

Irresistible Grace

Is God's Grace Resistible?

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Does salvation depend upon God's grace or upon man's free will? Is it provided for all despite being accepted by only a few? Is grace supplied for everyone only to be rejected by most? Is God's desire to save frustrated by men and women who want nothing to do with Him?

These are important questions. Grasping such key matters helps to form our understanding of God's sovereign rule in the world. They also teach us about the state of man as a consequence of sin, the plan of salvation and the worth and effectiveness of Christ's atoning work on the cross. Going astray in our understanding of grace has huge implications for the public preaching of the gospel as well as for personal comfort and spiritual enjoyment of God's gifts and promises in Jesus Christ.

Yet many people claiming to follow Bible teaching do go seriously wrong on these points for the simple reason that they do not believe in irresistible grace. Put another way, many churches, ministries and personal testimonies are blighted by the notion that God's grace to men is resistible. They profess to believe in sovereign grace but act and preach as though grace finds its power not in the purpose of God but the will of man.

Is grace resistible?

Many people wish to argue that grace is resistible. They say that grace is resisted constantly by sinners. They say grace tries to find an entrance into a man's heart but man shuts the door; grace wants to bless but man wants none of it.

The problem with such woolly thinking is that we are talking about God's grace, the executive power of God's sovereign will. In truth, the question may be put, "Are God's decrees resistible?" Then the answer is clear – no more than God Himself is resistible (Isaiah 46:10,11; Daniel 4:35; Romans 9:19).

God does not try to save sinners or hope they will be saved. He does not offer salvation and wait to see who amongst the sin hardened children of men will find His offer sufficiently attractive to accept. Not at all! God saves sinners by the application of efficacious grace.

Take time to turn to the following verses of scripture and prove it for yourself: Deuteronomy 30:6; Isaiah 55:11; Ezekiel 36:26, 27; John 6:37; 6:39; 6:44, 45; Romans 8:29, 30. God chooses whom He will save and, having sent the Lord Jesus Christ to accomplish all that is necessary to secure their salvation and redeem those chosen people, He applies effective, irresistible grace to achieve His purpose by the power of the Holy Spirit. Salvation is a Triune work.

The language of grace

Consider the scriptural language of grace and see how the Holy Spirit would have us to understand the power of grace.

1. Scripture speaks of salvation as a new birth, 'Ye must be born again' (John 3:7). Natural birth is a process in which the newly born is completely passive. Physically we are conceived and born by the will and work of another. So spiritually, the new birth is not your will or work. It is a sovereign, irresistible act of God's grace.

2. Scripture speaks of salvation as a new creation. Creation is an act of God, and Jesus Christ has created all things for His own pleasure (Colossians 1:16; Revelation 4:11). Amongst the things He has created are saints from sinners who are created anew and who by the word of Christ are a new creation. Spiritually, the Lord Jesus has created us in Himself, for any man in Christ is a new creature (2 Corinthians 5:17). Thus the Holy Spirit would have us know that we can no more resist grace than Adam could resist God's breath of life in the garden (Genesis 2:7).

3. The Bible tells us about resurrection from the dead. Again the language of grace moves us beyond someone who is merely sick, deformed or incapacitated. It speaks of spiritual death and life giving grace that raises sinners from the grave. Ezekiel's vision in the valley of the dry bones and Christ raising people from the dead reinforce this picture of irresistible grace.

Hence, the Holy Spirit has carefully chosen the words birth, creation and resurrection to describe the effects of grace and demonstrate that grace accomplishes its purpose unaided and unhindered by man. See Ephesians 2:1-10.

Objections to irresistible grace

1. The opponents of irresistible grace say the doctrine teaches that a man is saved against his will. This is quite contrary to the truth. No one is ever saved against their will. On the contrary, every sinner whom God will save craves peace with God. God ensures this by allowing the sinner to see the evil state of his heart and by sparking within the sinner a desire for forgiveness. The guilty one longs for freedom from condemnation, cleansing in Christ and fellowship with the Holy Spirit. He longs to be

converted.

How does this longing come about? God brings the spiritually dead sinner to spiritual life (Ephesians 2:5). The quickened sinner, becoming sensitive to his lost state, desires forgiveness and seeks the grace of God in Christ and embraces his Saviour willingly. He is a lost sheep, a prodigal son, a storm tossed ship in a wild sea. Ask any converted believer if they are sorry to be saved and you will soon discover they are not redeemed against their will.

2. Some argue that irresistible grace makes preaching the gospel redundant. If God is going to save He will simply renew, recreate or resurrect the sinner without the need for a preacher, or a sermon, or an evident means of grace. Again, this is quite contrary to scripture. The revealed will of God is to save His people by means and that means is the preaching of the gospel. As the apostle shows, 'faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God' (Romans 10:17).

3. Irresistible grace opposes the freewill of man. With this we agree, but it is not a valid objection. We need to define freewill. Because man is a fallen creature his will is enslaved to sin and subject to Satan. It cannot be described in any true sense as free but is predisposed to the pursuit of selfish and sinful ends.

Nevertheless, as has been shown above, salvation is a gift from God, unconditionally bestowed at God's discretion, according to His elective purpose and at the time of His choosing. The acquiescence of man is neither required nor sought. God saves sinners by implanting grace in their soul, making them willing in the day of His power and gathering them in by the preaching of the gospel.

Subtle attacks on irresistible grace

Irresistible grace is attacked in the home of a friend by those who preach common grace as the sincere but ineffectual desire of God to save all sinners. By making the grace of God general and resistible, such teachers tear down and belittle the sovereignty of God despite all their protests to the contrary. Building gospel preaching on a foundation of common grace undermines the unity of the Godhead making the saving will of the Father to be at odds with the atoning work of the Son and the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

Another attack on irresistible grace comes from presenting the gospel as a universal offer of forgiveness to be accepted or rejected by man. This teaching, while accepting that Christ's sacrifice is efficient only for some, presents it as sufficient for all. Consequently, the gospel is devalued and presented as though it is designed for the salvation of all; not as the deliberate means of gathering in the elect.

The free offer of the gospel implicitly declares that God does not achieve what He wills; that the gospel does not accomplish whereto it is sent, and grace is not strong enough to save.

God's prophets know better. 'So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it' (Isaiah 55:11).

Wherever common grace is held and taught, and a free offer of salvation is preached, the result will be the diluting of sovereign grace and an unhealthy emphasis upon the will of man.

Conclusion

Irresistible grace is a central pillar of God's saving purpose. Despite the debilitating presence of sin in man not one of the elect whom God has chosen to salvation and redeemed by the blood of Christ will fail to be eternally saved. God accomplishes this great salvation by the irresistible application of sovereign grace. In so doing the three persons of the Godhead work in perfect harmony to accomplish all the eternal purpose of the One True God.

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