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**Divine Grace, the Nature of Human Will, and the Irrevocable Nature of Salvation**

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God is not man that he should lie.  
God is not the son of man that he should change his mind.  
Does he speak and then never act?  
Does he promise and not fulfill? (Deut. 23:19)

**Introduction**

We use the term grace in common speech to denote kindness, elegance, refinement and polish.<sup>2</sup> But, we use the term grace in theology to denote favor, undeserved love, and empowerment from God to do what is above our natural ability to do. The doctrine of divine grace teaches two important facts about God and his relationship with us. It teaches: (1) that God loves Adam so much that God forewarned Adam of the death embedded in the fruit of the tree, which *is* in the middle of Eden; and (2) that God graciously prolonged Adam’s life on earth after he ate the fruit of that tree. These two facts are so

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<sup>1</sup> See [vnstaben@yahoo.com](mailto:vnstaben@yahoo.com).  
<sup>2</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED).

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fundamental to the Christian gospel that they sum up the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for our salvation from sin and death.<sup>3</sup>

But these two facts also generate a profound theological puzzle for us. To adequately state this puzzle, we need to point out our pre-theological conviction that God is faithful to his words such that if God told Adam that he would die if he eats the fruit of that tree, then when Adam ate the fruit of that tree Adam should have died right away. But Adam ate the fruit of that tree yet he did not die right away.

Why?

We will examine Adam's will and says, first, why Adam disobeyed God and ate the fruit of the tree that God told him not to eat. Second, we will argue that although Adam should have died right away after he ate the fruit of that tree, the grace of God empowered him to live long after he ate the fruit of that tree. We shall end the paper with a brief explanation of why Adam (and we) cannot reject the grace God gives us unto salvation from sin and death.

#### **A. The Puzzle**

We can best see this puzzle if we note that the main reason why God told Adam not to eat the fruit of that tree was to keep Adam alive on earth forever. God knew that the substance of that fruit was deadly to Adam. If Adam eats it he would surely die. So, God told Adam not to eat it. God called the fruit: "the fruit of knowledge of good and evil." The title "knowledge of good and evil" is euphemism for death. To keep Adam alive on earth, therefore, God told him not to eat the fruit of that tree.

But, Adam ate the fruit of that tree anyway. Having eaten the fruit, Adam ought to have died right away. But Adam did not die, which generates a serious theological puzzle for us. First, why did Adam eat the fruit of that tree? Second, why did Adam not die right away after he ate the fruit? Another way of stating this puzzle is this: We *know* that God is faithful to his words. So, if God says that it will be (x) at  $t_1$ , it will be (x) at  $t_1$ . It cannot be the case that God says that it will be (x) at  $t_1$ , yet it is not (x) at  $t_1$ . Equally, if God says that it will be not-x ( $\sim$ x) at  $t_1$ , it will be not-x ( $\sim$ x) at  $t_1$ . We know this *a priori*,

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<sup>3</sup> Scott Hoezee, *Actuality: Real Life Stories for Sermons that Matter* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014), p.90.

i.e., from our pre-theological intuition that God has all powers (omnipotence) and that God knows all things (omniscience).<sup>4</sup>

So, why did God tell Adam that if he eats the fruit of that tree he would die yet Adam ate the fruit and he did not die? Did God mean what he said to Adam or did God change his mind? That is, did God mean to tell Adam that he would *possibly* die if he eats the fruit or that he would *actually* die if he eats the fruit? If the former, then that Adam did not die right away does not constitute any serious theological puzzle because God's statement is contingent (i.e., Adam may, or may not, die). But, if the latter, then that Adam ate the fruit but he did not die right away constitutes a serious theological puzzle because God's statement is necessary (i.e., Adam must die, no matter what). We take the latter option. Thus, the continuous existence of Adam, after he ate the fruit, generates a serious theological puzzle.

We will use the doctrine of divine grace to (try and) solve this puzzle. The doctrine of divine grace gives us a way to show both how God is faithful to his word and to state the reason why Adam continued to exist after he ate the fruit of that tree. But, first, let us examine Adam's will to see why he disobeyed God and ate the fruit of that tree.

### **B. The Human Will**

Note that while God warned Adam not to eat the fruit of the tree, which is in the middle of Eden, because he would die if he eats it, death was not a form of punishment to Adam for disobeying God. Rather, death was innate in the fruit and it was to occur to Adam as a consequence of eating the fruit. It was a case in which either Adam does not eat the fruit and so he lives or Adam eats the fruit and so he dies. God left it open to Adam to choose either to eat the fruit or not to eat the fruit. Unlike sticks and stones that lack freewill, God gave Adam a freewill to choose to do whatever he wanted to do. William James writes: "We impute no mentality to sticks and stones, because they never seem to move for the sake of anything, but always when

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<sup>4</sup> We can cash out omnipotence as the property of being such that God has all powers that it is possible for a divine being to have. Thus, to say that God is omnipotent is to say that God has powers to bring about anything God says. We can cash out omniscience as the property of being such that God fully knows all actual and possible states of affairs. So, any proposition that God asserts is one God knows its truth-value and modal status. It follows that God can only assert true propositions.

pushed, and then indifferently and with no sign of *choice*. So, unhesitatingly we call them senseless” (italics mine).<sup>5</sup>

In modern parlance, we can say that God did not make Adam like a robot. A robot lacks a freewill to choose to do whatever it wants to do. Thus, a robot can only do what its maker automates it to do. But God did not automate Adam to do only what God wants. Rather, God left it open to Adam to will to do whatever Adam wants to do, which includes obeying or disobeying God. Adam freely chose to disobey God by eating the fruit of the tree that was in the middle of Eden.

But before Adam made the choice, God had given him valuable information about the tree to help him choose not to eat it. Had Adam listened to God, he would have chosen not to eat the fruit, then he would have lived forever. Since Adam knew that the consequence of eating the fruit was death, Adam should not have eaten it. But, alas, Adam plucked the fruit and ate it. Thus, implicitly, Adam freely chose death.

The possibility that Adam would live forever was directly proportionate to Adam’s ability to choose not to eat that fruit. Since Adam did not utilize his will power to resist eating the fruit that entailed death, Adam brought it about that he could not live forever on earth. Adam embraced death when he freely chose to eat the fruit of that tree.

### C. Satan’s Temptation

Adam ate the fruit of that tree because Satan came into the Garden of Eden and convinced Adam that the fruit of that tree would not *actually* kill him. Rather, Satan said that the fruit would make Adam to be like God. Thus, Satan counteracted God’s assertion that the fruit has the substance that would kill Adam if he eats it. Adam weighed the words of Satan against the words of God and he concluded that Satan’s words were true. That is, Adam concurred with Satan that the fruit would not *actually* kill him; rather it would make him to be like God. But soon after Adam ate the fruit, he realized that Satan lied to him.

Satan lied to Adam when he told Adam that the fruit would not *actually* kill him, but make him to be like God. Indeed, Satan knew both that the fruit would *actually* kill Adam and that the fruit would not make Adam to be like God. But he lied to Adam to make Adam eat the fruit and die. Why? Well, Satan believed that the death of Adam would make God very sad. If God were sad, Satan would be happy. Satan

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<sup>5</sup> William James, *Psychology*, Vol. 1. p. 8.

would be happy because something quite precious to God is destroyed or annihilated. Thus, the Scripture attests to Satan's ongoing quest to kill, to steal, and to destroy the precious works of God.<sup>6</sup>

But Adam did not know that Satan actually wanted to kill him. Hence, Adam accepted Satan's words and he plucked the fruit and he ate it. It was only after Adam ate the fruit that he realized that Satan lied to him with the intent to kill him. Adam did not become like God and he did not gain knowledge of good. The only knowledge Adam gained was knowledge of evil. After eating the fruit, Adam fell into Satan's control and Satan subjected Adam to evil always.

Still, note that Satan failed to achieve his ultimate goal, which was to kill Adam. Satan failed to kill Adam because God graciously sustained Adam's life after he ate the fruit of that tree. Had God not graciously sustained Adam, Satan would have killed Adam and thereby dealt a huge blow to the kingdom of God. That is precisely what Satan wanted. Satan wanted to eliminate God's image bearer on earth so he would establish his mischievous kingdom on earth unopposed. But, thank God, the grace of God sustained Adam, so Satan could not achieve his ultimate goal. Thus, James K. A. Smith wittingly states: "To merely exist as a creature is to be dependent on the gift of existence granted by a gracious God: to be is to be graced."<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, Satan was quite puzzled that Adam did not die after Adam ate the fruit of that tree. Satan knew that the fruit was deadly and that if Adam eats it he would surely die. That Adam ate the fruit but he did not die was quite puzzling to Satan. It raised the question: "Why did Adam not die after he ate the fruit of that tree?"

Adam did not die because God sustained him. True, the substance of the fruit was poisonous, but God gave Adam grace, which emasculated the poisonous substance in the fruit, so it could not kill Adam right away. In due time, God would efface all vestiges of sin and death from Adam through Jesus Christ by the working of the Holy Spirit.

#### **D. Doctrine of Divine Grace**

The doctrine of divine grace gives us a way to redress this puzzle, i.e., of showing God's faithfulness to his words and of justifying God's

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<sup>6</sup> John 10:10.

<sup>7</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Letters to a Young Calvinist* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010), 15.

sustenance of Adam after he ate the fruit of that tree. An adequate account of the theological concept of grace presupposes two fundamental properties of God, what are called undeserved love (favor) and what are called supreme (divine) power. God's communication of these two properties to us, in his interaction with us, is what theologians call grace. Thus, grace denotes the *underserved (or unmerited) love* and the *awesome power* of God infused in Adam to sustain Adam's life after he ate the fruit of that tree.

Love is underserved (or unmerited) if it does not reciprocate prior love shown by the beloved. Love is deserved (or merited) if it reciprocates prior love shown by the beloved. Had Adam loved God, God's love of Adam would have reciprocated Adam's love. In that case, God's love of Adam would be deserved. But Adam disobeyed God's word; hence Adam did not show love to God. Still, God loved Adam so much that God graciously sustained Adam after he ate the fruit of that tree. God's great love of Adam is undeserved (unmerited), but without it Adam would have died. The writer of Lamentation puts this fact thus: "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed for his compassions never fail."<sup>8</sup> Grace, understood as the gift of God's undeserved love to Adam, is what sustained Adam after he ate the fruit of that tree. God's grace accomplished two things in Adam: (1) it made Adam to live, and (2) it made Adam to reciprocate God's love.

Secondly, by grace (that is, by God's power in Adam) Adam lived long after he ate the fruit of that tree. Paul attests, "And he said to me, my grace is sufficient for you for my strength (power) is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly, therefore, will I rather glory in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest upon me."<sup>9</sup> Again, Paul equates God's grace with God's power: "I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's *grace* given me through the working of his *power*."<sup>10</sup> Adam lived because God's power (grace) sustained him. God empowered Adam to live despite the death sentence that hanged over his head. God's power in Adam impeded Satan's strategy to kill Adam.

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<sup>8</sup> Lamentation 3:22 (NIV).

<sup>9</sup> II Corinthians 12:9.

<sup>10</sup> Ephesians 3:7.

Just as God's power enabled Adam to love and obey God, so God's grace makes us to love and obey God. Thus, Jesus told his disciples to wait in Jerusalem for divine power before they could preach the gospel to the world.<sup>11</sup> Although Jesus commissioned his disciples to preach the gospel, he knew that they would default unless they have divine power. So, Jesus told them to wait in Jerusalem until they get divine power to preach the gospel to the world. When they received divine power, on Pentecost day, Peter and the disciples preached and converted many people to Christianity. The disciples credited God's power with their ability to preach the gospel to the world. They acknowledged that it's "by God's grace" that they have preached the gospel and that many people have accepted the gospel.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, John Calvin credits God's grace (God's power) with enabling us to live and work for God. Calvin attests that God's grace (power) is what sustains us so Satan *cannot* destroy us and it enables us to do God's will.<sup>13</sup> Satan's potent tool of destruction, which is disobedience to God, is made impotent by the grace of God in us. As such, Satan cannot kill us. We now reciprocate God's love by obedience to his will. We no longer reject God's grace; rather we receive it happily and use it to live so Satan cannot kill us.

### **E. Irresistibility of Salvation**

I have argued that it is God's grace that made Adam to live. So, it is evident why Adam (and we) cannot resist God's grace. We cannot resist God's grace because it is God's power to save us from sin and death. Since we desire life, we do not resist or revoke the salvation God gives us in Jesus Christ from the evil of sin, estrangement from God, and death.<sup>14</sup>

The ultimate gift of God's grace to us, through Jesus Christ, is eternal life. Just as God gave grace to Adam in Eden to keep him alive, so God gives grace to us in Jesus Christ to keep us alive eternally. God's grace is irresistible because God's power works in us through

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew 29:19-20; Acts 1:8.

<sup>12</sup> Acts 2:41

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will: A Defense of the Orthodox Doctrine of Human Choice Against Pighius*, ed. A.N.S. Lane, trans. G. I. Davies; *Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker 1996), 174.

<sup>14</sup> William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. John Dykstra Eusden (Durham, NC, Labyrinth Press, 1968), 54.

the Holy Spirit to make us embrace it. The Holy Spirit helps us to realize our need for the grace God gives us and he makes us able to accept the grace God gives us unto salvation.

Historically, it was the followers of Jacob Arminius who held that we could reject the grace God gives us unto salvation. Writing in 1610 A.D., against the teaching of John Calvin on irresistible grace, followers of Arminius stated in the *Remonstrance*<sup>15</sup>:

God's grace is the beginning, continuation, and end of our spiritual life so man can neither think nor do any good or resist sin without prevenient, co-operating, and assisting grace. But as for the manner of co-operation, this grace is not irresistible, for many resist the Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup>

Followers of John Calvin insist that no one can resist God's grace because the Holy Spirit works in the elect to make them accept the grace God gives them unto salvation. The elect is not forced to accept the grace God gives but by the aid of the Holy Spirit in the elect, God brings the elect to warmly embrace the grace of God unto salvation. This Calvinistic view is aptly stated in the Canons of Dort:

What neither nature nor the law can do, God accomplishes by the power of the Holy Spirit (Art.6). In eternity, God chose his own, and within time he effectively calls them and grants them faith (Art. 10). The Holy Spirit supernaturally regenerates God's chosen ones in an incomprehensible manner (Art. 11-13). This regenerating work is irresistible: all those in whose hearts God works in this marvelous way are certainly, unfailingly, and effectively reborn and do actually believe (Art. 12).<sup>17</sup>

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) also affirms the effectual call of God's elect:

All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, he is pleased, in his appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by his Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ: enlightening their minds, spiritually and savingly, to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and by his almighty power determining in them to

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<sup>15</sup> The *Remonstrance* was a five-point contra-Calvinistic document that stated Arminian teachings on *Ordo Salutis*. The theological debate that ensued between the Calvinists and the Arminians on the *Ordo Salutis* lasted for a long time until it was finally settled at the Synod of Dort (November 1618 to May 1619).

<sup>16</sup> Philip Schaffer, *A History of the Creed of Christendom* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1877), 517.

<sup>17</sup> Keith A Mathison, "Transforming Grace," in *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion Doctrine and Doxology*, ed. Burk Parsons (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust, 2008), 170.



that which is good; and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ; yet so as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace.<sup>18</sup>

It is actually the desire of the elect to live (and not to die) that makes them to freely embrace the grace God gives them through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In Jesus Christ, God gives us precisely what we desire, namely, eternal life unto salvation from sin and death. The fact that we cannot resist the grace God gives us unto salvation does not imply that God compels us to accept it. We embrace grace because we yearn for eternal life unto salvation from sin and death. Hence, we warmly embrace God's undeserved love and power bestowed on us through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit unto salvation from sin and death.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, let us note two alternative strategies to solving this puzzle. The first strategy seeks to demonstrate God's faithfulness to his words to Adam by claiming that God meant spiritual death, not physical death, when God told Adam that Adam would die if he eats the fruit of that tree. God was true to his words to Adam because the day Adam ate the fruit of that tree Adam died spiritually. Keith Mathison says:

Calvin clearly taught that in order for man to be saved, the Holy Spirit had to work efficaciously and irresistibly to bring him from a state of spiritual death to spiritual life. ... The doctrine of efficacious grace is necessary because of the state of fallen man.<sup>19</sup>

The second strategy insists that God is faithful to his word, but that God delayed bringing about the consequence of death on Adam when he ate the fruit of that tree. Although Adam entered into the state of death at the moment he ate the fruit of that tree, the actual death of Adam did not occur *on the day* Adam ate the fruit. Adherents to this view maintain that this is not a problem because God only told Adam that he would *surely* die if he eats the fruit of that tree. Surely, when Adam ate the fruit, Adam died. We perceive Adam from the human

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<sup>18</sup> *Westminster Catechism of Faith*, Q. 67.

<sup>19</sup> Keith A. Mathison, "Transforming Grace," in *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion Doctrine & Doxology*, 174. He cites: Romans 5:12; Eph. 2:1, and Col. 2:31 to show that Man in born dead in sin with his heart and mind corrupted. Those whom God elected and for whom Christ died are brought to life by the Holy Spirit (John 1:12-13; 3:3-8; 5:21; Eph. 2:1).

temporal point of view so we do not think that Adam died. But from the divine point of view Adam died the moment he ate the fruit of that tree.<sup>20</sup>

Both attempts at dissolving this puzzle have ground in biblical asseverations, but they are not as accurate as the above argued position. The answer we have given in this paper, namely, that Adam did not die right away after he ate the fruit of that tree because the grace of God thwarted Satan's plan to kill Adam, is more accurate. This answer identifies God's grace as the means of our salvation from sin and death through Jesus Christ. So, the most accurate answer to this theological puzzle of Adam's continuous existence is that God's grace sustained Adam's life. We are saved from sin and death because of the irresistible grace of God, the sovereign and mysterious work of the Holy Spirit, who gave us eternal life through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.



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<sup>20</sup> II Peter 3:8.