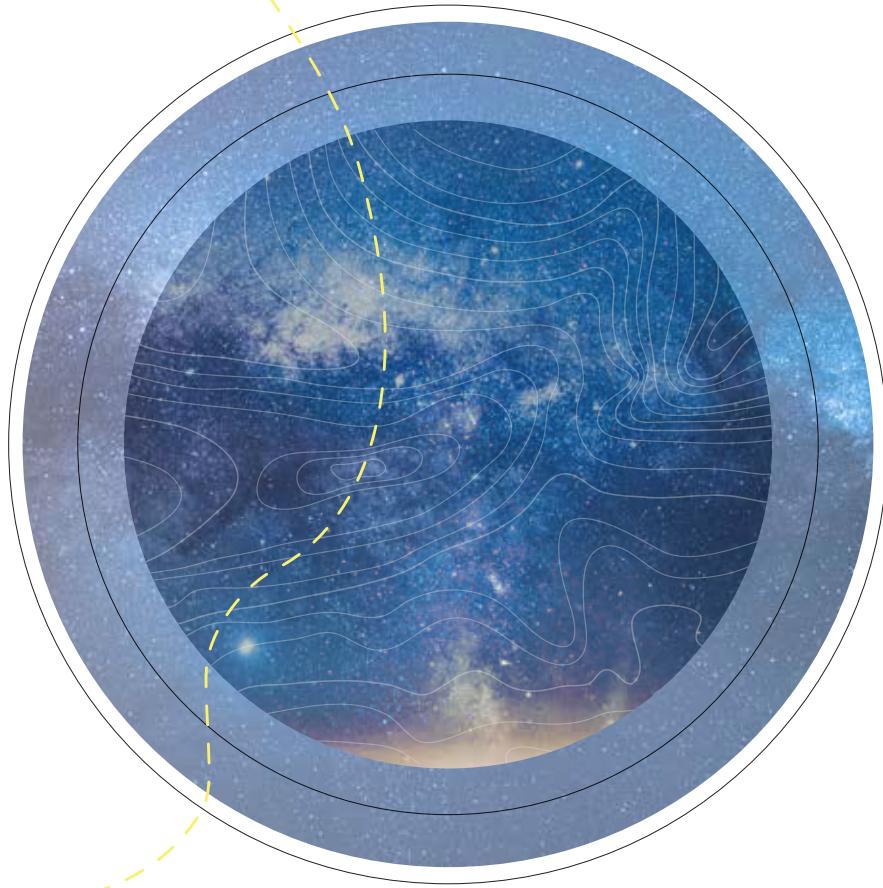
# AN UNDESERVED GRACE

*by* MARCO VELASCO

FOR 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.

EPHESIANS 2:8-9





**GOD’S GRACE, AND ONLY THIS GRACE,** can offer salvation to humanity. “So God created mankind in his own image...male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). Humankind disobeyed and corrupted their original relationship with God. In our fallen state, we can do nothing by ourselves to recover this image and our original relationship with our Creator. No effort we make can restore the image of God in us. Only grace can restore us to a new relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Everything begins and ends with grace.

Because of the fall, we experience death. God had warned Adam and Eve that they would surely die if they ate from the tree (Genesis 2:17). Paul confirmed the human condition when he stated that we are dead in our sins (Ephesians 2:1). This condition was not the intent of our Creator, and without the grace of God, we cannot be restored.

Understanding the condition of fallen humanity leads to understanding grace. There is nothing in humanity that is good (Romans 3:10-12). We can take no pleasure or confidence in our efforts to earn God's favor. God the Father, in His infinite goodness, sent God the Son to die on the cross for our redemption. Believers understand grace when they realize that it is something entirely undeserved.

### THE GRACE THAT GOES BEFORE

God intervened on behalf of humanity, preventing the full consequence of sin from taking place and enabling every person to respond to Him in faith. He has not left us alone and helpless in our condition of living under the power and contamination of sin. The expression "prevenient grace" has its origin in the Latin *gratia preveniens*, meaning "grace that goes before." *Gratia preveniens* is not *something*, but rather, it is about *Someone* who comes before and who anticipates any previous reaction. It is really about God: He, in His grace, goes before.

God seeks us even before we are aware that He is looking for us. He is already there, drawing near in order to awaken us and show us the way to salvation. Grace accompanies us and goes before us. God's active presence is a part of a process that involves the continuous presence of the Spirit, which helps us to advance within a relationship that will sustain and restore us into the image of God. No situation or person is beyond the reach of divine grace.

The blood of Christ provides the means for each believer's redemption (Hebrews 9:12). God is actively working in us and with

## THE RESTORATION

### OF THE IMAGE OF

### GOD WILL NOT TAKE

### PLACE WITHOUT

### OUR RESPONSE.

us. The grace of God provides the opportunity for the restoration of each human heart and mind. This grace provides a vital and primal stimulus that anticipates every human response while still giving the opportunity to respond positively or negatively.

### GOD'S LOVING GIFT OF FREEDOM

To understand grace essentially as love is to see it as being relational. God's love does not force or coerce the human will. Wesley writes: "The God of love is willing to save all the souls that he has made... But he will not force them to accept it."<sup>1</sup> Wesley believed grace to be a free and undeserved gift. God's grace is fundamentally His love for humanity: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son..." (John 3:16a). God's gift of grace continues to give us life to this day.

Wesley's concept that God's grace preserves human freedom to make choices (for otherwise His purpose of restoring humanity to His image would be frustrated) helps us to better understand our current situation regarding human responsibility. Wesley, quoting Augustine, says: "He that made us without ourselves, will not save us without ourselves."<sup>2</sup>

People often ask why everyone does not respond positively to this grace. Maybe you are thinking right now that it is because of sin, a power that can take control of the human will (Romans 6:14). God in His love allows for men and women to choose Him freely. He allows humanity to accept or reject Him. People disobey God's will not for lack of knowledge but because they are not obedient



with the knowledge they have. Nevertheless, God continues to give everyone the opportunity to be with Him or against Him. In Wesley's words:

"Everyone has...good desires, although the generality of men stifle them before they can strike deep root or produce any considerable fruit. Everyone has some measure of that light, some faint glimmering ray, which sooner or later...enlightens every man that cometh into the world...Everyone...feels more or less uneasy when he acts contrary to the light of his own conscience. So that no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath."<sup>3</sup>

The grace of God, which is His love, is the beginning of all that is necessary for our salvation. Justifying grace is part of a process, preceded by another dimension of grace that is equally important. According to Wesley, salvation as part of a process begins with the first stimulus that God gives to us even before we are aware. God's love is the primeval and vital stimulus that anticipates the human response. Wesley called this primal impulse "prevenient grace."

The cooperation between human and divine freedom is active in prevenient grace and thereafter in justification and sanctification. This synergistic association is important in understanding that the restoration of the image of God will not take place without

our response. We will not advance in solving the problems that plague us today unless we understand our participatory and shared role with God within the divine purpose in the entire process of salvation made possible by the grace of God.

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1. John Wesley, "On The Wedding Garment" (Sermon 120), The Wesleyan-Holiness Digital Library, <https://www.whdl.org/wedding-garment-sermon-120>. Accessed June 15, 2020.
2. Quoted in John Wesley, *The Works of Rev. John Wesley* (Kansas City, MO: Nazarene Publishing House, n.d.; and Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958, concurrent editions), VI, 53.
3. John Wesley, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation" (Sermon 85), The Wesleyan-Holiness Digital Library, <http://whdl.nbc.edu/working-out-our-own-salvation-sermon-85>. Accessed June 15, 2020.

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# A CALL TO WORSHIP

*by* T. SCOTT DANIELS

AND THE SIGHT OF THE GLORY OF THE  
LORD WAS LIKE DEVOURING FIRE  
ON THE TOP OF THE MOUNT IN THE  
EYES OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL.

EXODUS 24:17, KJV



**MY WIFE, DEBBIE, GAVE HER LIFE TO CHRIST** on the second Sunday of November in 1988. She had just graduated with a degree in communications, was working an exciting new television job in Seattle, and was preparing to marry her college boyfriend. For a 22-year-old, the pieces of life were falling into place quite nicely. Yet something was still missing.

One evening, on her way home from working downtown, she took the wrong exit on the freeway and happened to pass by the Seattle Aurora Church of the Nazarene. Her attention was immediately drawn to the new building, and in particular, the beautiful stained-glass window. She decided to make that day's directional mistake a habit. One day as she drove by in order to see the church again, she saw two men hanging out a sign saying something like, "All Are Welcome. Our Church Can Be Your Home. Service Times on Sunday are..." In that moment, she made the decision that she would visit soon.



**AS WE WORSHIP,  
WE RECOGNIZE THE  
UNIQUE AND OFTEN  
MYSTERIOUS  
PRESENCE OF GOD.**

That first Sunday she attended, she arrived at the wrong time. The sign she saw (which never existed) apparently invited her to come right in the middle of Sunday school and almost an hour before the worship service started.

An elderly greeter welcomed her and spent several minutes showing her around and making her feel at home. Another family invited Debbie to sit with them during the service; however, they sat far too close to the front for the comfort of someone who had been to church only a handful of times. So politely declining, Debbie took a seat in the very back.

During the entire service, Debbie felt something tugging at her heart. The sermon – preached by my father – seemed to be exactly directed at her. When the message concluded and the altar was open with an invitation to pray, without really knowing what to do or say, Debbie stepped forward, knelt in prayer, and received a new life in Christ Jesus. The rest, as they say, is history.

I never tire of telling or hearing Debbie's testimony of coming to faith. It is an amazing story of redemption and has had significant implications not only for her but for truly hundreds of others also, including myself. However, I want to step back and ask a few interrelated theological questions about her experience. I wonder about these kinds of

things: How was the Spirit of God at work in Debbie's coming to faith? What role did her own freewill and decision-making play in her conversion? Why that day, that place, and that moment?

There are some theological traditions that would answer those questions like this: Debbie came to faith on November 13, 1988, because God had predetermined that day—perhaps before the foundations of creation itself—for her to receive His grace. The story of salvation God is writing, thankfully, includes her, and in that moment and at that place, God's irresistible love and grace captured her heart and life.

Believers in the Wesleyan tradition would find prevenient grace (the gracious and loving presence of God's Spirit that universally goes before or in front of all people, drawing all people not only to God but to God's purposes) to be the answer to my questions. That grace had been at work every moment of Debbie's existence. For 22 years, the Spirit of God had been finding ways to love her and woo her so she would respond in faith to God's redeeming grace. In this particular story, God's prevenient grace can be seen in Debbie's unsettled soul, two men we never knew and a sign that never existed, the warm hospitality of a greeter, the hearing of the Word, the fresh insights of a well-crafted sermon, and the gentle tug of the Spirit upon her heart to respond. God would never force Debbie

to serve and worship Him, but without His loving invitation, she could not have known Him nor been able to respond to Him.

Although Debbie's conversion story is quite dramatic, it is not far off from what happens every week when God's people are gathered in worship. We are convinced that God's people come together not simply out of habit or a commitment of the will; instead, they are responding to the Spirit's voice to worship Him. The call goes out even before the service begins and sounds something like this: "Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker" (Psalm 95:6). And it is responded to in this way: "I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD'" (Psalm 122:1).

Services or liturgies that begin with a call to worship attempt to recognize and acknowledge the prevenient presence of God. Worship does not begin with the voice of a pastor, the greeting of a neighbor, or even the singing of a choir or music team. God initiates worship. Personally, I think this particular practice in worship is significant and helpful because it reminds us that we are part of a divinely initiated family and not an institution or club that we have joined. We are being called to a diverse and holy mission and not to a gathering of people who would get together for namesake. In and through worship, we draw near to God so we experience Him as the

One worthy to be worshipped. And as we worship, we recognize the unique and often mysterious presence of God. Worship trains our spiritual eyes to recognize the presence of God that was there prior to our arrival, and to recognize that same presence that goes before us throughout all life.

Several years after coming to faith in Jesus, my wife was working at Warner Brothers studios in California. Frequently, Christian friends would share how thankful they were that she was working there so she could "infiltrate the television industry for Jesus." Her usual response was that she felt no need to infiltrate the studio or storm the gates of the industry. On the other hand, she was well aware that the very

presence of Jesus always went before her each day. Her job was not to fight and "take back space" from which God had been removed. Instead, she was called to recognize, and respond to in faith, the movement of God that already filled the studios and impacted the people present.

God teaches us to have the right attitude of worship. His grace trains us to hear and respond to His voice so that we might then go into the world and give Him the glory.

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# THE PURSUING POWER OF GRACE

*by* SHANTI THOMAS

BUT WHEN THE KINDNESS AND LOVE OF  
GOD OUR SAVIOR APPEARED, HE SAVED US,  
NOT BECAUSE OF RIGHTEOUS THINGS WE  
HAD DONE, BUT BECAUSE OF HIS MERCY.

TITUS 3:4-5

**ALMOST THREE DECADES AGO**, I had not understood God's grace the way I recognize its *power* on my life now. The pursuing, transforming, enduring, yet mysterious and hovering presence of this unmerited favor of God is both capturing and captivating. In addition to the Word of God being the primary channel to a foundational understanding of God's grace and its mysterious workings, my familiarity with literary works has brought a level of erudite awareness about the workings of grace.

John Milton, the seventeenth century English Puritan poet, reconstructs the biblical Fall story in his epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667). A careful study of the work, arranged into 12 books, reveals Milton's emphasis of the triumph of God's goodness over evil and the role of God's prevenient grace in humanity's salvation through Jesus Christ. In the first 10 books, Milton dramatizes God's perfect creation and the events leading up to Adam and Eve's disobedience and fall. Book X ends with Adam and Eve confessing their sin, falling prostrate, and, "with tears watering the ground" (1101-2) in remorse, begging for forgiveness. Then, the beginning of Book XI traces the theme of prevenient grace:

Thus they, in lowliest plight, repentant stood  
Praying; for from the mercy-seat above  
Prevenient grace descending had removed  
The stony from their hearts, and made new flesh  
Regenerate grow instead;<sup>1</sup>

In essence, prevenient grace empowers Adam and Eve to be penitent about their sin as they are about to be banished from Paradise. In "The Theology of Freedom in *Paradise Lost*," Benjamin Myers writes, "The fact that Eve and Adam become penitent at all, after all that has taken place, bears witness to the intervention of the grace of God." Myers emphasizes that the concept of prevenient grace "is central to the theology of conversion in *Paradise Lost*"<sup>2</sup> (220-21). Prevenient grace bestows on Adam and Eve the *power* to be remorseful yet to accept God's plan of eternal salvation despite the earthly consequences of their disobedience.



Francis Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven" (1893) is an allegorical poem, a haunting work of genius that focuses on the poet's futile flight away from God's unrelenting pursuit to redeem him. Employing a daring metaphor, Thompson portrays God as a hound, but of heaven, whose grace never gives up on a wayward soul on the path of utter ruin. Divine grace follows the fugitive "down the arches of the years," "down the labyrinthine ways," and "in the mist of tears." At the end of that long chase, he hears "That Voice round [him] like a bursting sea":

... 'Rise, clasp My  
hand, and come!' ...  
'Ah, fondest,  
blindest, weakest,  
I am He Whom thou  
seekest!'<sup>3</sup>

After his mother's death and in his younger days, Thompson became addicted to opium and fell into a low life on the streets of London. Hungry and ill, he was on the verge of suicide when a prostitute befriended him, cared for him, and influenced him in writing poetry. Oddly enough, the graciousness of the prostitute ministered Thompson back to the path of transformation. In a 2007 sermon preached at Duke University chapel, the Rev. Sam Wells referenced Francis Thompson's poem and said, "There is no other word in the Christian vocabulary for the publication of that poem but providence, and there are no other words in the theological lexicon for the ministry of that prostitute but Holy Spirit."<sup>4</sup> Such encounters, although strange, poignantly and powerfully speak to the role of prevenient grace in God's work of redemption.

Likewise, Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* is a brilliant literary creation that has fascinated me with its theological undertones of grace. In a subtle yet bizarre and grotesque manner, Dickens portrays the *power* of grace to transform a miserly Scrooge on to love and good works.

Published around Christmas time in 1843, Dickens wrote the novel primarily to expose the social ills of the time, especially the greed of the money mongering upper class and the impoverished life of the working class of the post-Industrial English society. By placing his plot within the context of the Christmas season, Dickens purposed to revitalize the themes of love and charitable acts that the season epitomized. Nevertheless, Dickens's fictional narrative is also a touching parable of individual transformation in the *power* of prevenient grace.

Dickens creates Ebenezer Scrooge, an antithetical character, portraying him as a self-deluded, uncaring, and peevish banker who cannot be deterred by other people's troubles until three ghastly visitors encounter him later, on Christmas Eve. In fact, Scrooge's difficult and painful past has hardened him to be "a cold and solitary man." Dickens introduces Scrooge upfront:

Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self contained, and solitary as an oyster.

... The cold was inside him ... Nobody ever stopped him in the street to say, 'My dear Scrooge, how are you?' ... and even dogs ran away from him ... But what did Scrooge care? It was the very thing he liked."<sup>5</sup>

Scrooge rejects any Christmas pleasantries or charitable acts with a "Bah, Humbug!" – an expression of disapproval and contempt. He abuses Bob Cratchit, his hardworking and passive clerk, and has no respect or sympathy for his poor family nor his sickly son, Tiny Tim. Scrooge's interactions with Fred, his persistent and gracious-hearted nephew, demonstrate that Scrooge views Christmas as a sham and just another excuse for people to spend money. Yet year after year, Fred invites Scrooge to Christmas dinner, for he says, "I mean to give him the same chance every year, whether he likes it or not, for I pity him"<sup>6</sup> (Dickens 62). Scrooge turns down the men who come to collect charity, for it is not his business to interfere in the lives of others.

The plot takes a strange and ominous turn on that Christmas Eve when the ghost of Jacob Marley visits Scrooge in a dream in the form of three Spirits: The Spirit of Christmas Past, The Spirit of Christmas Present, and The Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come. When the story begins, Jacob Marley, Scrooge's old business partner and companion, also his literary double, is dead. Marley's wicked life on earth seems to have sent him to hell, but his ghost has come to remind its living business partner to escape a doomed fate, for it says: "I am here to-night to warn you, that you have yet a chance and hope of escaping my fate ... You will be haunted by Three Spirits" (24).

The first Spirit, that of Christmas Past, commanding and streaming with light, takes Scrooge to his bygone days—his happier and worst times, and his lost love, Belle, with her family. Not able to bear some of the scenes, Scrooge tries to put out the light emerging from the Spirit before it exits.

Without much delay, the second Spirit, that of Christmas Present, appears showing Scrooge scenes of Christmas celebration and gatherings all around, including Christmas at Bob's and Fred's, respectively. Scrooge has kept himself away from the joyous occasion all these years while living in his tightfistedness. However, by now, Scrooge seems to have become submissive and "was not the dogged Scrooge he had been" (48).

The third Spirit, that of Christmas Yet to Come, takes Scrooge to a funeral scene, where other businessmen discuss the dead man's money he left behind with no one to enjoy the belongings of the deceased. As the two travel, Scrooge foresees his own dreadful future making him "shudder, and feel very cold," and he says to the Spirit, "this is a fearful place. In leaving it, I shall not leave its lesson, trust me. Let us go!" (77). Continuing on the journey, the Spirit takes Scrooge by a neglected graveyard, and Scrooge gets a glimpse of his own tombstone with his name on it if he were to live in his old wretched ways. Falling on the ground, Scrooge begs: "Good Spirit, he pursued, 'Your nature intercedes for me, and pities me. Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life!'" (84). Henceforward, readers get to meet a Scrooge on the road to transformation and good works.

Understood from a Christian perspective, Scrooge is an everyman with varying degrees of wretchedness transformed by the power of grace. Not only so, as a spiritual parable, Bob, Tiny Tim, Fred, and the three Spirits are all symbolic representations of prevenient grace influencing Scrooge in his journey forward.

Adam and Eve's redemption, Thompson's transformation, Scrooge's turnaround, and each of our unique salvation initiations establish that God's administration of grace is impartial and is not dependent on one's social standing, wealth, or education, nor is it dependent on the enormity of a person's past sins. God is rich in mercy (Ephesians 2:4) toward anyone willing to come to Him at any stage of life and gives abundant grace to the humble (James 4:6), for grace is the redeeming element of God's love. Simultaneously, the ways people respond to the work of grace are contextual and a matter of choice, for only prevenient grace has the power to discern the ripeness of each person's heart toward salvation.

The deeper I reflect on God's immeasurable provision of grace, the more convincing are the words of the well-known hymn by William Rees:

Here is Love, vast as the ocean,  
Loving-kindness as the flood . . .  
Grace and love like  
mighty rivers  
Poured incessant from above.  
And Heav'n's peace  
and perfect justice  
Kissed a guilty world in love.<sup>7</sup>

The preceding grace of God encounters each of us at the crossroads of our lives and enables us to believe in Christ's

atoning sacrifice, thus redeeming us from the deep scars of those sinful human tendencies that might have shaped us (Ephesians 1:7). It equips our hearts with the power toward daily renewal and sanctification (Romans 12:1-2). And in the power of God's abundant grace, we, too, can say like the apostle Paul, "But by the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Corinthians 15:10).

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# CHRIST'S MISSION, OUR COMMISSION

In March 1972, my family moved from Fort Wayne, Indiana, to Merriam, Kansas. I had just turned 1 year old. My parents had had a rocky start in their marriage. For my mother, a new Christian, and my father, still running from God, our move to Kansas City was both a new start and a last chance. Three weeks from the day we moved in, we received a knock on the door.

Neighbors Mike and Cindy Couch had walked across the street!

Mike was a seminary student at Nazarene Theological Seminary and was in an evangelism class taught by Dr. Charles “Chic” Shaver. Dr. Shaver had given the class a homework assignment that required the students to knock on five neighbors’ doors and ask a five-question survey. The final question asked, “If you don’t have a church, would you visit our church?” On Sunday morning, April 16, 1972, my family visited a Church of the Nazarene for the first time.

At the close of that first Sunday morning service, my father walked to the front of the church, knelt at the altar to pray, and was changed forever. I was carried out of the church that morning by a brand-new dad and mom. I tear up at the words of Isaiah the prophet who wrote, “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” (Isaiah 52:7). Mike and Cindy represent those saints who bring good tidings! So much had led to my parents’ salvation that day. Christ, the Seeking Savior, had been showing His love for them in so many ways, wooing them to the heart of the Father. While they were still in their sin, Jesus was the very grace of God to them. We call this prevenient grace, the grace that goes before. They had not been seeking God. God had been seeking them!

John 20:21 reveals that Jesus was on a mission when He lived on this earth. Jesus said, “the Father has sent me.” Interestingly, the Greek tense of the verb “sent” carries the idea of a past event with continuing effect. Jesus is still very much on mission today. What is His mission? In Luke 19:10, Jesus said, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” He is still loving, still seeking, and still saving.

What is truly amazing is that Christ’s mission becomes our commission! The Father’s sending of Jesus is not the end of the story. John 20:21 continues, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” Christ followers are sent in the same way that Jesus is sent—loving, seeking, and proclaiming the good news! We are called to join Jesus in what He is doing. It is our co-mission! Imagine that for a moment. God’s grace is going out to this world, through the person of Jesus, to seek and save the lost. You and I are called to go proclaim and show what God has done and is doing! We are called to follow Jesus in His mission of making Christlike disciples in the nations.

**Scott Rainey** is global director of Sunday School and Discipleship Ministries International.

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