

Sola Gratia

And the Wickedness of the Heart

Ex 33:19 And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ...

^{4:5} The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD.

⁶ The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,

⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

⁸ And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped.

⁹ And he said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance."

(Exodus 33:19; 4:5-9)

Eph 2:1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins

² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience--

³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,
⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-- by grace you have been saved--
⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,
⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.
⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,
⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.
¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.
(Ephesians 2:1-10)

A MODERN CRISIS, MUCH WORSE THAN ROME...

I HAVE A THEORY. It may sound very strange at first: The more that people in the church embrace **Pelagianism**, the more violent the societies in which they find themselves become. Paradoxically, the more violent those societies become, the more strongly (not the less) everyone in them will of their own **freewill** embrace Pelagianism as their **basic worldview of human nature**. Here is an anecdote from this week that shows half of my theory in action.

On Monday October 1, 2017 America saw its most deadly act of modern terrorism. The death toll in the Las Vegas shooting has now risen to 59 with over 525 more injured from bullets and being trampled underfoot. A friend of mine who is a very sweet person and would claim to be a Christian wrote:

All mass shootings and terror attacks are terrible, but this seemed to hit me especially hard. Maybe because I'm a mom. Maybe because I knew people at the concert. Maybe because I've been to many country concerts and have seen this singer multiple times. For whatever reason, today I could not stop crying. I don't know what answers to guns or mental states of mind would have prevented this (nor do I want to talk about it yet). I don't know why this evil person did what he did. But I still believe people are 99% good, and we can't let fear and evil win.¹

My theory can be seen here, but I'll finish the entry to prepare us for something later. As a Christian, we might

¹ I have changed much this post and put it in my own words in order to protect the identity of its author.

hope that the gospel would go out at this moment. Instead, what was encouraged was simply a kind of new **pay-it-forward** program of niceness to one another in order to make the world a better place to live, which of course is obviously not a bad thing. You remember pay-it-forward? A few years back a guy decided to pay for the person's coffee in the Starbuck's drive-thru line behind him and started a national trend? But that is anything but the gospel.

So how does this exemplify my theory? To answer that, we need to understand **what Pelagianism is**. **Pelagius** was a contemporary of **Augustine**, preaching at the turn of the 5th century in Britain. The core of his teaching was the people are not inherently sinful. Or, as my friend put it, people are 99% good. That is, for all intents and purposes, Pelagianism. For even Pelagius believed that people could sin, he just believed that it was not their natural bent. Even more, while he believed that grace was real, he didn't think it was necessary for salvation. It could help "facilitate" righteousness, but it wasn't necessary.²

² See **R. C. Sproul**, "The Pelagian Captivity of the Church," *Modern Reformation* (May/June 2001), <http://www.reformed.org.ua/1/85/Sproul>.

What is so strange to me is how in the face of such gross and ever escalating violence as we are seeing on display in the post-Christian postmodern Western world, there is this staunch refusal to acknowledge that these events are nothing but the natural outcomes that *any of us* could be given over to were God to remove his hand from us. You may remember that soon after 9-11, the media made it all too clear that using the words “evil” and “terrorism” could not be tolerated. That same idea is latent when in the face of heinous wicked violence, people not only still say, but actually resolve and entrench themselves in this belief that everyone is basically good.

So, we are seeing that the *worse* people show themselves to be, the *less* inclined we are of ourselves to believe that all people are really like this. This seems backwards (and it is from a biblical perspective). You would think that as outward wickedness increases, people’s view of human depravity would rise. But it doesn’t. Why?

I think it is because no one wants to face the fact that what these wicked people are displaying to the whole world is nothing but a little piece of ourselves. “*I am not like that!*” It is a basic refusal to admit that I am a sinner. There simply

isn't a person who has been born that wants of themselves to admit this. None. Why? Because it brings condemnation and necessitates that there is a Judge who judges sin.

Another anecdote. A different friend (we went to the same Christian college and Seminary) responded to this latest terrorist attack by posting an article, “**Thoughts on Vegas, and Why Men Keep Doing This?**”³ The answer? Men are lonely. Men have experienced ongoing play deprivation. Men are deeply ashamed, having been ridiculed, rejected, and humiliated. The solution (which he concludes by calling “good news”)? “**You, as an individual, can make a difference**” by helping in one of those areas. Again, those probably contribute to people’s problems in some ways, and helping with them are certainly not bad things in and of themselves. But when I pointed out that this is basically Pelagian, my friend first asked, “What is Pelagianism?” And then said, “**Maybe we are coming at this from different approaches. I just wanted to use it to start a conversation about the importance of good friends.**”

³ **Charlie Hoehn**, “Thoughts On Vegas, and Why Men Keep Doing This,” *beyourself* (Oct 3, 2017), <https://byrslf.co/thoughts-on-the-vegas-shooting-14af397cee2c>

Now, this friend is not a Pelagian (this week he also wrote a letter calling this event, “The sinful rebellion of mankind on full display.” But think about what this kind of thinking means, especially once it has crept its way into the church. Michael Horton begins a treatment of our topic today by saying, “If human beings are basically good and evil is attributable to impersonal forces, structures, institutions, and upbringing, the doctrine of grace—the essence of the gospel—is meaningless.”⁴

Now, the church of the Reformation was bad. But believe it or not it was not *this* bad. That means what we are talking about today is even more important than it was back then. The Roman church held to what is called semi-Pelagianism. This is the idea that “God helps those who help themselves.” The saying in Luther’s day was, “God will not withhold his grace from those who do what lies within their power.” At least in this system, grace was needed at some point. In Pelagianism, it’s virtually irrelevant.

Yet, fighting against just semi-Pelagianism as it was expressing itself through indulgences (grace + buying you

⁴ Michael Horton, “The Sola’s of the Reformation,” in *Here We Stand: A Call from Confessing Evangelicals*, ed. James Montgomery Boice and Benjamin E. Sasse (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996), 118 [99-130].

way into heaven), Luther would write in his 95 Thesis, “The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God” (Thesis 62). Yet, he would say, “But this treasure is naturally most odious, for it makes the first to be last (Mt 20:16)” (Thesis 63). Grace is not something we natural want to have. As Kevin Vanhoozer says, “Grace contradicts every system of religion precisely because God’s free mercy cannot be predicted, calculated, or manipulated. Grace is especially troublesome for control freaks—sinners curved in on themselves, bent on securing their own existence and status.”⁵

Therefore, what we want to do is look at the first of the three *solas* that in some ways are one. They are **grace alone**, **faith alone**, and **Christ alone**. These are usually the middle three (of five) in discussions.⁶ I will talk about them in this order, because grace is the prerequisite that holds them together, faith is then the only instrument God gives to

⁵ Kevin Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority After Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017), 40.

⁶ One rare exception Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority After Babel* (see n. 4 above), who deals with grace alone first, the faith alone, the scripture alone, then Christ alone, and finally to God alone be the glory. Originally, the three actual slogans did not include the final two here, which is probably why he treats them last. They were present in the Reformation, but they were not really treated in the same way the others were until a little later. For example, he writes that Bach seems to have been the first to incorporate *solī Deo gloria*.

receive this grace, and as a climax, Christ is both the only basis and the End to which these others point.

As we consider this, we are going to look at a NT passage, just a few verses of it first. Then we will go to an OT passage, and then we will return to our NT passage. As with all these doctrines, there are many places in Scripture we can turn, but these two really seem to me to get at the needed theology and pastoral importance of *sola gratia*: salvation by grace alone.

Sola Gratia

I want to begin in Ephesians 2:1-3. This passage is all about grace. Vs. 5 says, “by grace you have been saved--.” Vs. 8 repeats this and adds something important that we will look at next time. Vs. 7 also talks about grace, describing “the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

But Paul’s discussion of grace really begins with the needed backdrop which begins in vs. 1. This hits right at where we began. I said earlier that even semi-Pelagianism is “bad.” A lot of people would disagree with that. So how do

I justify such a remark that would surely get me into trouble in many circles?

Ephesians 2:1-2a. “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked...” This is God’s holy word alone, and not some man-made idea. What does this verse teach? The language the Apostle Paul uses is “**dead.**” The word in Greek is *nekros*. Do you know what kinds of words we get from this? **Necrosis**—the death of cells through injury of disease. **Necropsy**—the examination of a body after death; autopsy. **Necropolis**—a cemetery. **Necrophilia**—Obsessive fascination with death and corpses. **Necromancy**—the practice of communicating with the spirits of the dead in order to predict the future. Are you getting the picture of the meaning of the word? You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked.

What does this mean? Semi-Pelagians and Pelagians read this very differently than I do. A good semi-Pelagian or Arminian (same thing, different flavor) will read it as teaching a kind of **Miracle Max theology**. Miracle Max was the medicine man in the *Princess Bride*? When the man in black was brought to him, he declared, he isn’t dead, he is “... **mostly dead. There’s a big difference between all dead**

and mostly dead. Mostly dead is slightly alive.” In other words, Paul is saying that you were slightly alive in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked.

You might say, that’s an absurd interpretation. It isn’t as absurd as you might think. But it is profoundly confused. Notice how he says that you “used to walk” in them. He goes on to say that you were “following the course of this world, following the price of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience” (Eph 2:2b). The words “walked,” “following,” and “disobedience” demonstrate that the person is, in fact, alive. So, we have both life and death here.

The semi-Pelagian solves the dilemma by merging them to say that it is talking about slightly alive people, and therefore grace is like gasoline for the tank or a blood transfusion for the body. On the other hand, the Reformation believed that it was talking simultaneously about completely alive people and completely dead people. Not a mixture that lessens each, but a 100% of both. How can we understand this?

The first thing to do is to take seriously the word dead. Paul means dead, that’s the word he used. But Paul also

means alive, for he used words that clearly refer to people being alive. Then what is the meaning of “dead in the trespasses and sins?” He explains it to the Corinthians in terms of a “natural” (*psuchikos*) man and a “spiritual” (*pneumatikos*) man. “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (2Co 2:14).

This verse presupposes that a natural person understands and accepts many things. That is, they are alive. How? They are alive physically, they have beating hearts, functioning minds, and working wills. They make choices and decisions. But it states it is impossible for them to make *right* decisions or *good* choices regarding God because the things of God are not naturally discerned. So, he is spiritually dead, but physically alive. Being spiritually dead, he simply can't understand the things of God, because the words are foolishness and a stumbling block to him. He needs to be born again. How? By freewill? By making a decision? By

cooperating with grace? No, by the Spirit of God calling things that are not into existence.⁷

Martin Luther described this as being in “*Bondage to the Will.*” It is a state of living-death, life-long slavery to the world, the flesh, and the devil (the devil part shows up in Eph 2:2 (see note 7). This becomes the reason why he believed, as Augustine before him, that the **predestining grace** of God was an absolute prerequisite for coming to saving faith in Christ. It is also the reason why he believed that the work of God in a person’s life to save them was due to absolutely nothing in them, and was entirely the work of God towards them by grace alone. In fact, it was not just

⁷ In Ephesians 2 the reason why a person can’t understand is explained as being “**children of wrath**” (Eph 2:3) because you were “**sons of disobedience**” (2). This is very consistent with the rest of the Bible. It works itself out from start to finish in everyone ever born. We are all born children of wrath. God’s wrath is against **at birth**, David says, the wicked go astray from their mother’s womb (Ps 58:3) and even he was brought forth in iniquity and conceived in sin (51:5). The Western church has talked about this in terms of **original sin**, or the sin which is credited to our account because of Adam, even though we have not committed actual sins yet.

This original sin is combined in our passage and many others with a giving over to being sons of disobedience. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, this is explained as being **children of Satan** (usually Belial). Here it is followers of “**the prince of the power of the air**,” which is again, Satan. Much of Ephesians is taken up with this topic, and a chief purpose of the Gospel is to free people from this born slavery to the devil. But when the two things are put together, what it results in is this: Naturally alive people freely choose only to sin. This sin does not always manifest itself in the worst ways. In fact, sometimes it can manifest itself in ways that are outwardly good. But inwardly, everything is being done only to the glory of themselves and to the furtherance of their own self-interests. Everything is ultimately a worship of self, and thus a violation of the first commandment. And it is the reason why violence will only get worse when Pelagianism is adopted.

Luther. **J. I. Packer** has powerfully written in a modern Introduction to Luther's *Bondage of the Will*,

Historically, it is a simple matter of fact, that Martin Luther and John Calvin, and, for that matter, Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer, and all the leading Protestant theologians of the first epoch of the Reformation, stood on precisely the same ground here. On other points they had their differences; but in asserting the helplessness of man in sin, and the sovereignty of God in grace, they were entirely one. To all of them, these doctrines were the very life-blood of the Christian faith.⁸

Every single first generation Reformer was unified on these points. It is part and parcel of what it means to be Reformed (or Lutheran). This *is* the Reformation, and it is the very heart of *sola gratia*. For, grace is only grace when there is absolutely nothing that a person can do to earn, merit, or will salvation of themselves. And I mean absolutely nothing.

⁸ **J. I. Packer**, "Historical and Theological Introduction," in Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, translated by J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1957, 1995), 58.

It is completely and totally of God grace alone, because he is pleased to look upon you on account of Jesus Christ.

The word here you will come across is **monergism**. This is opposed to **synergism**. One-working vs. cooperation. Synergism is what all semi-Pelagians have in common. You cooperate with divine grace in a kind of 50-50 dance in order to get saved. You do your half, then God will do his. God tells you to believe in Christ, you go ahead and make that choice, and then you will be saved. Jesus reaches out his hand, you the drowning man take it, Jesus pulls you up. This is the church of Rome (though there have always been dissenters), the Eastern Orthodox, Arminianism, Wesleyans, most Baptists, and others.

But the Augustinians (many Benedictines, the Jansenites like the famous philosopher Pascal--all Roman), and all of the Reformation said no. This is important, because this was no new doctrine that the Reformers were espousing, even in Church history. Scripture alone tells us that unless God does the work in a person's heart by a miraculous work of his spirit through the Gospel, no one will ever come. But when he does, they will.

They did not deny that people come, nor did they deny that people choose. Some Calvinists wrongly teach this and it is worse than nonsense, for it denies *sola fide*. But instead of that choice being the thing regenerates you, being regenerated is the thing that causes you to choose. Dead men don't choose Christ. Only alive men do. In other words, faith is a gift of God, not the one good thing that you do to merit God's favor. We will discuss this in much more depth **next time**. The point is, this is the meaning of *sola gratia*. Without it, you don't have grace alone. You have grace plus something else. This is why the *sola* part was added, so that you may know that God's grace and grace alone is what saves you.

What is Grace?

What then is grace? This is a vital question. Here is where I want to turn to our OT passage. **Exodus 33:19-4:9** is a great self-disclosure of the biblical God who was speaking to Moses. “**And he said, ‘I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my Name, 'The LORD.' And I will be gracious to whom I will**

be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy” (Ex 33:19).

In the context, grace is chiefly God’s goodness in Christ both proclaimed and granted. This can be summed up in one word: favor. Grace is God’s favor toward you. The last verse of our text says this very thing. “And he said, ‘If I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please ...” (34:9), and then he mentions some things he would like God to do. The point is, the story begins with goodness and grace and ends with favor. Favor is a good thing, for it means that God is for you, not against you. Any time you are thinking of one of his graces and it is causing you to question or doubt or worry, you have changed grace into something else. Perhaps you can’t understand why God would be gracious *to you*, but that’s precisely the point. It has nothing to do with you. He favors you simply because it pleases him to do so. Is that not wonderful news to a despondent soul?

This is defined with several terms throughout the story. In 33:19, another word that is used is “mercy.” Sometimes we hear that mercy is **not getting what you deserve** while grace is **getting what you don’t deserve**. You deserve punishment (mercy), you don’t deserve good gifts/benefits

(grace). But really, these are two sides of the same coin. In fact, mercy is defined here as **compassion** upon someone who is an offender. Compassion is **not a lack**, but **the presence of grace**. Thus, they are in the same verse together.⁹ Now, this verse is quoted in Romans 9 as part of **one particular benefit of God's grace**. We are not ready to talk about these yet, because first we want to know more about what this incredible gift of God.

Ex 34:6 unfolds more of it. “**The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful** (there's mercy again) **and gracious** (there's grace again), **slow to anger...**” To understand grace, you need to know that it means that **God is slow to anger**. Most of us are too often very quick to get angry. The tiniest thing happens and it sets us off. Then we project ourselves upon God, as if he is like us. He isn't like you. People sometimes ask where is God when times are evil. One of the answers is that God is slow to anger. He does not “take people out” the moment they first sin.¹⁰ He is slow to anger.

⁹ For more on mercy and grace, see my sermon “Getting God Right,” on Psalm 51.

¹⁰ The doctrine of impassibility often teaches that there is no sense at all in which God can even get angry. I think there is probably a sense in which God (the Divine Essence) does not get angry. However, it seems clear that God (the Three Persons) do in fact get angry. But when the impassibility point is combined with this “slow to anger,” it is meant to be a strong encouragement to you when you sin.

Next, he is “abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” “Steadfast love” is the single word *hesed* in Hebrew. This is a word that emphasizes how God acts when he is in covenant with someone. Thus, it implies a positive relationship to them. When this is the case, God has “much” or “abounding” steadfastness and faithfulness to them. He acts truthfully, never falsely.

We see this in the next section, “... keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...” (34:7). Part of his steadfast love is that he forgives you of your sins, not once, but always. He does this to all and any who call upon him to do so, for this is the meaning of “thousands.” Therefore, when you call out to God for him to forgive you, you are to be assured that he in fact does do this. For that is what grace is.

Of course, there is an opposite here, which is that if you do not call upon him, he will not forgive you. Instead he visits “the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation” for those who are “guilty” (7b). This idea of “guilt” is a second benefit of grace that we will now begin to work our way towards.

The Benefits of Grace

Jesus Christ the Chief Benefit

As we do that, I want us to think about **the chief benefit of grace**. This actually vaults us **ahead a couple of weeks**, but since it is here in our two texts, we need to discuss it. For everything else that we say pales in comparison to it. The chief benefit of grace is God himself—particularly in the person of Jesus Christ. As someone has said, Grace is “**God’s unmerited favor to sinners in communicating life in Christ.**”¹¹

What I want you to see here is that Christ is not a means to an end. He is the End. He is the Goal. He is the Treasure. He is our Benefit. He is Grace. Grace is given for the sake of Christ alone. And Christ is given because of grace alone.

Christ is here with Moses. He is the “**Lord**” (Adonai) who is speaking to Moses (**34:9**). He is the Lord whom Moses asks, “**Please ... go in the midst of us ... pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.**” Just a few chapters earlier, Moses was told, “**Behold, I send an**

¹¹ Vanhoozer, 27.

angel before you ... Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him” (Ex 23:20).

There is a lot we could say here, but just notice how the themes of forgiveness of sins and going before the people are explicit. Moses is talking to the Angel. Furthermore, this idea of taking Israel as an inheritance is the great privilege of the Second Person of the Trinity in the OT (Deut 32:8-9; cf. Ps 2:8; 82:8; Dan 7:14). Two other themes are present in the encounter with the Lord on Mt. Sinai.

The first is the “voice.” The LORD said he would “proclaim” something to Moses (33:19). The second is the “Name.” He would proclaim “the Name” (19). The voice of the LORD is the word of the LORD. The word of the LORD comes from the Word of the LORD. We are orbiting close to *sola scriptura* here. Moses is hearing a sermon from God and recording it for his posterity in the biblical book of Exodus.

The Name of the LORD is also the Word of the LORD (Jn 1:1; 12), because the Word is the Angel and the Name is in him. This is the Apostolic message. That “Repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to

all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47). That “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom 10:13; Joel 2:32). But “how are they to hear without someone preaching?” (Rom 10:14). What is that name? “The name of the Lord Jesus ... Jesus whom Paul proclaims” (Acts 19:13).

The point is, Jesus is the chief benefit of God’s grace to you. He is not the way to something better. He is the something better. You hear about that benefit by being told, through a proclamation, through preaching. Therefore, preaching is a great grace to you. For through it you are able to call upon the Name of Jesus and be saved. And what is it that you are to be told about him? That he is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty. This is needed good news to guilty sinners.

Salvation (and the Ordo Salutis or Order of Salvation)

I now want to consider the two points raised earlier. I’ll take them chrono-logically, the way they happen in real

time. Then we'll think about a couple more from our Ephesians passage. First, we want to return to this idea of having mercy on whom he will have mercy. This is quoted in the book of Romans (9:15) about the doctrine of predestination. **Predestination** is a great grace of God. But what is it?

First, I want to hammer this home that predestination is a *grace* of God. Some people think of and treat predestination as a great terror, almost like it is not gracious, but the opposite, some kind of divine judgment. This is to misunderstand the doctrine to your own spiritual harm. Damnation is not predestination. Damnation is the result of sin, not predestination. Being reprobate is not predestination. Reprobation (from a Latin word meaning “disapprove”) is the result of God leaving people in their sins. Not so predestination.

Predestination is what the word literally means. It is a predetermining of something by God. What is that predetermination? It is his *gracious* decision to choose whomever he wants for salvation before the foundation of the world. We learn in Romans 9 some important things about this.

Predestinating is based upon something in God, not something in you. When you “were not yet born” or “had done nothing either good or bad” (Rom 9:11). Some people will ask why God chooses one person and not another. The answer we can give with certainty is that it has nothing to do with what he foresees someone will “choose.” Why? Because all he would see everyone choosing is to reject him!

Instead, it is for the glory of God. “In order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls” (11b). It is for the mercy of god. “It depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy” (16). So that God “might show his power in you” and so that “his Name might be proclaimed in all the earth” (17). So that no one can talk back to God (20). So that he can display his wrath (22) and make known his mercy (23), so that it would be all of grace and nothing else. (If we had time, we could go to the backdrop of Ephesians 2, which is the entirety of chapter 1 which is also about this theme).

But displaying his wrath is something that terrifies people about this doctrine. It shouldn’t. The Bible never gives this doctrine to terrify a person. It is always given to give them hope and joy and peace. God does not have to

predestine someone to hell in the sense of making some kind of positive decree that a neutral person will end up there. No, no one is neutral, we have already established that. All he has to do is leave them in their own willful state of rebellion and that's where they will end up.

Predestination is a grace for this simple reason. If he didn't predestine people, all would end up in hell. Predestination ensures that stubborn, wicked people will in fact come *to Christ*. It guarantees it. It is his favor towards you. Have you come to Christ? Then don't enter into the labyrinth of speculation about whether God has predestined you or not. Don't look to election. Look to Christ. And if you are looking to Christ, then be assured you can only do this because you are predestined. That's the order. Predestination is a grace, not a terror. It is given for your comfort, not for torment. Use it as such.

But [how do you come to Christ?](#) This is our second point from Exodus. Recall that it was there with the word "[guilty](#)." God does not acquit the guilty. At first, this seems to lead to a horrible problem. If everyone is sinful, then everyone is guilty. Therefore, God cannot acquit anyone. This is horrible news, not good news.

But this is exactly why we need grace. Somehow, those who are guilty are able to be brought into a covenant relationship of *hesed*-love. How does this happen? It happens by the Holy Spirit counting you the righteous in Christ. Being counted as righteous is what we mean by the term “justification.” God justifies the guilty. He declares them not guilty even though they are. But this is quite unfair. How could a righteous God let the guilty go free?

The answer is that he didn't let the guilty go free. That's one of the reasons Christ died. “In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (2Co 5:19). Not counting their trespasses against them why? Because Christ was punished in your place. Justice has been met. The guilty has been punished. In Christ. Of course, *he* was not guilty, but he took your punishment in your place as part of an eternal agreement within the Godhead, because of grace. Jesus' death is a great grace.

Here's how our Ephesians passage puts it. “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ...” (Eph 2:4-5a). Do you see

that dead men are being brought to life? God did this. God made us alive together. People don't get God to make them alive by an act of freewill. That makes no sense. Rather, God makes them alive and liberates their will from death to sin, so that they now freely choose him, because that is the power of God in Christ.

Again, we will look much more next time at when and **how this happens in time** to any person. But know that this Ephesians passage answers it in **vs. 8**. **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”** Through faith, God justifies wicked people.

But oh, the benefits divine and spring forth from God's grace here. First, **he makes us alive**. I was once dead, but now I'm alive. Alive to God. Alive to the Good. Alive to the Law. Alive to true freedom. Alive in spirit. Risen from the dead. Though I was alive naturally, God grants spiritual life. How? Purely by his grace alone. Through the means of the gospel proclaimed, which is the power of God unto salvation (**Rom 1:16**), he brings you to life. “Lazarus, come out.” The Word calls, and things come to life. This is

predestination applied in time. Through this life-giving calling, the gift of faith is granted. It is all of God.

Even greater, **he unites us literally to Christ**. The language is being “**in Christ Jesus**” (6). God has “**raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus**.” **As a head is to the body, as a branch is to a vine, as a wife is to a husband**, so also you are to Christ. It is a mystical, inseparable union, because it is all of grace. Through it, God literally gives us the very life of Jesus Christ himself, for he is in us by his Spirit. Christ in you, the hope of glory.

In the verses, there are two particular benefits of grace mentioned. The first is that **we have his very authority**. To be seated with him in heavenly places is to be given his power and dominion in heavenly places. This gives us power over the Evil One (**Eph 6**) and allows us to begin carrying out our function as image bearers on earth (**Eph 4:24**). This is looked at here in Ephesians as particularly doing good works (**Eph 2:10**), the opposite of Adam. “**We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.**”

Second, it allows us to enter into heaven in the coming ages. We speak of this as glorification, the transforming of our earthly bodies into bodies fit for eternity. And what awaits us there? “immeasurable riches” which he will show us (7). The riches of “his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1Co 2:9).

A Few Quotes

As we conclude, allow me to give a few summary quotes about grace alone, and then we will conclude with some thoughts about where we started. First, this doctrine was in the early church. By grace alone you understand the Scripture. Justin Martyr, “This grace alone was given me from God to understand Hi Scriptures in which grace I invite everyone to share freely and abundantly, lest I should be held accountable at the judgment” (Justin, *Dialogue* 58).

It is grace alone that predestines. Augustine, “It is grace alone that separates the redeemed from the lost, all having been mingled together in one mass of perdition from a

common cause leading back to their origin” (Augustine, *Faith, Hope, and Charity* 25.99).

It is grace alone that causes a person to believe the gospel. Fulgentius [467 – 532], “Grace alone worked in Paul to change him from an unbeliever into a believer. It converted an enemy and bestowed faith upon an unbeliever at a time when, because of his unbelief, he did not deserve to receive faith” (Fulgentius, *The Truth about Predestination and Grace* 2.27 [XVI]).

Perhaps my favorite, because of who said it and who published it, deals with **justification**. This comes from Leo the Great—Pope Leo the Great as published by the Catholic University Press, “For he sees a new people from all the human race being brought into adoption as children of God, and, through the virginal fertility of the Church, the births to regeneration being increased. He sees that he is deprived of the power of his domination, expelled from the hearts of those he once possessed; that thousands of the old of both sexes are snatched from him, thousands of the young, thousands of children; and that neither one’s own sin nor Original Sin stand in the way of anyone, when justification

is not granted by merits but is given by the generosity of grace alone” (Leo the Great, *Sermon* 49.3).¹²

And of course, grace alone is a major part of the Protestant Confessions. Ours says, “When God converts a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace, he freeth him from his natural bondage under sin, and by his grace alone enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good; yet so as that by reason of his remaining corruptions, he doth not perfectly, nor only will, that which is good, but doth also will that which is evil.” LBC 9.4. It adds the same thing about the effectual calling of the Holy Spirit (10.2) and the very idea of the covenant of grace in Christ (7.3).

So what are we to say? A case can be made that the Evangelical church of our day is either semi-Pelagian or as R. C. Sproul has argued, full out Pelagian.¹³ But either way, something horrible is being perverted in both the law and the gospel. With regard to the law, it is clearly not being preached in such a way as to make people consider their own

¹² Leo the Great, *Sermons*, ed. Thomas P. Halton, trans. Jane Patricia Freeland and Agnes Josephine Conway, vol. 93, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 211.

¹³ The slogan, “God helps those who help themselves,” was believed by 87% of American Evangelicals 20 years ago. On Pelagianism, see Sproul above.

sinfulness in relation to a Holy God. Why do people turn to Pelagianism? As **Anselm of Canterbury** said long ago, “**You have not yet considered how great *your sin is*.**”¹⁴ This, as we have seen, is a huge problem, because if people do not recognize themselves to be sinners, then what possible sense could the gospel of Jesus Christ and his death on the cross even make? What would even be the point. And in fact, it often isn't the point, even with Christians. It is the last thing, not the first, that they think about sharing with people.

This is precisely why not only do we find Pelagianism rearing its ugly head when horrible things happen, horrible things happen all the more when it rears its ugly head. Why? Because the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the only thing that can truly restrain our evil, wicked, violent hearts. Only when a person has internalized the love of God, the kindness of God, the forgiveness and mercy of God—in a word, only when they have experienced the amazing grace of God can there ever be a change in that heart of stone.

Why don't more Christians want to talk about this? Maybe it is because they've never been taught it. Maybe,

¹⁴ This is one of Horton's favorite quotes, appearing in at least a half of dozen of his books. Unfortunately, I have been unable to find exactly where it comes from.

God forbid, they have never come to see how amazing it actually is.

Laws and regulations can curb outward sins for a time, but if there is no changed inner-life, the natural order of things is really just an eternally devolving free-for-all of greater and greater depravity. Eventually, those with the power end up destroying those who do not have it. All great socialist experiments are rooted in one common anthropological denominator: Pelagianism. People (at least “my people”) are basically good. From the Communists of China and Russia, to the Socialist Nazis of Germany (granted, Hitler believed only one race was basically good), to the socialist experiments unraveling society in our country today, that is the premise. If we want to see this madness come to an end, there is only one power in all the world capable of overturning it. The grace of God through the Lord Jesus Christ and proclaimed in the Gospel and as experienced first-hand by a Christian.

I’ll leave you with a quote from a Lutheran scholar who wrote the following on the 400th anniversary of the Reformation, “Hearing Him and Him alone, Luther learned a glorious truth. Two words—and all Scripture was written

for their sake--; two words—and all spiritual life, and so also the life of the Reformation, strung from them--: *sola gratia*. They tell the despairing sinner that God, in His infinite mercy, has laid all the sins of the world of Jesus; that he is not required to bring about his salvation by his own works; that his sins are forgiven him freely, by grace.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Theodore Engelder, “The Three Principles of the Reformation: Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Sola Fides,” in *Four Hundred Years: Commemorative Essays on the Reformation of Dr. Martin Luther and Its Blessed Results*, ed. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1916), 101 [97-109]. <https://archive.org/stream/fourhundredyear00daugoog#page/n120/mode/2up>