

## IS EFFICACIOUS GRACE IRRESISTIBLE?

### **Introduction**

The concept of grace is a familiar one to every Christian. In fact, one of the first verses that a new believer will often memorize is Ephesians 2:8 which states, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” All Christians understand that grace is the key component in salvation. Salvation is not of man’s doing; it is God’s.

Over the centuries much has been made of this term “grace.” What is grace? What is the nature of that grace? What kind of grace saves? The answers to these questions, as some have stated them, have stirred up considerable debate. And it is the object of this paper to discuss the grace that is spoken of in Ephesians 2:8—saving grace. This saving grace is “efficacious grace,” by which God effects salvation in the life.

This paper will endeavor to establish that efficacious grace is irresistible grace by first understanding the role of grace in salvation. We will then look at a more detailed definition of the doctrine and examine its merits based on the relevant Scriptural data. Finally, the objections to the doctrine will be answered so as to leave one without a doubt as to the validity of the argument for irresistible efficacious grace. In so doing we will ascertain that the nature of efficacious grace is as follows: Efficacious grace is irresistibly applied to the elect, overcoming their resistance to the call of the gospel and producing their salvation.

### **The Justification for Efficacious Grace**

It is necessary to first lay the groundwork for the doctrine of efficacious grace by discussing the need for grace *in general* and the relation of *efficacious* grace to other operations of grace. Additionally, we will strive to understand the role of efficacious grace in its relation to various other components of salvation. This section will serve to give an apprehension of the terms employed in the study of efficacious grace so that a meaningful conversation may occur in the chapters to follow.

### *The Need of Grace for Salvation*

Man is sinful—this fact is without dispute (Ps 130:3). A point that is of dispute, however, is the *extent* of man’s sinfulness. That this is a point of contention is peculiar, for the Scriptures appear clear on the matter. The Bible repeatedly directs us to the actuality that man’s sinfulness is total. We need only read Romans 3:10–18 to understand that every man is morally bankrupt, and he does not seek God in any way (cf. Rom 3:23, Jer 17:9, 1 John 5:19). Yet some would argue that while every person is sinful, man may have some ability to do good.<sup>1</sup> The meaning of Ephesians 2:1–5 is manifest: mankind is in dire straits; he is *dead* in sin and able only to pursue his own evil cravings. Man has no life or ability. Just as one would not ask a dead man to get up and walk, for he has no ability to do so, so also the natural man. Due to his spiritual deadness he is unable to do anything of spiritual good.

---

<sup>1</sup>The Pelagian view teaches that man is born neutral, free of original sin and able to choose good because he is not inherently bent toward evil. The semi-Pelagian view, seeking to palliate this stance, without going so far as to say that man is completely sinful and unable, still deprecates the fall of man. Man is no longer considered spiritually dead—only weakened. The will was injured, but not fatally so, in the Fall; he is able, therefore, to cooperate with God in salvation. The Arminian position is similar to the semi-Pelagian in its result. Man is considered guilty because of the sinful acts he commits (not because of his inherited sin nature), but he does not have the power to live righteously on his own. Each individual must have some type of mitigating bestowal from God—prevenient grace. This bestowal comes upon every man as a special influence to counteract the effects of depravity and make obedience possible. Each man is then able to make righteous choices. See Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1989), pp. 311–13, 404, 423–25, 433, 437.

This concept is integrally important to the topic of grace, for there can be no understanding of sin and the need for efficacious grace in salvation without first grasping the idea that man is *totally* depraved.<sup>2</sup> The sinner is dead in *every aspect* of his being—his heart is deceitful and desperately corrupt (Jer 17:9). Thus, unsaved man is unwilling and unable to choose God or to do anything that is good and pleasing to God.

When Adam sinned, all mankind was plunged into sin, and therefore death by sin (Rom 5:12). Though man may be a free moral agent, his will is free only to the extent that his nature is free, and man's nature is in bondage to sin. Therefore, man cannot choose good over evil in spiritual matters.<sup>3</sup> It is vital that one accurately grasp this concept, for it will color his thoughts on almost every other area pertaining to salvation and certainly his conception of efficacious grace.

Man is desperately sinful and totally unable; consequently, grace is necessary. But what is grace? Simply stated, grace is God's undeserved, unearned, and unwanted<sup>4</sup> favor. God's grace can be seen operating in two arenas. The first operation is seen in all mankind, via the Holy Spirit, to restrain the full impact and effects of sin in the world.<sup>5</sup> This form of grace is experienced by all men without discrimination, and it is designated theologically as common

---

<sup>2</sup>By total depravity we do not mean that every man is as sinful as he can be or that he does every sinful act that is imaginable. Rather, sin pervades his entire being.

<sup>3</sup>Calvin aptly stated, "When the will is enchained as the slave of sin, it cannot make a movement towards goodness, far less steadily pursue it. Every such movement is the first step in that conversion to God, which in Scripture is entirely ascribed to divine grace" (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1846], 2.3.5).

<sup>4</sup>Because of depravity the natural man is unwilling to have anything to do with God. The man's sinful will is under a natural and irresistible power to incline only one way—toward sin (cf. Rom 8:21, Gal 4:2, Eph 2:13). Calvin comments fittingly that the will "both inclines and hastens on with the strongest affection towards sin" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.3.5).

<sup>5</sup>Man is not manifestly as evil as he might be. In fact, many people give evidence of noble, gracious, and benevolent deeds.

grace.<sup>6</sup> Common grace is that which enables men to produce social order, achieve positive accomplishments, and perform civic good.<sup>7</sup> *Yet this mode of grace is not salvific*; it does not give any ability to produce *spiritual* good. For without faith it is impossible to please God (Rom 8:8, Heb 11:6), and apart from regeneration God cannot allow men into heaven (John 3:3). Therefore, there is a need for another operation of grace.

The second operation of grace is special or salvific grace, which is operative in only those to whom it is given. It is narrower in scope than common grace, for common grace is experienced by all. God is holy and demands perfect righteousness if man is to spend eternity with him, and since man is completely sinful and unable to come to God. “God must move to bring about reconciliation between man and God.”<sup>8</sup> God’s movement to reconcile the sinner to himself is called efficacious grace; it is termed efficacious because it is grace that necessarily “effects,” or produces, salvation. It is the solution to man’s sin problem, producing justification and bringing salvation from sin for God’s elect.<sup>9</sup>

### *The Need for Calling to Salvation*

---

<sup>6</sup>This grace is only possible because of Christ’s atonement, which makes spiritual provision for all men. His death provides the basis by which God can extend grace to the unbeliever. This is necessarily so theologically. “Any mitigation of the effects of sin is due ultimately to the cross work of Christ. There is no other basis on which God could deal with sin in grace or mercy. Common grace is grace, and is a mitigation of the full effects of sin” (Rolland D. McCune, “Systematic Theology II” [Class Notes, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, December 1998], pp. 181–85).

<sup>7</sup>Common grace is also seen in the general blessings which God imparts to all men indiscriminately, when and in what measure it seems good to him.

<sup>8</sup>Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, p. 332.

<sup>9</sup>Election, as it is used here, is more than simple foreknowledge, whereby God saw who would respond affirmatively to the gospel message and “elected” those people to salvation. That is an inaccurate understanding of the biblical use of “foreknowledge.” Foreknowledge is God’s placement of his electing love on a person or persons in a personal way; it is an intimate, special regard for someone. Further, it is closely related to his foreordination whereby all things are rendered certain. Cf. Eph 1:3–6, Rom 8:29, Rom 9:14–18. Election, therefore, is *God’s* choosing of particular individuals, based on no merit of their own but by his free grace, to bring them into a personal relationship of love by imparting faith and repentance upon regenerating them.

At this point a question must be logically deduced, given that man is totally depraved and yet God, by grace, may save him: What process does God use to transform a spiritually incapable sinner to a justified saint? More specifically, what draws an individual to the point of justification? Here we see there is an additional component to be examined in order to veritably fathom the relation of efficacious grace to salvation. That component, and the answer to the preceding question, is the calling of God. Through “the calling,” God confronts the needy, totally depraved sinner with the help he so desperately needs. By means of God’s calling, man is brought face to face with his spiritual condition.

But what is “the call” exactly? As with God’s grace, we find there are two aspects. The calling of God consists of both a general call and an effectual call. The general call is an unlimited invitation to respond to the gospel; it is indiscriminate and open to all men. The general call’s proclamation of the gospel brings a certainty of guilt to the heart of the sinner,<sup>10</sup> yet all men reject it due to hard-hearted unbelief. Men consider the gospel to be foolishness (1 Cor 1:81, 1 Cor 2:14), and though the invitation of the general call is a sincere and true offer, it is *always* rejected because of mankind’s spiritual deadness<sup>11</sup> and inability (Rom 8:7).

However, there is an effectual aspect of the call which is the power and wisdom of God unto salvation for his elect. The elect individual is effectually summoned to respond in faith to the invitation of the gospel and accept the gift of salvation.<sup>12</sup> What makes the difference between the influence of the general and effectual call (cf. Matt 22:14)? It is certainly not the sinner

---

<sup>10</sup>All men seek to reject or excuse themselves from the guilt they apprehend. They may say the gospel is untrue or that the feeling is only an emotion rooted in religious fear-mongering, but they are able console themselves by saying it is not “scientific fact.” However, in the end every man knows the truth of the gospel because of the image of God that is indelibly stamped on all men’s hearts.

<sup>11</sup> Spiritual deadness necessarily indicates blindness (2 Cor 4:4); therefore, man cannot see the offer as his only hope. He resists the way of righteousness, clinging to his own way—the way of destruction.

<sup>12</sup>*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, S.v. “Effectual Calling,” by J. Mitchell, Jr, p. 369.

himself, for no man comes to the Light who does not first love the Light (Rom 9:11–12, 2 Cor 4:6, 1 Pet 2:9). The difference is that there is something in the effectual call that *causes* a love of the light. More will be evaluated on this later, but for now it is sufficient to understand that those called “according to his purpose” will not finally reject or resist the effectual call of God. Rather, it draws the called sinner into fellowship with God, inevitably bringing life to the spiritually dead (Rom 8:30).

*The Relation of Efficacious Grace  
To the Effectual Call in Salvation*

Due to the language employed in the preceding discussions of efficacious grace and the effectual call, we are confronted with an obvious question: Are efficacious grace and the effectual call synonymous, or are we to understand some kind of distinction between the two? In answering this question it may be helpful to examine the concept of the effectual call in terms of the *ordo salutis*.<sup>13</sup> In point of fact, the first act in the *ordo salutis* is the effectual call whereby the sinner is summoned to salvation and “the benefits of redemption are conveyed to [him]”<sup>14</sup> (Rom 9:23–26). The effectual call inevitably brings about what it commands, effectively evoking faith and repentance. The same thing is also said of regeneration.<sup>15</sup> Regeneration is a divine work which comes before a man’s confession of faith; it renews the heart causing and enabling the individual to respond appropriately. Faith and repentance depend wholly upon the regenerating

---

<sup>13</sup>*Ordo salutis* is a Latin phrase which means “order of salvation.” The classical, Reformed order places the effectual calling first in the *ordo*. It is this positioning which is assumed here. It is beyond the scope of this paper to defend this position; however, for a thoroughgoing explanation for the Reformed *ordo* see Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), pp. 704–800.

<sup>14</sup>*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, S.v. “Call, Calling,” by J. I. Packer, p. 200.

<sup>15</sup>Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.24.8.

power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup> We may well then *equate* the effectual calling to regeneration.<sup>17</sup> It is regeneration, therefore, that is the effecting call causing men to repent in faith and be converted.<sup>18</sup>

If the effectual call is tantamount to regeneration then we must consider whether efficacious grace can also be equated to regeneration in answering whether the two terms are synonymous. Let us again look at what efficacious grace consists of to see if the same is true of regeneration. Efficacious grace, as the very name implies, is grace that accomplishes its purpose. It is by God's free act of grace that men *are* reconciled to him (2 Cor 5:18). Efficacious grace, "by changing the heart, . . . makes man perfectly willing to accept Jesus Christ unto salvation and to yield obedience to the will of God."<sup>19</sup> It is grace that *applies* a change of heart. The change that is wrought in the heart by efficacious grace may be identified as none other than regeneration itself. As previously stated, it is regeneration that causes a change in a man's desires so that he willingly comes to Christ and undergoes conversion. Therefore, efficacious grace could just as easily be termed regenerating grace. Additionally, the doctrine of efficacious grace is

based on the 'called' passages of Scripture (cf. Rom. 1:1, 6–7; 8:28; 1 Cor. 1:1–2, 24, 26; Eph. 1:18; 4:1, 4; 2 Tim. 1:9). This calling denotes the effective invitation of God whereby

---

<sup>16</sup>Regeneration comes before the human response, for man simply could not respond appropriately to the gospel on his own due to his total depravity and inability. Regeneration is pre-faith (cf. John 6:44) and "is the precondition of repentance unto life and faith in Jesus Christ; it is not dependent upon these for its appearance in the Christian life" (Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, p. 720).

<sup>17</sup>Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1907), p. 793. For an alternative view see Murray (John Murray, *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955], pp. 93–94).

<sup>18</sup>With this understanding we may posit that the Holy Spirit, in the act of effectual calling, *causes* the soul to become regenerate by implanting a new governing principle or habit of spiritual affection and action.

<sup>19</sup>Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 436. Note well that efficacious grace does not abrogate man's responsibility to believe (John 3:36). Moreover, man is lost because he *willfully refuses* to believe the gospel; his condemnation is not the result of not having received efficacious grace (John 3:18).

He woos the person through the power of the Holy Spirit and renders the individual willing to respond to the gospel.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, all that is said of the effectual call can also be said of efficacious grace. The two are equivalent, and they are both synonymous with regeneration.

### *The Role of Efficacious Grace in Salvation*

Man, because of his depravity, is unable to respond to the call of the gospel in his own unaided natural state. In order to come to salvation he needs something outside of himself—something which can effect a response. He needs God’s free, efficacious grace which elicits and, indeed, causes the individual to respond to the Word of God in repentance and faith. This efficacious grace *is regeneration* which God is producing in the elect individual; it is the call to faith, which goes out powerfully and effectually to the elect. Thus, God does for the individual what he cannot do for himself. The person is hence converted due to the supernatural, regenerating act of God. Moreover, because regeneration is granted or withheld according to the good pleasure of God, salvation is entirely of grace. We have, therefore, found that this kind of grace effects what it calls for; it is regenerating grace which produces salvation.<sup>21</sup>

### **An Explanation of the Nature of Efficacious Grace**

The concept of efficacious grace has been propounded as God’s working to make regeneration occur in the hearts of his elect, and it has been further stated that this is “inevitable.” What do we mean by this terminology? Is efficacious grace irresistible? Or an even more telling question according to what we discovered previously: *Is regeneration* irresistible?

---

<sup>20</sup>Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, p. 335.

<sup>21</sup>Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Scribner’s, 1872), 2:161–62.

*Efficacious Grace Is Irresistible*

The efficacious grace of God is irresistible—not in the sense that it cannot be opposed in any degree, but in the sense that it cannot be overcome.<sup>22</sup> That is, the regenerating work of the Spirit *will* and *must* occur in all those who God purposes for it to do so—in his elect. For even the elect share no affinity for God in their natural state; furthermore, they too have no ability to love God if left to their own devices. It is only because of God’s work, by means of the Holy Spirit, that particular ones are called effectually unto salvation.

*Efficacious Grace May Be Resisted for a Time*

However, efficacious grace is irresistible not in the sense that no form of grace is resisted by the sinner. Rather, when grace is of that special degree which constitutes it as regenerating or efficacious, it overcomes the sinner’s opposition and makes him willing, and he is changed by God’s power. This grace is irresistible in its effect; not by the way of physical constraint imposed on the will, but as a moral power, which makes man willing, and which infallibly attains its end—the conversion and final perfection of its subject.<sup>23</sup>

It must be stated that this does not mean that the non-elect will find God’s grace irresistible, for the regenerating grace of God is not even extended to them. Moreover, the irresistible nature of efficacious grace does not mean that the elect will be regenerated the very first time they hear the message of the gospel, for even the elect may resist God’s overtures toward them for a time. But God’s “elect are incapable of resisting forever God’s gracious overtures toward them. At his appointed time, God draws the elect, one by one, to himself by

---

<sup>22</sup>William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2003), p. 332.

<sup>23</sup>As Shedd states, the will of any human being “cannot be made willing or inclined by (a) external force, (b) human instruction, or (c) human persuasion.” It is only through the *immediate* operation of the Holy Spirit upon the human that his will is changed. Regeneration of the elect is not dependent upon the activity of the recipient; he is passive in the process (Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, p. 332).

removing their hostility and opposition to him and his Christ, making them willing to embrace his Son.”<sup>24</sup>

### *Efficacious Grace Is Not Finally Resistible*

Therefore, we should understand efficacious grace as being irresistible in that, when God chooses to save a man he does so easily and certainly. More specifically, salvation takes place when God, by his own gracious choice, regenerates a totally depraved, spiritually unable man from spiritual death and calls into existence a new nature that will cause a man to willingly respond to the Gospel message and be saved. It always occurs in every man God has selected, and it will not occur in the non-elect. Though it may be resisted for a time, it will not finally be resisted but will instead regenerate the ones God elects to place his grace upon.

### **The Biblical Support for Efficacious Grace**

We have developed a solid theological understanding of efficacious grace; however, it will prove important to examine a few texts that have bearing upon the doctrine and identify how efficacious grace is supported textually. We will examine five key texts in order to reinforce, from an exegetical standpoint, the biblical concept of the inevitable nature of regenerating, efficacious grace.

#### *The Spirit Will Regenerate Those Whom He Desires—John 3:3–8*<sup>25</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” <sup>4</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born?” <sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup>That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not

---

<sup>24</sup>Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, p. 1124.

<sup>25</sup>All Scripture quotations are from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’<sup>8</sup> The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

This discourse between Jesus and Nicodemus begins with a simple question from Nicodemus, which Christ then utilizes to transpose the topic to a higher plane. Jesus explains, in verse 3, that the requisite for experiencing God’s ruling over the life<sup>26</sup> is to be “born again.” He elaborates on that statement in verse 5 by stating that the requirement is to be “born of water and the Spirit.” Though there is some discussion on what it means to be born of water, the context clearly indicates that to be born of the Spirit denotes regeneration.<sup>27</sup>

John goes on in verse 6 to record Jesus’ words that *only* the Spirit of God can produce spiritual life, for just as human parents can only give life to human children, only the Spirit can produce spiritual life. The implication is clear: the Spirit is the author and source of spiritual life; there is nothing that man can do to begin or contribute to the impartation of regeneration. Furthermore, the comparison of the Spirit to the wind in verse 8 is telling on this concept. It illustrates that the work of the Spirit is invisible and mysterious; like the blowing of the wind, man can control neither.

Spiritual life cannot come according to man’s desire (cf. John 1:13); it is derived and initiated by God. The Holy Spirit is the power of God to give spiritual vitality; it “transform[s] frail humans.... The flesh of itself is unable, because of its frailty, to attain the destiny of eternal

---

<sup>26</sup>The phrase “kingdom of God” is used only twice in John’s gospel (John 3:3, 5). John typically favored eternal life terminology over kingdom terminology (Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1-11*, NAC [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996], p. 171). The phrase “[kingdom of God] has the significance of God’s rule in the lives of men, rather than of a territory or tract of land over which God rules. The expression *see the Kingdom of God* is therefore often translated ‘experience God’s ruling over one’ or ‘have God as one’s ruler’ or ‘enjoying the ruling of God over one’” (Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator’s Handbook on the Gospel of John* [New York: United Bible Societies, 1980], p. 78).

<sup>27</sup>Note similar terminology in Tit 3:5–6 and Ezek 36:26–27. Also consider both of these passages likewise speak of the work of regeneration as being accomplished by the Holy Spirit.

life, but the Spirit is the empowering means of life.”<sup>28</sup> The words of our Lord explain that God is the only active one in regeneration—he does it all. But not only can man contribute nothing in regeneration, he also cannot stop the regenerating work of the Spirit. It may be an argument from silence, but the passage does not show how the one who is acted upon can change this. When the Spirit sets his affections upon a man, he will regenerate that individual.

*Christ Gives Life to Whom He Wills—John 5:21*

For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will.

The chapter begins with a miracle that Jesus performs on the Sabbath. The Jews sought first to persecute Jesus because of his work on the Sabbath, but when Jesus corrected them by saying that he worked on the Sabbath just as his Father does, the Jews sought to kill him. Jesus was placing himself as equal with God. This, in return, opened the door to the gospel: as proof of his equality, Christ proclaims that he performs the same actions of the Father, giving life to the spiritually dead via regeneration. He found us when we were all dead. Moreover, the two phrases “raises the dead” and “gives life” are linked, in that it would not have been enough for Christ to rescue us from death if he had not completely and perfectly restored life in us.<sup>29</sup> Yet this life is not given indiscriminately, for “the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it.” Christ confers life only on his elect.

Consider the nature of this raising to life; is it inevitable? Let us assess this from a consideration of the creation of the universe. When God said, “Let there be light,” light irresistibly came into being. In addition, take into account that when Lazarus was raised from the

---

<sup>28</sup>Borchert, *John 1-11*, p. 176.

<sup>29</sup>John Calvin, *John*, Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994), Jn 5:21. George Beasley-Murray, *John*. WBC (Dallas: Word, 1999), p. 76.

dead, he came to life without opposition. When Christ “raises the dead and gives them [spiritual] life” he merely calls it into being and it occurs without any resistance from the one acted upon. Thus, regeneration will inevitably occur in those whom God desires for it to do so.

*The Call Effects Salvation in Those Who Are Elect—Romans 8:28–30*

<sup>28</sup>And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup>For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. <sup>30</sup>And those he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

In this passage we encounter the “salvation chain,”<sup>30</sup> which serves to enlighten us as to God’s purpose and working in salvation. God not only has chosen some for glorification but also works in such a way as to compel the chosen ones to that eternal life.<sup>31</sup> This is especially evident when we consider that Paul’s use of the past tense stresses the certainty of the event which is still future; the chosen ones *will* be glorified one day.<sup>32</sup>

It is of great importance that verse 30 does not say that “some” of those called are justified. It fuses the called and justified together so that those who have experienced calling have also inevitably received the blessing of justification. None are lost in the process. Now if all those who are called are also justified, then calling must be a calling that is effectual—it must create faith.<sup>33</sup> *All* those who are called are justified and justification cannot occur without faith,

---

<sup>30</sup>William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), p. 281.

<sup>31</sup>N.b. The call embraces the elect only, which is proven from the fact that the Scriptures represent the “called” as the “elect” and the “elect” as the “called” (cf. Rev. 17:14). The objects of God’s love are particular; He does not love everyone with the same love.

<sup>32</sup>Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Romans* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1973), p. 169.

<sup>33</sup>Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), p. 188.

which itself is only exercised upon regeneration. Thus, the “all” leads to an understanding that regeneration *necessarily* takes place in those who are chosen by God. The very purpose of the call is to make saints (cf. 1 Cor 1:2, 2 Thes 2:13–14). Altogether this is an act of God’s sovereign grace, wherein he always takes the initiative; man is passive in regeneration.<sup>34</sup>

We therefore discover that Romans 8:28–30 teaches that God *will* evoke a change in the hearts of all those he has ordained to salvation. It is not only a call to salvation, but verse 30 presents it as the kind of call that will certainly work effectually to bring about final salvation. The call will not fail, but will accomplish its final purpose to the glory of God. It may, therefore, be considered certain and irresistible.

*The Father Graciously Causes Regeneration in His Elect—1 Peter 1:3*

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Peter’s contemplation upon God’s mercy caused him to praise God as the author and source of the Christian’s hope. He extols God’s love, which provides the gift of regeneration. Peter vividly elucidates the necessarily efficacious nature of God’s regenerating grace, saying, “he has caused us to be born again.”<sup>35</sup> The concept emphasizes that the source of life is outside man and lies wholly with God whose Word engenders life (cf. 1:23). Just as a person is passive in natural birth, so is he also in spiritual birth. That is, God is active in the process of begetting a Christian, for he *causes* him to be born again. Thus, Peter helps us again see the difference

---

<sup>34</sup>A. A. Hodge, *Commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, reprinted 1958), p. 170; Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, p. 715. Newman and Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Romans*, p. 168.

<sup>35</sup>The ESV is correct in translating the clause as causal. See Daniel Arichea and Eugene Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the First Letter from Peter* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1980), pp. 14, 16. C.f. also BDAG, S.v. “ἀναγεννάω,” pp. 59–60.

between our natural birth and our spiritual birth—the efficacious grace of God. This grace of God causes regeneration to take place. That which it set out to do is always, inevitably accomplished.

*The Father Calls and Causes the Final Redemption of  
His Elect—John 6:37–40, 44–45, 65*

<sup>37</sup>“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. <sup>38</sup>For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. <sup>39</sup>And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. <sup>40</sup>For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” <sup>44</sup>No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. <sup>45</sup>It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me... <sup>65</sup>“no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.”

Verse 37 begins, “All that the Father gives to me will come to me.” What are we to make of this statement? The indication is that the Father has selected particular ones to be redeemed, and they will most certainly come to the Son to be secured. God leads to faith *all* those whom he plans to redeem. In other words, the redemption of the elect is certain *because* God has decided for it to be so.

Those who come to Christ will display it by adhering to his doctrine and becoming his followers. Accordingly, the Son promises to accept anyone who truly believes; he will never refuse to accept them, nor will he lose even one.<sup>36</sup> In fact, the force of verse 40 is that Christ *must* not lose any.<sup>37</sup> There is an important connection here that we must not gloss over. The Father has chosen some to gain life through the Son, and the chosen are *guaranteed* to have this come to fruition. God’s elect *will* be finally saved—the Son will lose not one from that group.

---

<sup>36</sup>Newman and Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of John*, p. 200.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*

In addition, according to verse 44, we see that those who come to Christ do so because they are “drawn.” Indeed, they can come through no other means. Jesus here teaches that no one can respond positively to his warning and invitation apart from the Father’s work of drawing the individual to Jesus. It is God’s divine prerogative to bring men to salvation.<sup>38</sup> God’s call is the difference between the rejection and acceptance of the gospel (cf. vv. 26–29, 1 Cor 1:22–24).

Consider also verse 65 wherein we find it is impossible for anyone to come to Christ without the enabling call of God. The sinner’s moral inability to choose Christ must be overcome by the gracious and sovereign power of the Spirit (John 3:5–21). Believers come to the Father through the Son, yet “they were already the Father’s before they became followers of Jesus” because they had been regenerated by the effectual call.<sup>39</sup> In the inner, effectual call the person’s mind is first enlightened and the heart renewed so that the gospel is accepted as the truth of God, and God in Christ becomes the object of love and affection.

This passage teaches us that there are none that the Father has chosen who will not be finally redeemed. Yet each person cannot come of his own choosing, but only via the Father’s drawing and granting. Those who are effectually called will hear, and the one who follows Christ as a result of the Father’s drawing will certainly be saved. This closely parallels John 10:26, 27 where we read that Jesus’ sheep will hear his voice and will follow him, and those who do not hear cannot because they are not his sheep (v. 26). The work described in this passage is the regenerating call of God, and it will certainly bring about salvation.

---

<sup>38</sup>The heart is naturally hard and will not accept God’s invitation unless a special work of God’s grace takes place (cf. John 6:65).

<sup>39</sup>Rodney A. Whitacre, *John*, IVP (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p. 161. It is appropriate to accept verse 44’s statement regarding the one that “comes to me” as speaking of regeneration for reasons already discussed in previous sections.

*A Summation of the Biblical Presentation of the Irresistible  
Nature of Regeneration and Efficacious Grace*

The Scriptural data supports the understanding that regeneration is certain for God's elect. As an act of God's sovereign grace he chooses to effect regeneration. It will inevitably come about, and it is not dependent upon the one who is acted upon. It cannot be successfully opposed, but will bring about the elect's salvation. Therefore, we may rightly label efficacious grace as irresistible; it is grace that causes what it desires in the elect—regeneration.

**Various Objections to Efficacious Grace**

Even after observing the biblical evidences, there are still some who object to the case for irresistible regenerating grace. The Arminian objects to the doctrine of irresistible grace, questioning why God would ever demand repentance if men are so enslaved to sin that they cannot respond. Arminians do not believe any person is so enslaved to sin that he is insensitive to or cannot respond to the gospel. Thus, they place faith before regeneration and the response to spiritual things prior to any spiritual life which enables one to respond. They fight against not only man's depravity but also God's election and irresistible grace.

*Faith Is Involuntary*

It is argued that if man is passive in regeneration, and regeneration is the necessary forerunner to conversion—which is composed of repentance and faith—then faith is an involuntary act. It is argued that if regeneration precedes faith then man does not come to Christ in faith. Efficacious grace, therefore, is unbiblical, for the Scriptures clearly call for conversion by means of repentance and faith (cf. Mk 1:15, John 3:16, Acts 3:19, Acts 16:31, 2 Pet 3:9).

The doctrine of efficacious grace does not necessitate that faith is involuntary. The converse is in fact true, for by efficacious grace God regenerates the mind, giving spiritual life

and illumination to the mind. The individual understands the call of the gospel and the need for conversion, responding in faith and repentance. Furthermore, the individual's faith is hardly involuntary. It is rather a joyous reflex of the spiritual life given through efficacious grace. The man is still called to respond in repentance and faith, which he does. He is not completely passive in salvation; it is only in regeneration that he is passive. His responsibility is to exercise what is commanded in the Scriptures—repent and believe.

### *Condemnation Is Unfair*

The Arminian may also contend that if it is impossible to resist efficacious grace then God cannot condemn those who are not regenerated, for they had no power to overcome. How can God still find fault since the concept of total depravity makes a response to the gospel apart from the effectual call impossible?

Paul has answered this very contention in Romans 9:19–21. Why does God still find fault, for who resists his will? Paul's answer is that God is completely sovereign and can do as he pleases with his creation. The fact that he does not regenerate all and that the non-elect cannot be converted apart from his regeneration does not remove every man's personal responsibility for sin.

Men are never condemned to hell because they are not God's elect. Men are condemned because of the sin that pervades their being. Non-election is never given as the reason men are eternally punished. However, election, which brings regeneration and conversion, is the only reason that men can spend eternity in heaven. Furthermore, unsaved man will undergo eternal punishment because he willfully resists the call of God. He wants nothing to do with God and hates him with his entire being (Rom 3:10–18).

### *God Is Partial*

The Arminian may also argue that efficacious grace does not coalesce with Scripture's teaching that God does not show favorites. Romans 2:11 states, "God shows no partiality." However, this contention fails to account for the context of the passage. Paul states this to show that "ethnic background or racial privilege will not deter God from blessing those who do good or from punishing those who do evil.... God will reward each person on the basis of what that person has done."<sup>40</sup>

### *Man Is Coerced*

If efficacious grace is irresistible, then every man's will is coerced, for he certainly does not have the power to resist. Man is therefore a machine. The argument for efficacious grace contends just the opposite; having made the human spirit voluntary and self-moving, God does not influence the will in a manner that destroys its voluntariness, nor does he coerce it in any way.<sup>41</sup> God does not drag sinners kicking and screaming into his kingdom. God knows his creatures and their natures; thus, he changes the very hearts of men to crave him and his Word. He renovates their will and desires by giving them a new heart.<sup>42</sup> God's omnipotent Spirit powerfully moves on sinners' hearts to make those who were formerly unwilling, willing to come to Christ. There will be no one in heaven who is frustrated because God forced them to believe. Efficacious grace changes the heart and man willingly desires salvation.

### *Conviction Is Resistible*

---

<sup>40</sup>Mounce, *Romans*, p. 93.

<sup>41</sup>Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology*, p. 335.

<sup>42</sup>Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, p. 332.

What about the conviction that a man may feel and yet resists (Acts 7:51)? If efficacious grace is irresistible, then why is there ever a struggle that goes on in a person's heart before he is regenerated? This would surely indicate that he is resisting God's regenerating grace, would it not? Many are lost in hell who might have been saved if they had not resisted God's grace.

By efficacious grace we do not mean to deny that men may, in some sense and to some extent, resist the Spirit, the possibility of which is clearly indicated in Scripture. However, when God sets his efficacious grace on someone he will not ultimately be rejected. Man can resist up to a point, but once he has been instantaneously regenerated he finally fully understands his need and is enabled to respond in faith.

However, conviction in an unbeliever's life does not necessitate that efficacious grace is to be extended, for persons who are not elected and who finally perish, "may have some common operations of the Spirit,"<sup>43</sup> which they will resist and cast off. All men always resist God's general calling, for it is not extended as an effectual call. Not all conviction leads to efficacious grace which actually regenerates.

### *Evangelism Is Squelched*

If efficacious grace is truly irresistible, due to man's total inability, and only regeneration will cause him to exercise faith, then there is no need for evangelism. We cannot rightly exhort one to repent and seek God, for it is impossible. He cannot respond to this appeal. Why evangelize?

Though the statement is correct that the natural man cannot respond appropriately to the gospel, that does not negate the need to proclaim the gospel openly and freely. Indeed, Paul explains that the Scriptures must be proclaimed, and men everywhere are to be called to repent

---

<sup>43</sup>Westminster Confession, 10.3.

(Rom 10:14). No one knows who God is working in effectually and who is only receiving the general call. The command is still the same: give the gospel, for we know that God uses his Word to impact the heart and effect change. Rather than being a detriment to evangelism, the doctrine of efficacious grace should be an impetus to spread the gospel zealously. God will always use his Word to accomplish his purpose (Isa 55:11).

### *Objections Are Answered*

Wesley once asked, “How is it more for the glory of God to save man irresistibly, than to save him as a free agent, by such grace as he may either concur with or resist?”<sup>44</sup> Though the question is thought provoking, on what basis is it asked? What are the Scriptural grounds for it? It seems that the Arminian develops his argument based not on Scripture but chiefly upon experience and natural theology, for the Scriptures do teach that efficacious grace is irresistible. Many objections may be raised to the doctrine of irresistible grace, but each one can be answered directly from Scripture.

### **Conclusion**

Our study has shown that all men everywhere are called to repent; however, only God’s elect will respond to the efficacious call. The natural man will never heed this call if left to his unaided “free will.” He can’t! Men are in bondage to sin and thus their will is also in bondage; therefore, when presented with a choice of good or evil, men will always choose evil. A man will never come to salvation apart from the Holy Spirit’s work in his heart.

In our examination of the various passages of Scripture it was determined that efficacious grace, which is synonymous with the effectual call and regeneration, is the grace which works in

---

<sup>44</sup>John Wesley, *Works*, Vol 10, p. 231.

the elect individual inevitably and irresistibly to grant regeneration. Though the message of the gospel is available to all, only those whom the Father sets his love upon and draws will be regenerated.

By the work of the Holy Spirit in a man's heart, efficacious grace renders the person *willing* to believe in Jesus Christ. Though the conviction of the Spirit may be resisted for a time, it will inevitably cause the impartation of spiritual life and renew the mind of those effectually called. The Spirit then creates faith in the heart and causes the man to respond to the call to repent. Yet the individual does not come against his will; rather, his will is changed via regeneration so that he now desires the good news of eternal life. Thus, he freely comes to the decision of faith and repentance. This will inevitably take place in God's elect to produce their salvation. God's efficacious grace is irresistible; it always produces that which it desires to effect.