

# IRRESISTIBLE GRACE

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Most lessons begin with a definition of terms to be used in the discussion. However, the expression we are to study, “irresistible grace”, has to be misunderstood to be understood! Grace is favor, and the Bible makes this definition apparent. Consider the first appearance of the word “grace” in the Bible. “But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD” (Gen. 6:8). The word “grace” can be simply replaced with “favor” and the verse retains its meaning. However, in the expression before us, the word “grace” does not have this meaning at all. Instead, Calvinists treat grace as “the quickening power of God's Spirit will”.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, Calvinists’ use the term “irresistible grace” to refer to the sovereign work of God to overcome the rebellion of the individual’s heart and bring him to Christ so that he can be saved.<sup>2</sup> In this view, grace acts on the individual as a force. However, please notice that in the Bible, an individual finds grace as opposed to grace acting on the individual. In fact, the Bible student has to read from Genesis all the way to the book of Ezra before he can see the word “grace” not preceded by the word “found” or “find”! For the purpose of this lesson, I will refer to grace in both senses as we compare the two views.

## History of the Concept

The concept of irresistible grace finds its most obvious roots in the work of John Calvin. Calvin was born to a lawyer in 1509. In 1536, Calvin published the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* which explained his religious ideas.<sup>3</sup> Calvin’s ideas were based on two principles: his interpretation of God’s supreme power and his view of human nature. In *Institutes*, Calvin states:

And truly God claims omnipotence to himself, and would have us to acknowledge it, - not the vain, indolent, slumbering omnipotence which sophists feign, but vigilant, efficacious, energetic, and ever active, ... governing heaven and earth by his providence, he so overrules all things that nothing happens without his counsel. (1.16.3)<sup>4</sup>

Concerning the free will of man, Calvin states:

In this upright state, man possessed freedom of will, by which, if he chose, he was able to obtain eternal life. ...

Adam, therefore, might have stood if he chose, since it was only by his own will that he fell ... (1.15.8)<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, Calvin writes concerning the results of Adam’s sin:

After the heavenly image in man was effaced, he [Adam, bjw] not only was himself punished by a withdrawal of the ornaments in which he had been arrayed, viz., wisdom, virtue, justice, truth, and holiness, and by the substitution in their place of those dire pests, blindness, impotence, vanity, impurity, and unrighteousness, but he involved his posterity also, and plunged them in the same wretchedness. (2.1.5)<sup>4</sup>

Calvin’s false view of man’s moral nature forced him to his view of grace. If man is incapable of wisdom and holiness, then God’s will for man could not be achieved without

external aid. Calvin concluded that this aid would necessarily come from God who alone had the ability to hold sway over man's will.

### **Arguments From Calvinism**

It should be understood that Calvinism is mostly self-consistent. Assuming one of the principles of Calvinism to be true forces a rational person to arrive at the rest. Irresistible grace is no exception. Above, this was shown using the false principle of man's inherent depravity.

Consider now the Calvinistic principle of Unconditional Election. Calvin explains election, saying:

Although it is now sufficiently plain that God by his secret counsel chooses whom he will while he rejects others, his gratuitous election has only been partially explained until we come to the case of single individuals, to whom God not only offers salvation, but so assigns it, that the certainty of the result remains not dubious or suspended. (3.21.7)<sup>4</sup>

Why does Calvin consider an individual's election entirely certain? Calvin is certain that once God makes a decision it will come to pass. However, Calvin also believes that man is incapable of being holy, so God must directly provide the means for man's salvation. God must provide an overwhelming force to subjugate man's depraved nature. Calvin calls this overwhelming force "irresistible grace". Since Calvin claims that God's elect must be saved without fail, he must also claim that once an individual is a Christian, he must remain so. Calvin's saint must persevere despite his corrupt nature, requiring still more "irresistible grace" to keep the saint in holiness by divine force.

Clearly, the major tenets of Calvinism are self consistent, but this does not imply that any one of them is true! The Bible does not teach any of the Calvin's principles, and as one of the principles fail, the whole system topples.

### **Arguments From Scripture**

More important for our consideration are the arguments that Calvinists make from Scripture concerning irresistible grace. The most common error of the Calvinist is the misinterpretation of metaphors and analogies. For example, Christ states, "*The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit*" (John 3:8). The text here contains a comparison implied by the word "so". The Calvinist assumes that the word "wind", normally translated "spirit" (upper or lower case), refers to the literal wind. He then further assumes what Christ intended to teach with this analogy. One Calvinist states it as follows:

"Therefore, as the wind is sovereign and irresistible in its course (it *bloweth where it listeth*), so likewise is the Holy Spirit in His work of the new birth. He undertakes the spiritual quickening when and where He pleases, and His efforts never prove abortive. Further observe that there are no exceptions to the rule of John 3:8, *for so is every one that is born of the Spirit*. Therefore, if it can be shown that some are quickened under the power of irresistible grace,

then it must be concluded that all are quickened under that same power.”<sup>1</sup>

That would be fine if the reader of any text got to choose the meaning of figures and comparisons within the text, but such is never the case! For example, when the Bible uses the metaphor “*God is light*” (1 John 1:5), may I assume that since the light in my living room may be controlled with the flick of a finger, that the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth may be controlled by my whim?! This interpretation illustrates an important point: a figure of speech, analogy, or comparison goes only as far as the context intends. Even assuming that the “wind” in John 3 is literal wind (as in weather), that would not warrant the conclusion so many draw, since wind has more than one characteristic. Wind is also invisible, a balm on hot days, a terror to ships at sea, and so on. The meaning of the comparison must be determined by the context. The word “wind” in this text is possibly “spirit” (see ASV footnote) and the whole expression would then be talking about inspiration. However, it isn’t my goal to commentate fully on this verse. This example merely demonstrates the inclination of Calvinists to draw doctrine from assumptions they make about analogies and figures of speech.

The same technique is used with the following analogies to salvation: a birth (John 3:3-8); a quickening (Colossians 2:13); a translation (Colossians 1:13); a death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6:1-6); and a creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). A Calvinist states, “Clearly, no creature ever contributed toward its own creation. Accordingly, the dead cannot contribute toward their own resurrection. In fact all of these analogies suggest an irresistible power working on a passive object. We are compelled by their collective preponderance to conclude that irresistible grace is an irresistible truth.”<sup>1</sup> This interpretation assumes something about the analogies that cannot be proven. For example, does the new birth imply that the Holy Spirit is a woman, or does our resurrection make the Holy Spirit a mortician?! An analogy says nothing more than what the context allows. The new birth, the creation, and the resurrection figures are not intended to show who is or who is not involved in salvation. They show the change that must certainly take place in salvation from the old man to the new.

Another mistake of the Calvinist is to assume their doctrine in every verse they read. For example, Jesus says, “*No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: ...*” (John 6:44). The Calvinist reads into this passage the method through which God draws. One states, “This drawing is the sovereign work of grace without which no one can be saved from their rebellion against God.”<sup>2</sup> By “sovereign work of grace”, understand that he is referring to “irresistible grace” forcibly pushed on “the elect” by a direct act of the Holy Spirit. Where in that verse did anyone state the method God uses to draw man? No where! I could falsely assert thousands of methods by which God could draw man, including a fish hook, but none would necessarily be right. If this passage does not state the method, I must turn to another passage rather than assume one that fits my doctrine.

Calvinists also like to assume that the only way God can accomplish anything is through a direct act that overwhelms man. Often this causes them to mistake the power of the Gospel for a direct act of God on the human heart. When a Calvinist reads about Paul’s conversion, they conclude that “perhaps the clearest and most remarkable case of irresistible grace in the scriptures is that of the Apostle Paul’s.”<sup>1</sup> Why? The Calvinist simply cannot conceive of the human heart being changed by the words of Christ. When

a Calvinist reads about Lydia, “whose heart the Lord opened” (Acts 16:14), they never consider the Gospel as the power used by God on the heart. Instead, they state, “Unless God opens our hearts, we will not heed the message of the gospel. This heart-opening is what we mean by irresistible grace.”<sup>2</sup> Calvinism implies that the Gospel is ineffectual on the heart of man, rather than being “*the power of God unto salvation*” (Romans 1:16). Consider all the things that the Bible says that the Bible can do. The Bible can reprove, correct, and instruct (2 Timothy 3:16). The Bible can build us up and give us an inheritance (Acts 20:32). The Bible can help us to grow (1 Peter 2:2). Perhaps most important to this discussion, by the Bible we are sanctified and cleansed with the washing of water (Eph. 5:26). God’s Word is His power unto salvation, and any doctrine that renders God’s power powerless is patently false.

### **Free Will & Judgment**

According to Calvinism, without an overwhelming force from God, I am depraved and can do nothing right. According to Calvinism, with an overwhelming force from God, I am saved and can do nothing wrong. However, the God of the Bible has always demanded that man choose (Joshua 24:14-15). God proclaims this choice to the whole of man and the basis of his eternal judgment (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14). Without choice, that judgment is meaningless. If I am depraved, then I am condemned by a curse from Adam. What since will it make for God to say “*depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels*” (Matt. 25:41) when it was Adam’s fault that I was cursed? If I am a saint, what sense will it make for God to say “*well done, thou good and faithful servant:*” (Matt. 25:21) when my God made me to do good and forced me to be faithful? The doctrine of irresistible grace makes the judgment scene a terrible hoax. In the Calvinists’ judgment, God implicitly condemns himself for the wicked depravity in which God leaves man to drown. In the Calvinists’ judgment, God merely pats himself on the back for the goodness he forced on a select few he takes into Heaven. That depiction of judgment is a mockery of divine justice and of the God who will sit on the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10).

### **Real “Irresistible Grace”**

At the beginning of this lecture, we defined irresistible grace as “the quickening power of God’s Spirit will”.<sup>1</sup> In other words, irresistible grace is the absolute and irresistible force that God uses to enforce His will. From this definition, we can draw a conclusion that shows the incompatibility of the Bible and irresistible grace. The Bible clearly identifies what God’s will is. “*The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance*” (2 Peter 3:9). God is not willing that any should perish, so by our definition of irresistible grace, God should exert an overwhelming force on every single person so that his will may be reality. However, the Bible does not suggest that at all. Instead, Jesus says quite the opposite. “*Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: [14] Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it*” (Matt. 7:13-14). Not only will a single person perish, not only will many people perish, but most people will perish. Though this is clearly not the will of God, it is reality as prophesied by Christ. How can

this be? It is so because God does not exert an overwhelming or irresistible force on man to produce the will of God concerning man.

What would irresistible grace really be like? I have already partially depicted that, but allow me to suggest that there will come a time when God will act through an overwhelming and irresistible force on man such that everyone will conform to His will. Paul declares, *“For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. [12] So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.”* (Romans 14:11-12). At the final judgment, every wicked, stubborn, self-willed, haughty person who has ever lived will bow and give an account along with every other soul. This is what it will be like when God no longer offers a choice. Notice, though every knee will bow and every tongue confess, this will not save anyone from eternal Hell. Why not? God will not judge us based on something he has made us to do. Instead, *“God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil”* (Ecclesiastes 12:14).

### **Conclusion**

An imperfect parent with imperfect love knows that love will not allow the parent to force right and proper decision on a child all the days of their life. Instead, the parent offers guidance and support, hoping that the child will make the right decisions when the times of decision making arrive. So it is with our perfect Father and His perfect love. He offers guidance through His inspired Word, but never at anytime does the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit exert an influence on an individual that cannot be resisted. God made man able to make right moral decisions, and so we must.

### **References:**

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