



Minutes With Messiah

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HOORAY FOR MILTON

It's a nice story. Satan was a beautiful angel in heaven, maybe even a great singer. But then he gets too proud, leads a bunch of angels in a revolt and is kicked out of heaven. So he becomes the prince of this world, and reigns here and in hell. Add to that, Jesus went to hell after the crucifixion and took some keys from him. Oh, and one of his names is Lucifer. Sound familiar? It should. It is the plot of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and many people believe it is told in the Bible, too. The problem is, it isn't in the Bible at all. Some portions seem to be, but on closer examination they are not.

Start with two names. Satan and Lucifer. In the Old Testament the title Satan (adversary) appears in four books. The name/title is not used in the book of Genesis, even in the narration of the incidents in the Garden of Eden. (That passage only speaks of the serpent, and not even using the description as the devil.) In Job and Zechariah the one holding that title is still in heaven and appears to be some sort of prosecutor. In each case it may not even be the same angel. In either case, that puts Satan in heaven after the devil did his work on earth. It is not until the New Testament that the title Satan is in any way associated with the devil. For clarity it would have been better to say that the devil was the subject of that first paragraph. And what about Lucifer? That name or title appears only once in the Bible, if at all. The King James Version uses that name to translate a Hebrew word (that doesn't even sound like Lucifer) which means light-bearer. Most modern translations don't use that word at all. It only appears in Isaiah 14:12, where it is specifically addressing the king of Babylon. "How art thou fallen from the heavens." It prophesies the downfall of Babylon from its lofty position in world politics, and appears to have nothing to do with falling from the abode of God.

What about the beautiful angel description? Ezekiel 28 speaks of the "anointed cherub" who was "perfect...until iniquity was found in thee." Even though "thy heart was lifted up because of thy beauty" "I will cast thee to the ground." All are very good biblical quotes that sound very much like the story above. The problem is that they are specifically addressed to the king of Tyre.

So now we have prophecies about the kings of Babylon and Tyre conflated into a tale of a beautiful cherub named Lucifer who got too proud and was cast out

of heaven. It takes some serious twisting of the scriptures to make all of this symbolic of some angel, rather than the specific kings addressed.

Then there is his reign. Jesus did refer to the devil as "the prince of this world." (Jn 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) In two of those passages, however, he points out that his reign as prince was about to end when Jesus died on the stake. As far as reigning in hell, that might be a bit difficult. Because hell is a place without God, there can be no good. It is a place of chaos, of anarchy. There can be no ruler in such a place.

After this so-called rebellion someone was "cast out" of heaven. Peter does mention (2 Pet 2:4) angels that sinned who were cast down to hell and chained. He doesn't specify the sin, although any sin could be called rebellion. Some equate these to the "spirits in prison" of 1 Peter 3:19, which would make them human, not angelic. Some point out the ambiguity of the term angel, which can be used of men or heavenly beings. Either way, these angels are chained and not on this earth. Jesus "beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven." (Lk 10:18) No specifics are given as to when, why, or how. He specifies that he fell, not was cast out. To incorporate either of these passages into the narrative above would be to take them out of context and beat them as a square peg into a round hole.

As for taking the keys of hell, there is absolutely no relevant passage in the Bible. In Revelation 1:18 Jesus claims to possess the "keys of hell and of death." It does not say that he had to take them from anyone. They have always been his.

You tell people something long enough and loud enough they begin to believe it, and even repeat it. Too bad some of them don't research it first.

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IRRESISTIBLE GRACE

In *The Princess Bride* the character Vezzini often uses the word “Inconceivable.” At one point Inigo Montoya replies, “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.” Many articles have been written to refute the Calvinist doctrine of Irresistible Grace. In many cases, Reformed scholars will reply with some form of Inigo Montoya’s line. Irresistible doesn’t mean what you think it means. To that end, we must look at what they think it means before we can make arguments for or against the doctrine.

As with Limited Atonement, Calvin did not use the term irresistible. Rather, he spoke of effectual grace; that is, grace that accomplishes faith in the elect. The term irresistible is a shortcut for what he taught.

Most articles opposing Calvinism make the argument that if grace is irresistible that means God forces man to believe whether he wants to or not. While that seems to follow some of the other points of doctrine (unconditional election, and the underlying doctrine of specific predestination), Reformed writers say that this doctrine does not mean that God drags sinners kicking and screaming into salvation. In fact, the doctrine is not about

Calvin’s view is that grace is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to communicate God’s will to man.

who is saved and who is not; it is about how those who are to be saved are saved.

The important word is not “irresistible” or “effectual;” it is “grace.” The doctrine concerns itself with how grace works within a person to bring about and grow faith.

Irresistible Grace

Grace, according to Calvin, is that which is given by God that allows man to recognize his sinfulness and to know the mysteries of God. He calls it “preventive grace,” using the adjective in the sense of his day, not ours; preventive grace being that which comes before the will to do good.

The Apostle’s doctrine is not, that the grace of a good will is offered to us if we will accept of it, but that God himself is pleased so to work in us as to guide, turn,

and govern our heart by his Spirit, and reign in it as his own possession. (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book II, Chapter 3)

He also speaks of “effectual grace;” grace will achieve its work. Since the work of grace is to turn the will, then those to whom grace is given will necessarily have their wills changed. In this sense, then, grace could be called irresistible; if we are among those given grace (the elect), then we will choose to turn our will toward obedience.

And the only meaning which can be given to our Saviour’s words, “Every man, therefore, that has heard and learned of the Father, cometh unto me,” (John 6:45), is, that the grace of God is effectual in itself. ... Men are indeed to be taught that the favour of God is offered, without exception, to all who ask it; but since those only begin to ask whom heaven by grace inspires, even this minute portion of praise must not be withheld from him. It is the privilege of the elect to be regenerated by the Spirit of God, and then placed under his guidance and government. (*Institutes*, Book II, Chapter 3)

Lest one ask whether Adam could have made a free-will choice not to sin, Calvin (paraphrasing Augustine) says that Adam had the power to resist temptation if he had the will, “but he did not will to have the power.” We are better off than Adam because God gives us grace so that we have both the will and the power.

This doctrine is a logical extension of the earlier points of Calvinism. If man is totally depraved he cannot will to know God. If there are to be those who have the will to follow God, then that election is entirely from God. If God elects those who will be saved, then he must provide a means by which they are enabled to have that will. That means is grace, effectual in its work among those elect to whom God gives it.

It should also be pointed out that grace is not faith. Grace produces faith. “By grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.” (Eph 2:8) Faith is the means by which grace saves.

Calvin’s view, then, is that grace is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to communicate God’s will to man. Without this grace, sinful man cannot know God except as they are given a measure of grace that makes them uncomfortable by a knowledge of sin without the conviction of the salvation through the death of Jesus. (He must posit this ephemeral grace to justify that some of the reprobate have an awareness of their sin.) Thus grace, and therefore the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, precedes salvation.

The Biblical View

Given the Calvinist definition of grace, does the Bible support the same conclusion? That is, if grace guides our heart, and therefore having the work of the Holy Spirit must be the Holy Spirit, does the Bible teach that the gift precedes salvation? This is a basic tenet of at least some descendants of Calvinist thought. The Baptists at least, and possibly some other groups (including, recently, a few in the Church of Christ), contend that one must be saved prior to immersion because the gift precedes the act. Baptism may be essential, just not essential for salvation. What, though, does the Bible say?

Peter says “baptism doth also now save us.” (1 Pet 3:21) The Calvinist response says that he goes on to say it is “the answer of a good conscience toward God.” Since, in their view, one cannot have a good conscience unless they are among the elect and have been given the grace to understand their sinful state, then Peter must be saying that the good conscience is actually the saving force that sees its culmination in baptism. That might be an acceptable argument were it not for other scriptures.

This same Peter, in his first sermon after the ascension of the Christ, says “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.” (Acts 2:38) If the grace of God is only given to the elect to bring them to salvation, then Peter would have said “for you have received” (past) rather than “ye shall receive the gift” (future).

But if Peter says baptism (immersion) saves, and Paul says “you are saved by grace,” which one is right? Obviously, both are right. Grace is a driving force in salvation, which is not a one-time event but a lifetime process. Faith is the effectuator of salvation, and it is triggered by our submission to the reenactment of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. (Romans 6) When we die to the old man we are clothed with Jesus (Gal 3:27), and are given the gift of the Holy Spirit to guide us in the way which maintains that salvation.

Faith is the gift of God. (Eph 2:8) Even if one were to accept the doctrines of total depravity and unconditional election (which have been refuted in earlier articles), one would think that the Reformed view would talk of effectual, preventive, or irresistible faith rather than grace. While the two are interconnected, they are not the same thing. Even those who define grace as “unmerited favor” imply that grace is a gift of God. It is not. Therein lies the essential error of preventive grace; it defines grace wrongly.

So what, then, is grace, if not God’s gift? The Greek word commonly translated grace does not bear the meaning of a gift. It is favor or pleasure. It is a characteristic of God, not something he gives. Adding, as some do, the qualification of “unmerited” is unnecessary.

God is love. He looks upon us with favor, which is necessarily unmerited because we are all sinners.

If Calvin and his followers were to accept this definition, and it should be noted that Calvin never specifically defines what grace is, then they would be faced with two choices. The one that they would accept is that God only has favor to certain people, the elect. He looks at everyone else with disfavor. The problem with that is that it says that God has two essential, unwavering, and mutually exclusive attributes. God is love and unlove at the same time. The other choice is that God looks on everyone with favor, just as most parents look on all their children with favor, but does not condone the actions of every person. We condemn Jacob for showing favoritism toward Joseph, but taking the former view we would also be condemning God.

But not as the offence, so also is the free gift. For if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many.

Grace is a characteristic of God; faith is the gift.

(Rom 5:15; most modern translations read “the gift by the grace of one man, Jesus Christ”)

The gift, life (and by extension, salvation), comes through the grace of God and of Jesus, which incidentally implies that Jesus is God. The grace is that which caused Jesus to die as a sacrifice for sin. It is not the sacrifice itself, nor is it something resulting from that sacrifice. God’s gift to man is not grace but salvation.

What, then, of the passages where James and Peter quote the proverb that God “giveth grace to the humble”? If grace is an attribute of God, it can also be an attribute of man. This is not in the sense of that which leads us to salvation, but in the sense that other people look favorably on us. Thus those of humble estate often need a greater measure of this characteristic. It does not mean, however, that they are any more inclined toward salvation.

The formulation of Calvin’s doctrine of preventive grace was a reaction to Arminius’ doctrine of prevenient grace. Under the former, grace is given to the elect to lead them to salvation. Under the latter, grace is available for all who choose to receive it. Perhaps both were wrong. If grace is an attribute of God, rather than a gift given by God, then it is always there. It is neither something given by God to the elect, nor something people can choose to receive or reject. It just is. It is rather the gift that comes from that grace that can be received or rejected, given to a few or available to many.

The Calvinists sometimes argue that “irresistible” doesn’t mean what we think it means. Perhaps we should say the same for grace.

DIED OF LAUGHTER

In Umberto Eco's mystery, *The Name of the Rose*, someone is killing monks. In one argument an old monk (that, spoiler alert, turns out to be the killer) says that the Bible records that Jesus wept but never that he laughed. The monk who is trying to solve the mystery responds that neither does it say that Jesus did not laugh. It seems the whole mystery hinged on one man's theory that laughter is from the devil.

The old monk, by the way, was wrong. While the Bible never says directly that Jesus laughed, he does advocate laughter. "Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled. Blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh." (Lk 6:21) He went to parties, and as popular as he was it is hard to picture him with a dour look while all around him are laughing.

I like to laugh, and especially to make others laugh. I am especially on the lookout for good puns. Yes, it has been said that a pun is the lowest form of humor, but it has also been said that it is the highest form of wit. Shakespeare was so fond of the pun (or quibble in his day) that he averaged almost 80 puns per play, with some incorporating as many as 200. Even some of the historical plays had as many as 150.

There are some hymns we regularly sing that I have difficulty with because of my propensity to punning. In my house we eat a concoction of mushroom soup, hamburger, and rice that we call, logically, mushroom gravy over rice (Spanish: *arroz*). Whenever we sing *Low In the Grave*, I think that Jesus must have been fond of this concoction too. After all, the chorus repeats, "Up from the gravy *arroz*." He was also fond of Japanese soups, for the song *Why Did My Savior Come to Earth* claims that it was because he loved *miso*.

God was a baseball fan because he starts his book, "In the big inning." When some of the recent presidents of the United States got angry they became open to prophesying because God spoke through the burning Bush. I could go on, but will spare you the agony.

The Bible, though, is full of puns. Everyday people were fond of punning. It seems that biblical mothers could not help themselves. Frequently people were named because of some circumstance around their birth. Thus their names were often puns.

"And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, 'For God has appointed another seed for me instead of Abel, whom Cain killed.'" (Gen 4:25) Seth may be translated "to set" or "to appoint."

"And so it was, as her soul was departing (for she died), that she called his name Ben-Oni; but his father called him Benjamin." (Gen 35:18) Almost all of Jacob's sons were named as puns on their birth, but this one is most poignant. As the child's mother died she named him "Son of sorrow." Perhaps Jacob understood that this name would be a constant reminder that his birth had killed his mother. Instead Jacob named him "son of my right hand," perhaps implying his closeness to his favorite wife.

Not all puns, obviously, induce laughter. There is one name, however, directly related. God dictated that Abraham's son of his old age would be named Isaac ("he laughs). Both Abraham and his wife laughed at the thought of having a son at their age. If Jacob later saved his son from being a reminder of misfortune, God was not of the same mind. For the rest of his life, Abraham had to live with a reminder that he had laughed at God.

Maybe Abraham was fortunate that he did not live in the monastery in Eco's novel. Otherwise he might not have lived to father Isaac.

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