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Titus 2:11

For the grace of God has been revealed, bringing salvation to all people.

Psalm 121, New Living Translation

¹ *I look up to the mountains—
does my help come from there?*

² *My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth!*

³ *He will not let you stumble;
the one who watches over you will not slumber.*

⁴ *Indeed, he who watches over Israel
never slumbers or sleeps.*

⁵ *The LORD himself watches over you!
The LORD stands beside you as your protective shade.*

⁶ *The sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon at night.*

⁷ *The LORD keeps you from all harm
and watches over your life.*

⁸ *The LORD keeps watch over you as you come and go,
both now and forever.*

So, what is Prevenient Grace?

The word prevenient is archaic now and certainly isn't in common use, but it was used heavily by John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement. In regard

to the concept behind this term, he was heavily influenced by a sect of Christianity called Arminianism, which was part of the Dutch reformed movement in the late 1500's. It's a concept that is deeply embedded in the United Methodist approach to Christianity. I'd like to talk about what it meant traditionally – and what it might mean for us today.

What does it mean? We could argue that it reflects God's love for all people. Some argue that it has a somewhat more negative connotation.

Let's pull the word apart. There's a root at the beginning of the word that means "to come before". It doesn't mean to prevent. The important root is pre – not prevent. It refers to a form of grace that we receive before we accept Christ in to our lives. It is a form of grace that every human receives. It is God acting in a lovingly way, drawing us toward God – *before we are even aware of it.*

Not only is prevenient grace a form of grace that we get in a completely unearned fashion, it is a form of grace that we don't even know is there. Here is what it can do for us. Prevenient grace is how many of us come to God when we have never entered a church. Or we might have been attending a church for many years, but never truly accepted Christ. Or, we might find ourselves returning to God after some period of being away from the church. In any case,

prevenient grace was there, working on us, even when we are not consciously aware of it.

Why would it exist at all? Why would John Wesley want to talk and write about prevenient grace? Well, it resolves a bit of a paradox in Christian faith. We give God total credit for our eternal salvation. That is what we are taught. But on the other hand, each of us is responsible for our faith or lack thereof. There is a conflict in this. The answer is prevenient grace. God is in charge of our salvation and yet we are responsible for our salvation – so, it must be that God gives each and every one of us a fair chance at coming to God. Thus, we have prevenient grace – we don't have to initiate our own salvation, but we do have to accept God's offer of love and salvation – because God is reaching out to us.

What does this mean for us today, though? John Wesley lived in the 1700's. And to be honest, in the context of 1700's Christianity, prevenient grace was there to help us out of a jam - and thus, the negative connotation. Christians at the time were told over and over by their preachers that humans are inherently and totally corrupt, that we are condemned for eternity if we don't accept God and become Christians, with deep, sincere faith. Prevenient grace was a way out, a path for us to get out of this mess – this state of being sinful to our very core.

I'd like to change the subject for a moment and talk about my kindergarten days. I lived in Santa Rosa, in northern California at the time. While I attended Catholic schools from second through twelfth grade, I went to a public kindergarten – in the morning. We lived in an apartment and the local school bus didn't stop near our building. So, I walked to school.

Now, I was a particularly independent kid. And one morning, as I was walking the several blocks to school, a clever idea occurred to me. I would hitchhike. I don't remember where I got the idea; I imagine that I saw it on TV. But it sure seemed like an easy way to shorten the walk. And it seemed downright cool. So, I stood on a corner about a block from my house and stuck my thumb out and waited for someone to stop.

It didn't take long at all. A car stopped. The passenger door opened. I climbed in. The car drove away.

Now, back to prevenient grace. Let's try to look at it from a positive perspective. Consider our first Bible verse today. It's very brief and very simple: *For the grace of God has been revealed, bringing salvation to all people.* Indeed, God gives his grace to everyone. Without exception. But when we look at this book as a whole, we get insight into prevenient grace's negative interpretation.

This quote comes from the Book of Titus, which is a letter written by Paul to Titus, who is working with the church on Crete, a large island in the Mediterranean Sea. Paul instructs Titus to appoint spiritual leaders. He tells Titus to focus on sound Christian teachings that lead to holy living – something that Crete was definitely not known for at the time. In this letter, Paul is telling Titus that God's people will have to work hard to live godly lives in a deeply evil world where people live deeply evil lives.

So, our first quote, though it sounds positive, actually came bundled in a negative message. And most of us will agree that this message is still quite valid today. Turning on the TV, looking at news videos online, reading the paper – whenever we look at what's going on in the world, we're reminded that this is a tough world for people who insist on living in a fashion where we care about others as much as we care about ourselves. Young people today face an extreme challenge. They are supposed to promote themselves, judge others, be unforgiving, attain positions of authority, and gather wealth. And it takes a lot of money today to be a full-fledged member of the digital age. Cell phones and cell phone contracts, cable TV, computers, Internet connectivity, these things cost a lot of money – and you're supposed to have them when you are young.

How can we be Christ-like and humble when we face moral challenges that run so deep as to suggest that all of us are basically evil? Prevenient grace - God working within us without us knowing it? Maybe that simply is it.

Let's consider our second Bible passage for today. There are a series of Psalms, numbers 120 through 134 that have, since ancient times, bore the title "A Song of Ascents", or a song of climbing. It's thought that perhaps these psalms were sung by Jews who were traveling on trips they made three times a year to visit Jerusalem for Passover, the Festival of the Harvest, or the Festival of the Shelters. This last holy day celebrated the Tabernacle, or God's dwelling place.

Psalm 121, which we heard in its entirety, does feel like a Prayer for travelers.

*He will not let you stumble;
the one who watches over you will not slumber.*

⁵ *The LORD himself watches over you!
The LORD stands beside you as your protective shade.*

⁸ *The LORD keeps watch over you as you come and go,
both now and forever.*

In a way, this is a more positive take on prevenient grace. Yes, it's there, even if we don't know it, even if we are not listening for the voice of God in our lives. But maybe it's not so much that God is giving us a way out of the ultimate capital punishment for being inherently evil. Maybe God simply wants us to be

happy and to grow. Prevenient grace is a useful thing today in a society where humility and dedication to God are traits that are held in contempt. This was also true on Crete, in the decades right after the death of Christ. But maybe instead of curing us of something that isn't even our fault – the actions of others - prevenient grace is watching over us, protecting us, keeping us safe.

Now, what about my ride to Kindergarten? As I climbed into that car, I looked in and saw that it was an older lady, easily old enough to be my grandmother. She sternly asked me where I thought I was going. I gave her the name of my kindergarten. She nodded solemnly as she drove away.

She took me to my kindergarten. As we pulled up to the curb, I even remembered to thank her. But just as I was saying thank you ma'am, she said, you wait right there, young man. Then she came around to my side of the car and pulled me out. She held my hand tightly as she led me into the school.

She took me to took me to my classroom. She marched me up to my teacher, Mrs. Bridgewater, and told her that she had caught this little kid hitchhiking to kindergarten. He was standing on the sidewalk with his thumb in the air, she said. She had grandchildren who were about my age, and she knew what she would want someone to do if one of them was hitchhiking.

This lady told my teacher that she didn't drive much anymore but had decided that she wanted to attend a special prayer service at her church that morning. Because of me, she added, she was missing that prayer service.

I remember Mrs. Bridgewater, whom I liked very much, putting her hands on her hips and staring down at me, shaking her head.

Now, this was a public school, but this was an age when teachers weren't afraid to talk about God. And that's just what Mrs. Bridgewater did. She squatted down in front of me. "Buzzy, she said, "God was looking after you today. You could have been picked up by someone who could have hurt you. I know you didn't mean to do anything bad. But you never, never get in a car with someone you do not know. Okay?"

"Yes," I said meekly.

"Well, God sent this nice lady out there to get you. She didn't know that was what God wanted her to do this morning. She thought she was going to church. But this is a woman who listens to God. When she saw you standing there, she knew that you were the real reason for her trip today. That is why you are safe. This woman loves you. Do you understand that?"

I nodded, my head down.

The woman who picked me up went on her way. Mrs. Bridgewater called my mother after school. Because Mrs. Bridgewater made it clear that God was there looking after me, the incident made a huge impact on me.

That older lady who picked me up was God's grace, protecting me, even when I wasn't looking for protection. When I was a young boy and had not yet come to understand the place of God in my life, I discovered that God was there. God sent that woman to me as a form of prevenient grace – protecting me and letting me know that God was in my life.

Many, many people would simply say that her presence was coincidental. Was it?

Here's another one. When Wendy was pregnant with our son Julien, she was working in Fort Collins. We were living in Boulder. One day, when she was maybe seven months pregnant, there was a sudden blizzard when she was driving home from work. Then her car broke down. She found herself standing by her dead car in a very heavy snowfall, in the freezing cold – and this was in the days before cell phones.

After she had been there about thirty minutes, a man in a subcompact car pulled up. He had three little kids in the backseat and a Bible on his dash. He had

seen her on the side of the freeway when he drove by – in the opposite direction. He had gotten off at the next offramp and gone back for her. Then he drove her home to Boulder. Did God plant that man there at that moment?

But let's get back to prevenient grace. Now the truth is that indeed, this notion is rooted in the old school vision of Christianity where we are all hopeless sinners frozen in shame, needing God to rescue us.

Let's look at prevenient grace from the perspective of the woman who picked me up and the man who gave Wendy a ride. Maybe what prevenient grace is all about for us now is God whispering in our ears, not telling us that we can be saved from damnation, but that we can reach out and be the one who eases the earthly and spiritual suffering of other people. Maybe prevenient grace was telling that woman to rescue me or telling that man to go out of his way to rescue Wendy. Their job was to be Christ-like at that moment – and they knew it. They had grown because of prevenient grace - and they were passing it on.

Yes, all of us sin and we need God to guide us in the right direction. And we do need to be listening for that opportunity. But that right direction might have less to do with avoiding damnation - and more to do with making the effort to help others and to protect innocent people, the way God will always protect us.