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Prevenient Grace

Please turn to p. 48 in your worship book and join me in the Prayer to the Holy Spirit...

Of course I don't know what you experienced in childhood. I had the good fortune to be raised on a farm. The wonders of nature were all around me. I had a sense of God's love in making the creation so beautiful and so useful to humankind. I have wonderful and lasting memories of both the wonders of nature and the results of hard and persistent work. My family was the poster for traditional American values.

My mother took me to Sunday School when I was age 2. Early in my Sunday School education we had to learn the Ten Commandments. When I first learned to recite them I was too young to understand their content, but I experienced knowing them by heart as one more joyful thing to know about God. And I experienced a special kind of love at my little home church in a country village. Somehow I knew that God was loving me through the people of that country church.

Before I understood what was going on I sensed that God must be there for me.

My name is Stacy Evans and the title of this talk is [^]Prevenient Grace.

Prevenient Grace is a term that originated with John Wesley, the founder of Methodism in England in the eighteenth century. After many years on these shores the major church body from Wesley's beginning is called The United Methodist Church.

[^]**Pre** = going before; [^]**veni** = come. [^]**Grace** is God's unmerited gift of divine love.

So, Prevenient Grace is the grace of God that goes before us.

[^]**Prevenient Grace** means that God is always present with us and for us [^]throughout our lives, whether or not we are aware of it. This grace is at work

in us from our conception—from the moment we begin to be—until the moment when we accept for ourselves the relationship that God offers us in and through Christ.

Prevenient Grace is:

- The grace of God that comes before any human decision or endeavor; it is at work in us even before we are aware of it.
- The love of God wooing us
- The will of God drawing us
- The desire of God pursuing us
- The gift of God freeing us
- The activity of God empowering us

When I look back on it, you see, my first experience of Prevenient Grace was in that country church of my childhood. It was there that I was taught the great stories of the Bible: creation; the stories of the prophets, Samuel through Ezekiel; the stories of King David who had both his ups and his downs; and the story of how Jesus came from God to save a needy humanity.

One of the greatest examples of how Prevenient Grace is expressed in scripture is Psalm 139. Hear these wise and penetrating words:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

You know when I sit down and when I rise up;

You discern my thoughts from far away.

You search out my path and my lying down,

And are acquainted with all my ways.

Even before a word is on my tongue,

O Lord, you know it completely.

You hem me in, behind and before,

And lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;

It is so high that I cannot attain it.

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heave, you are there;

If I make my bed in sheol, you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning

And settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

Even there your hand shall lead me,

And your right hand shall hold me fast.

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,

And the light around me become night,"

Even the darkness is not dark to you;

The night is as bright as the day,

For darkness is as light to you.

For it was you who formed my inward parts;

You knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are you works; that I know very well.

My frame was not hidden from you,

When I was being made in secret,

intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.

In your book were written

All the days that were formed for me,

when none of them as yet existed.

How weighty to me are your thoughts O God!

How vast is the sum of them!

I try to count them—they are more than the sand;

I come to the end—and I am still with you.

Search me, O God, and know my heart;

Test me and know my thoughts.

See if there is any wicked way in me

And lead me in the way everlasting.

This ancient piece of poetry confirms that God has always been in my life. As I grew and matured I came to see more clearly that God had always been there for me, guiding and and protecting me as I grew older. Of course, as with most young people, I strayed from God's path in my early 20s. Nevertheless, God was surrounding me with his divine love. Even as I strayed, I heard the "still, small voice" of Jesus saying, "Follow me." God's prevenient grace was persistent and called me to the relationship with him that he had planned for my life. →

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- The nature of that relationship is LOVE. Not love as in "I love ice cream" or "I love my new car," but covenant love. The Bible tells us that a covenant is a binding promise that God makes to each and every one of us. The covenant is expressed in Deuteronomy 31:16:

The Bible begins with these words:

- *In the beginning God created the world, the cosmos, and all things within them. And God saw that it was good.* Genesis 1:1-25

I have not had a major struggle believing this, from the time I was a small boy on the farm. But I did have some trouble believing that I was good enough for God to create me. Through God's grace those personal doubts have been overcome.

Scripture tells us:

- God created humankind, both male and female. God declared that both genders of humankind were good—and he enjoyed relationship with them. Genesis 2:4-22, 26-31

I am a “child” of the tumultuous decade of the 1960s. That was a confusing and troubled time. My friends, and sometimes myself, engaged in experiences that were not for our own good. During that time it was sometimes hard to find God in the midst of everything and to remember that God is the guide for good and lasting relationships.

Scripture also tells us:

- The bad news of human sin is preceded by the good news of our origin in God

As I drank in the words of Psalm 139, I began to realize a profound truth. God has known me before I was born! God has been with me in the midst of all the darkness and confusion of my lifetime. God has designed a plan for my life. All I have to do is to follow him, and let the plan unfold.

We are told that

- God continues to offer us a relationship with him, no matter what we do in life. God is always there, surrounding us and loving us. God is constantly calling us to come ever closer to the love and life that God has designed for us.

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The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.

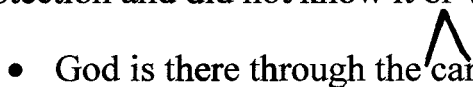


How can you experience God's prevenient grace?



- Examine the events of your life, both positive and negative. As you look back, see if you don't see God's hand there somewhere. God comes to us through all that we experience, even through all the heartaches and disappointments. God is the God of all life, both joys and sorrows.

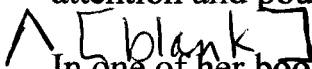
There are many things that I have experienced that I would never have chosen if life were simply a matter of getting things my way and in my time. As I look back, I can now see that God was there, giving me the strength that I needed, the encouragement that was essential, both in times where I was close to him and those times when I was farther away, doing my thing. Even when I needed God's protection and did not know it or want it—still God was there.



- God is there through the care and sacrifice of others who embody God's love toward us.

Certainly my parents sacrificed things so that I could have a better life than they lived. And one set of my aunts and uncles prayed me through my decision for ministry and prayed for me until their deaths, knowing that ministers need constant prayer. Those are the caring and sacrifices that I know for sure.

Oftentimes God's love comes to us through others in unexpected circumstances and situations. We usually expect love and care to come through certain people (although this is not always the case). Some of those persons are: our parents, our spouses, our friends, members of our churches and others who surround us in our lives. Sometimes we are disappointed when they are not there for us in the ways that we would like them to be. We can be deeply hurt when their encouragement and comfort do not come when or how we expect. Many times our hurt and our anger prevent us from seeing the other places where God is trying to get our attention and pour out his divine grace upon us.



[blank] In one of her books, Christian author Paula D'Arcy describes a tragic circumstance in her own life. She struggled with this as any of us would. She had gone to visit her family along with her husband and young daughter. The purpose of the trip

was tell her family the joyful news that she was pregnant with a second child. On the return trip there was a horrible moment when they were hit head on by another car. Her husband and her baby daughter were both killed. Paula survived, along with her unborn child—but she was flung into a very dark personal space that most of us could not even imagine. She has written two books and has become a frequent speaker through Guideposts. Her story comes to mind as I prepared this talk because it describes how she found healing as she opened herself to God's Presence in her life—as it was. God was there for her even when her pain blinded her to his Presence for a long period of time. God provided Paula with comfort, strength, and guidance. Other people were there for her, too, with their care and prayers. But God helped not only Paula but also those who loved her so that they could provide encouragement during her struggles with feeling alone in a very dark place. I am certain that those folks wondered whether or not Paula was going to make it back to the person they knew before the accident.

- God is there through the body of believers in the church.

Certainly this was demonstrated in the life of Paula D'Arcy when her own family and her church family ministered to her. I have found healing through the prayers of my family and the different church families that I have served. If you have not experienced this kind of caring, through the body of believers, I encourage you to find a Christian fellowship that meet this important need in your life.

- God is there through the Holy Spirit awakening our consciences and convincing us that we can never reform ourselves enough or earn a place in God's family.

Pulling yourself “up by your own bootstraps” is not really possible. The bootstraps only work on boots. This expression doesn't make a great deal of sense, does it? We all know that we fall far short of perfection. We know, deep in our hearts, that we cannot EARN a place in God's family. That's why we are talking about GRACE, God's grace. Remember, grace=gift. And a gift is always free to one who receives it.

- God is there through the Holy Spirit, who is constantly courting us, calling us to a life lived in God's love. Because this is a gift from God, a gift of love and a gift of grace, the Holy Spirit will never use force on us.

Each and every person needs to be open to see where the Holy Spirit is active in your life. The question for us is whether or not we can be open enough to see the work of the Holy Spirit. Are we willing to set aside our human perceptions and let God's Holy Spirit guide and direct us?

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I remember that I was sitting where you are today on my Walk to Emmaus, long ago in 1984. My church secretary had almost dragooned me into going. I was not that happy to be at the walk, even though others had told me what a great experience it was for them. Of course, I could not reveal to my table or anyone else that I was a clergyperson. All the roles that I was accustomed to had to be set aside for a weekend—that was not a bad idea, by the way. But I struggled about being on the walk.

I had heard about God's prevenient grace in a seminary class, but I had never understood it well. The talk on prevenient grace opened my eyes, however. I recalled a paper that I had to write for a professor. That had been nearly 20 years before. The topic of the paper was to reflect on what happened in your life after your baptism. I was baptized when I was age 12. And I could see that my life did change—that I was closer to God, step by step. After this talk, I realized that it was God's prevenient grace that had been leading me. "The grace that goes before."

I urge you to look over your life and see when and where God has been leading you through his prevenient grace.

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The critical question for you during this weekend is: Will you open your heart to God and accept the relationship that God offers you through Jesus Christ?

When you open your heart and accept Christ for yourself, this is the beginning of a great blessing and healing for your life. It is the beginning of a great adventure beyond anything that you have planned or imagined.

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