

The Canons of Dort: Irresistible Grace

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Ephesians 2:1-10

There are some people in this world who, when you hear their names, you instantly think of a character trait. So if I say Albert Einstein, you think, intelligence, genius. If I say Abraham Lincoln, you think honesty, character. If I say Usain Bolt, you think speed. If I say Mother Theresa, you think Christian service. If I say Martin Luther King Junior you think Civil Rights, justice. These people live their lives with such focus and passion that their passion becomes their brand. You say their name and that character trait comes to mind.

I bring this up because of verse 7 of our passage. Verse 7 has an interesting turn of phrase. Paul begins Ephesians 2 by telling us we're dead. You were all dead in the transgressions and sins. But then Paul announces that God who is rich in mercy, saved us. By his grace, he raised us from our dead state and lifted us up into the heavenly realms with Jesus. Why did God do this?

Verse 7 has this answer, "*in order that in the coming ages he may show the incomparable riches of his grace.*" In other words, God did this so that in the years to come, when people think of him, they might think of his amazing grace. In the ages to come, when people think of him, he wants them to say, "O Yeah the God who sent Jesus, He's a God of grace." God wants grace to be central part of his brand. When people think of our God they ought to think of Grace.

If you think that's overstating things, check out Ephesians 1:6. It expresses exactly the same idea! God has saved us in Jesus and blessed us with every Spiritual blessing, "*to the praise of his glorious grace.*" God worked salvation to the praise of his glorious grace, so that his name would be totally associated with grace. Grace is central to God's brand.

Philip Yancey tells a story about C.S. Lewis. During a British conference on comparative religions, experts were arguing about what made Christianity unique. Was there anything in Christianity that set it apart from other religions? Most religions have moral codes, some religions have stories of incarnation, some religions have resurrection stories, what, if anything, was unique about Christianity? Lewis walked into the room, he heard what they were talking about and he said, "I'll tell you what's unique about Christianity! It's grace." After a lot more discussion the others agreed. The grace of God poured out on us in Jesus Christ is something unique. Something different. It's this beautiful thing that God puts at the center of his story.

Which makes it a quality that is meant to be at the center of his people. We are called to magnify God's name and bring him glory. He is glorified when his character lives in us. God is glorified when people look at the church and think, "*Oh yeah, the church, the Jesus people, those people are really into grace.*"

What are we talking about when we talk about grace? What exactly is this character that is central to God's identity? We Christians use the word so much, it's easy to assume we all understand it, but let's try to define biblical grace. A traditional definition for grace is unmerited favor; it's kindness freely given to someone who hasn't earned it, with no expectation of return. That's OK. But we can do better.

Suppose at work one day I say to Bob, "Hey Bob, I'm going to The Taco Shop to buy some tacos for lunch, do you want anything? And Bob says, "Sure." So I go and buy some tacos for me and Bob, but when I get back to work, I'm feeling generous so I say, "Hey Bob! Keep your money! These tacos are on me. My treat!" Is that grace? It's unmerited favor. Bob didn't do anything to earn those tacos, and I give the gift freely with no expectation of return, but is it grace?

I don't think so, at least it's not the kind of grace that God reveals in Jesus. Biblical grace is kindness given in the face of hurt. It's not just that the person who receives your kindness hasn't earned it; it's that they deserve the opposite. Grace is kindness and favor given in a conflicted situation to someone who deserves the opposite of kindness from you. So my buying tacos for Bob is a picture of kindness, not grace.

A picture of grace is the food the father gives his son in the parable of the prodigal son. When the father kills the fatted calf and throws a party for his wayward son, it is grace. He's not just showing kindness; he's showing kindness to the son who broke his heart. Grace is kindness given in the face of brokenness, it's kindness given to someone who has hurt you. When you show grace you do kindness, but you also absorb

undeserved hurt. When you show grace you both give something good, and you absorb something bad. That's the grace we see on the cross, right? Jesus absorbs our sin and our hurt, and he gives us forgiveness, he gives us life, he gives us a feast. (without absorption you get cheap grace). When Paul says that in the coming ages God wants to show the incomparable riches of his grace, that's the kind of grace Paul is talking about. "*Oh you're a Christian. I've heard about your God. He's all about grace.*"

We've talked about what grace is and how it is central to God's character and how it should be central to the character of his people. Using Ephesians 2 and the Canons, I'd like to spend the rest of the sermon talking about how grace operates in our lives. And there are two things I'd like to say about that.

First, Grace is the cause of our salvation. Ephesians 2 makes that clear, and, so do the Canons of Dort. In making this point they are specifically coming against the Arminian view. What's the difference between the two ways of thinking about salvation? Well, let's have a little mid-sermon quiz. I will give you an analogy of our salvation in Jesus and you tell me if this is what the canons teach about the Bible.

Being dead in your sin is like being stuck in a deep hole, a desperately deep hole from which you cannot possibly escape. On your own you cannot climb out. You are down in the muck, and you need a rescue. God saves you from that hole. He does it like this. You are down at the bottom of the hole and a ladder is sent down to you. Christ is the ladder. At Bethlehem, he comes down into the muck with us. By his death, resurrection and ascension he creates a way out! He becomes a ladder that goes from the muck and all the way up to the heights of heaven. We see that ladder, we grab hold of it, and we joyfully climb out of the depths and into the light. Jesus has saved us.

Is that the biblical account of salvation as interpreted by the Canons of Dort? No. No it isn't. That is an Arminian position. Because it still depends on your choice. You have to grab the ladder. The Canons say something different and so does Ephesians 2. What's the image that Ephesians uses for us when we are lost in sin? It's used twice, once in verse 1 and verse 5. Paul says we are dead. Dead in our transgressions. Dead people can't choose. When you are dead, you can't grab the ladder and you can't climb. You need someone to raise you up before you have the sense to start climbing. In our salvation the grace of Jesus doesn't just give us the ladder, the grace of Jesus makes us alive in Christ. It wakes us up. Grace makes us able to grab the ladder. Grace gives us the ability to climb.

Read it carefully and you see that's what Ephesians 2:9 says. The verse starts out: "You have been saved by grace through faith." If Paul stopped there, you could imagine an Arminian version of salvation. Grace is the saving power of God. Grace is the ladder coming down. Faith is use receiving the saving power of God. Choosing it. Grabbing the ladder and climbing out. But what does the next clause say? "And this is not from yourselves, it is a gift of God." When Paul writes 'this', what is he referring to? Sorry to get grammatical on you, but sometimes grammar is important. What is the antecedent of 'this'? What does 'this' modify? What is 'this.' It's the grace and the faith. You have been saved by grace, through faith, and 'this' is not from yourselves. Both the grace and the faith are from God. Both the gift of Jesus (the ladder), and our ability to take hold of the ladder are a gift of God. None of this has anything to do with us. As the Canons say, "It is an entirely supernatural work."

Grace causes our salvation. It's all his work. And that's good. Think about yourself. Think about your weaknesses and all the times you've messed up. Then ask yourself: Do you want your salvation to depend on you? Given the choice, would you want some part of your eternal future to depend on your skill, your faithfulness, your goodness OR would you rather leave it all to God's grace and God's power. I would choose God's grace every time. How about you?

So grace causes our salvation. But grace also continues our salvation. It's not simply that Grace saves you in the beginning and now that you're not dead anymore, it's up to you to follow Jesus. No, even after you belong to Jesus, grace is the main power in your life. You continue to be completely dependent on grace. Verse 10 reminds us of that: for "*we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do Good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.*" God has laid out a gracious path, God's grace has prepared a way for us and grace guides us on the journey. That's the biblical pattern.

Hebrews 12: "Run the race marked out for you, keeping your eyes on Jesus who is the author AND perfecter of your faith." He doesn't just start you down the road, his grace powers the whole trip. Philippians 2:

“Work out your salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works in you to will and to do.” You’re working out this salvation, but it is God power that hems you in behind and before.

John Newton understood this. When he wrote amazing Grace, he was thinking of this theology. I know you don’t think of Amazing Grace as a theological song, or a song that has doctrine in it, but it does. “Twas Grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved. How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.” Newton knows that grace is the cause of his salvation. “Tis grace that brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home.” Newton knows that grace is continues to lead him along the path, that every day his life begins and ends in the grace of his Lord. As you go through your life, God’s grace is all around you, absorbing fear and pain, giving love. Leading you home.

This is true whether you realize it or not. And sometimes in the middle of our dangers, toils and snares, we have a hard time sensing that grace. It’s often not until the end that we realize Grace has been carrying us.

In 1995, I was there when my mentor, John Timmer, preached his farewell sermon at Woodlawn CRC. John was not a preacher who talked about himself and his stories, but in that sermon he did. John reflected on his 40 years in ministry, and all the work and all the struggles he had along the way. John reflected especially how he started his ministry as a missionary in Japan, and how hard that was! Learning the language was especially difficult for him. ‘The Japanese language was like an invincible dragon for me,’ he said. And of course he didn’t just have to learn to speak the language, he had to preach in it!! This led to much agony of Spirit. Often after preaching in Japanese he would say to himself, “*Another klinker! Another klinker that dropped from the pulpit like a wingless bird and hit the floor with a thud. Another sermonic disaster.*” But then sometimes someone would come to him and tell him, “your sermon touched me today pastor!” Or someone would say “I think I might be ready to be baptized now,” and John would find himself amazed. Amazed at the grace of God. Because he knew this wasn’t him. This HAD to be God’s grace.

Looking back on that moment and then looking back on the whole sweep of his ministry, over his 40 years of writing and visiting and reading and preaching, his reaction was: “*It is not me, I am not the author of the life, I am not the one who deserves applause, my life is a story of God’s unfailing grace.*” In that farewell sermon, John got to the end of his ministry and there was one thing he wanted to tell people and it’s the same thing Paul wants to tell people and it’s the same thing the canons want to tell us too. “*It’s all grace people. It’s all grace. “You have been saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.”*”

As you face that critical choice at work, God’s grace is all around you. As you go into that hard conversation with your friend, God’s grace is all around you. As you face the overwhelming work of caring for your aging parent, God’s grace is all around you. As you try to navigate the doubts and fears of adolescence, God’s grace is all around you. You are his handiwork, God is the craftsman, grace is his tool. Grace that’s brought you safe thus far, and grace will lead you home.

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