

West Valley Church
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What We Believe, and Why it Matters
Part Five: Prevenient Grace
COTN Article of Faith 7

In the Advent season of 2002, a teenage boy, along with his mom, step-dad, brother and two sisters went to a Christmas play at the church located just around the corner from their home. While the Christmas play provided entertainment, they were really going because the youngest sister in the family was in the play, as she attended this church's preschool. Being a good first born and older brother, this teenage boy, who you might know as Daniel Manning, went along to support his little sister.

After the play, Dan's mom chatted it up with the pastor of the church, and after that night, decided to start attending the church with her family. At this time, the pastor's son had also recently graduated from Olivet Nazarene University and eventually became a math tutor for Dan as well as a friend and mentor.

As the summer of 2003 approached, Dan's mom learned the church was going on a mission trip to Samoa to help build a church, and because she wanted Dan to have better influences in his life, she signed him up. Dan recalls she wanted him to have better influences, because he would cause problems at home since he didn't think he had a purpose in life.

Once summer came, Dan, and members from his church, including the pastor's son, flew to Samoa. Since Dan didn't have any building skills, his task was to go to the fields surrounding the field sight and pick up the biggest rocks he could carry to help fill the foundation. He would bring the rocks to a group of ladies who would tell him where to put them, and each time he brought them rocks, these ladies would tell him how he was a blessing, how his team was a blessing and how blessed they were that he and his church would come from America to help them build their church.

Dan felt guilty when these ladies told him he was a blessing, because he wasn't a Christian like the rest of his team, and he didn't understand how he could be a blessing since he wasn't a Christian. But over the three weeks he was there

working with these women, talking with them, hearing their stories and contributing his own stories, Dan found the purpose he was looking for in life. Dan sensed God in those conversations he was having with those women that his purpose in life was to serve God, that he was able to have a relationship with God and that he could be a Christian, as Dan previously believed Jesus and God were just for those who were already at the church. What Dan experienced on this trip is something that we affirm as an Article of Faith, a statement of belief, which is called *Prevenient Grace*.

So far in our sermon series, we have been going over what we Nazarene's believe, and why it actually matters. Up to this point we've learned we believe in the Triune God, consisting of the Father, Son and Spirit; the Holy Scriptures; Sin—original, personal and systemic; and the Atonement, that through Christ, we are able to be “at-one-ment” with God, as Christ died on the cross for our sins and died to the power of sin, once and for all, enabling us, through faith and acceptance of Christ's work for us on the cross, to be forgiven and be reconciled, or “at-one-ment,” with God. Today, we're looking at how this is all made possible in the first place—and the answer is *Prevenient Grace*.

According to *The Manual*, we believe prevenient grace is

The grace of God through Jesus Christ freely bestowed upon all people, enabling all who will to turn from sin to righteousness, believe on Jesus Christ for pardon and cleansing from sin, and follow good works pleasing and acceptable in His sight. We also believe that the human race's creation in Godlikeness included the ability to choose between right and wrong, and that thus human beings were made morally responsible; that through the fall of Adam they became depraved so that they cannot now turn and prepare themselves by their own natural strength and works to faith and calling upon God.¹

In other words, prevenient grace is the grace that comes before; it is grace that comes before we are Christians; it is grace that came before Dan; it is grace that comes **before us** as sinners. It is God reaching out to us, calling us back to God's self and enabling us to turn from sin to righteousness. One of

¹ Church of the Nazarene, “Articles of Faith,” *Manual 2017-2021*, accessed October 12, 2018, <http://2017.manual.nazarene.org/section/articles-of-faith>.

our great theologians, John Wesley, calls it “preventing grace,” as it prevents us from desiring our own desires and moves us to desire the will of God. Wesley notes in one of his sermons that preventing grace is “God, that of his good pleasure, worketh in us to will and to do;”² God breathes into us every good desire and brings every good desire to good effect.”³

Why does God do this? Why does God work in us, persistently calling out to us and working in us so that we might finally recognize God and turn to God? Jesus confesses in John 3:16...

“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.”

What God desires is for us all to be redeemed and reconciled back to God’s self. God desires, God wills, that each and every one of us will come to know Him, accept His grace and forgiveness and have eternal life. Death is contrary to God; death is of the enemy. It is not God’s desire that any should perish. God wants to redeem and restore creation.

God’s love is the basis of this desire and is the basis of prevenient grace. God loves us so much that God comes to us while we are still sinners and offers us grace and forgiveness. What amazing love; what amazing grace; but we have to respond. We have to accept this grace, this *enabling* grace, this prevenient grace.

God’s prevenient grace appears all throughout Scripture. It does so, because the Scriptures tell of the story of God, of the mission of God to redeem and restore creation and bring it to fruition. God won’t stop until that happens. God is on mission, and God’s love fuels this mission. So, when we look to Scripture, which reveals in part who God is, we can’t help but see God’s prevenient grace fueled by God’s love all throughout

One book of the Bible that testifies to God’s prevenient grace is Ephesians. In Ephesians, Paul, or one of Paul’s disciples, depending on which authorship

² John Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” in *John Wesley’s Theology: A Collection from His Works*, ed. Robert W. Burtner and Robert E. Chiles (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 147.

³ Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” 148.

argument you side with—today we'll side with Paul—wrote about God's drama of salvation and how the Ephesians were incorporated into God's drama of salvation.⁴ Paul then continues to encourage the Ephesians to walk in the way of the Lord as they not only have been incorporated into God's drama of salvation, or God's mission, but are now participants with God in mission.⁵

But what is pivotal in this book, and in the drama of salvation, is how God makes it possible for the Ephesians and us today to be incorporated into the drama of salvation and take part in it with God. The only way it is possible is through God's prevenient grace, which we will explore in greater depth as we look to Ephesians chapter 2, verses 1-10.

At this time, I would invite you to open the Bible, or the Bible App, and go to Ephesians chapter 2, verses 1-10, to the text we will be exploring this morning. And to honor the Word of God as I read it, I invite you to stand. Hear the Word of God:

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. 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, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For **we are what he has made us**, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

⁴ Stephen Fowl, *Ephesians: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

The Word of God for the people of God.

Prayer

I don't know about you, but the first three verses were hard to speak and to hear. Those verses contain some pretty heavy stuff. In these three verses, Paul recalls how the Ephesians used to live, which consisted of living in the way of sin and death. Declaring they were dead would have signaled to the Ephesians that they were devoid of God presently and would be eternally; they were dead spiritually and would be physically, as death was and is not part of God's purpose in creation but was and is of the enemy.⁶

Therefore, as Paul talks about their death in these three verses, it is apparent the Ephesians lived apart from God. Instead of walking in the way of the Lord, they walked in the way of the world, which was the same "world that could not abide the presence of the obedient Son of God and nailed him to a cross."⁷ Thus, as they lived in the way of the world, they followed the "ruler of the air," the devil, and lived according to the disobedient spirit, ironically obeying the disobedient spirit; and they lived according to the passions and desires of the flesh, which made them children of wrath.

While those of us who are Christian know living contrary to God is not the way to live, and may shake our heads or sigh deep sighs when we read Scripture of people not following the way, like when we read through the book of Judges hitting our hand against our forehead as we read of the Israelites falling into the cycle of sin, repentance, deliverance; sin, repentance, deliverance; sin, repentance, deliverance. We find ourselves wanting to give them a little pep talk like, "Get it together Israel! Follow God!" But how do we know there is a better way to live? How do we know that is not the way to live? We must remember that we too were one of those people. We too were an Israelite. We too once lived contrary to God.

Several weeks ago, Pastor Mike preached on the Article of Faith on Sin. He pointed out there is original sin (an inherited propensity to sin which we

⁶ Ibid., 68.

⁷ Ibid., 69.

inherited from our first parents—Adam and Eve—but we are not held accountable to it until we are old enough to accept or reject Christ’s work for us on the cross, which paid the price for this original sin); there is personal sin (when we knowingly transgress a known law of God); and there is systemic sin (sin that affects everyone and is everywhere).

Unfortunately, our inclination is to sin, and the only way sin has ever been overcome has been through Christ. Sin has a strong hold on this world that we are incapable of overcoming ourselves. That is why Paul writes here in Ephesians that we were dead through our transgressions and sins, through following the ruler of the power of the air which is Satan. John Wesley even acknowledged that “all men are, by nature, not only sick, but “dead in trespasses and in sins,” it is not possible for them to do anything well till God raises them from the dead. [Truly], it was impossible for Lazarus to come forth, till the Lord had given him life.”⁸

Since it is impossible for us to save ourselves, to be able to discern what is good and what is bad, what the difference is between walking in the way of the Lord and walking in the way of Satan, knowing why it is so bad that the Israelites keep falling into cyclical pattern of sin, there had to be a moment when God stirred in our hearts, prompting us to do good, to will to do good. There had to be something that sparked us to learn more, to know more about God; there had to be something that gave us a desire to go to our little sister’s Christmas play; there had to be something that gave us the courage to walk into a church or perhaps walk into this church today and be a part of this Body of Christ. Even if we didn’t know it at the time, those stirrings, those urgings, was God’s prevenient grace.

In Dan’s testimony I mentioned earlier, there were moments in Dan’s life when God was at work, whether Dan or anyone else knew it. God continued to work in his life, drawing Dan closer to Himself, enlightening Dan through Christ and convicting Dan through the Spirit that there is purpose in life and that God and Jesus are for everyone, as Dan slowly began to realize God was working in him even though he was not a Christian. This realization of God’s prevenient grace is what prompted Dan to journey to the altar later that night and commit his life to following Jesus. Thanks be to God.

⁸ Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” 148.

Looking back at our text, Paul's response to the Ephesians' life of sin and death, living as children of wrath, is, "But God..." But God.

If you're a parent, you probably hear the word "but" often, and perhaps even *too* often. I would know, because I was one of those kids who always had a response to something my parents had said or wanted me to do. My three common responses were, "But I don't want to," "But why?" or "But it wasn't me!" Perhaps you teens can relate. In any case, the "but" warned my parents that I was about to make a rebuttal.

When we get to verse four, Paul is essentially doing the same. Paul rebuts what he just said about the Ephesian's being dead as Paul says, "But God!" I can only imagine Paul is actually saying, "But Ephesians, but church, listen to this!" "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved."

What an affirmation and what a relief. Here Paul describes the transition from being dead in sin to being alive in Christ. No longer are we children of wrath, dead in our trespasses; we are alive in Christ and have become children of God. A reversal of verses 1-3 has occurred. What we once were, we are now no longer, and the basis of this transition lies upon God's grace, God's mercy, that is fueled by God's love.

Verse five also reminds us that prevenient grace is not something we can earn. Paul writes that when we were dead in our trespasses, God made us alive together with Christ. What this means is that while we were apart from God, alienated from God, God was at work. There was nothing we humans could do while we were dead that could make us alive with Christ. Only Christ has conquered death, so the only way we can come back to life is if we are united with Christ, made alive together with Christ, and that is God's gracious doing.

Remember what Jesus confesses in John 3:16?

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

This love of God is God's driving force of God's prevenient grace, preventing us from desiring our current way of life, which leads to death, and enabling us to respond to the grace that has been given and accept Christ's work for us on

the cross that redeems and reconciles us back to God. Therefore, it is fitting for Paul to end this verse affirming, “by grace you have been saved.”

But sometimes, this is something we struggle to believe, so as verses 6 and 7 move on to talk about what it means to be made alive with Christ, verse 8 reverts back to the discussion of God’s grace. Paul says:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

It is almost as if Paul thinks we need to hear this again to be reminded, to let it sink in, that we can do nothing to save ourselves. This second mention of God’s grace drives home the point to the Ephesians, and to us, that God’s grace is not just a nice thought; it is real, it happens, and it is by grace we are saved.

Two months ago, Dan and I became parents to an 8-week-old corgi puppy who we adore and love. His name is “Dug.” Although I’d like to say we named him after our fearless bus driver Doug Hyatt, that’s really not the case, and if you want to know the real reason behind his name, go ask Dan.

Anyways, before we got Dug, there were several things we had to do to get him, like apply for a dog license, get him a kennel, food, toys, food bowls and water bowls, and send in an application to our landlord.

I was really excited for Dug, and I was falling more and more in love with him each day that led up to the day my sister handed him over to us. But one day, I received news from our landlord that we could not have a dog in our duplex because our carpet was fairly new. I was devastated. I had this gut-wrenching feeling and hole in my heart. I felt like I had lost something I loved, and I would not take no for an answer. I pleaded with our landlord to let us have him, making a case that nowhere does it say we can’t have a dog because of carpet. For the next 12 hours, I kept checking my phone and e-mail, waiting for an answer. That whole time in wait felt like an eternity.

Perhaps you’ve experienced something similar. Perhaps you’ve lost something or someone you loved or held very dear to you. That feeling you get that something or someone you loved is never coming back is hard. We grieve for that thing or that person, and if we could change things, we would do anything we could to get that thing or that person back. The same is true of God. God loves us so much that God is willing to do anything to get us back. God is

persistent, always calling us back to himself, not willing that any should perish. Perhaps now you can understand why God offers us prevenient grace, always working to get us back, because wouldn't you do the same?

Now, not only does verse 8 affirm God's prevenient grace, making us really acknowledge it, encouraging us to truly believe it, but it also clears up any notion that this grace automatically makes us alive with Christ without us responding to it, as Paul writes, by grace you have been saved *through faith*, acknowledging there is a "trust or reliance believers put in God to bring about their salvation."⁹ But, we must reckon that faith is also a gift based on prevenient grace. We don't come to faith on our own as verse nine affirms; we come to faith only as God comes before us, working within us, stirring our hearts, revealing himself to us through different ways, including, but not limited to music, nature, art, interactions with other Christians, other religions, etc. The ways are endless. Therefore, our salvation, our new life in Christ, our ability to be reconciled back to God, to turn from sin to righteousness, is only possible based on God's prevenient grace, fueled by God's love. There is nothing we can do to earn it; it is a gift, but we must respond.

Speaking of gifts, what's coming up in about two months? Yep, Christmas will be here before we know it. Stores are already gearing up for Christmas; it seems like they're always two months ahead of us as they start selling the coveted pumpkin spice lattes in August and the eggnog lattes in October. I was very disappointed when I went to my favorite coffee shop in town, excited to try their pumpkin pie latte, but was informed their only special was an eggnog latte!

With Christmas coming up, we'll start seeing advertisements for black Friday (or is it black Thursday now?), and we'll start seeing prices slash. Some items may even be nearly free if there's a good deal. But why is it we can rush out and fight over these "almost free" gifts but struggle to accept this free gift of prevenient grace, the gift of God's mercy, forgiveness and love that enables us to turn from sin to righteousness and live a new life in Christ? A gift that comes to us without us putting it on a wish list, but comes to us while we are sinners deserving a bag of coal.

⁹ Fowl, 78.

Perhaps you just need to hear that; to know you don't have to do anything to be offered God's prevenient grace. In actuality, there's nothing you can do. Everything is dependent upon God. John 1:3 says:

“All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”

We can't transition from death to life without Christ. Christ is the source of life.

Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, what are you waiting for? If you sense an urging, a stirring in your heart, that is God's prevenient grace working in you. Acknowledge it and accept it. There's no right time to accept this grace. Now is the time. You don't have to wait until you feel ready or feel like you deserve it; you will never be ready or worthy enough. Paul's message of Ephesians 2:8-10 makes it clear that only when you accept God's grace, God's gift, will you be able to be transformed into Christlikeness, into what “he has made us — created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

In other words, you will only be able to start living a life worthy and righteous to God when you accept God's grace, accept what Christ has done for you on the cross, and live united with Christ. When we are united with Christ, Christ lives in us and empowers us; the power of sin that once lived in our hearts is replaced by the power of Christ that overcame the power of sin. Therefore, waiting until you feel worthy or deserving is futile. God knows we can't come to this on our own, so God graciously comes before us, enabling us to respond and to desire his will and good works.

For those of you who have acknowledged and accepted God's prevenient grace, what do you do with it? You may even be wondering how this affects you. What we can do is recognize God's prevenient grace at work within other people, just as the Samoan ladies recognized God's grace and blessings through Dan. We can participate in God's mission of redeeming and reconciling all of creation, of pointing people to Christ, of bearing witness to Christ and to God's grace. God's prevenient grace is without limits, without boundaries. It works in different contexts and in different settings, but it always consists of the drawing of the Father, the enlightening of the Son and

the conviction of the Spirit that draws him/her to repentance and regeneration, moving them to new creation in the image of Christ.¹⁰

How God draws, enlightens and convicts is different. I opened with Dan's testimony of God's prevenient grace. That whole journey consisted of God working in Dan through the preschool, through the church, through the Christmas play, through Dan's mom, through the pastor, through the pastor's son, and through the ladies he worked with in Samoa. What we can do is point out God's prevenient grace, God's activity in others, bear witness to Christ, and provide opportunities to share the grace and love of God to strangers, to friends and to family members.

Events we do here at West Valley Church and that you participate in, like the children's Christmas musical, the Morning of Music, Upward Soccer, Homework Club, Wednesday Night Dinner, Trunk or Treat, Breakfast with Santa, and First Friday Coffees, are all avenues God is working through whether we know it or not. God is without limits and so are the ways he works in us. We don't get to decide or tell God how to work. We must remember the prevenient grace bestowed on us, and remember it is by grace that we are saved and enabled to participate in mission with God, united and made alive together in Christ Jesus. Thanks be to God.

Let's pray.

¹⁰ *Global Wesleyan Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Al Truesdale (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2013), 430; Al Truesdale and Keri Mitchell, *With Cords of Love: A Wesleyan Response to Religious Pluralism* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2006), 145.