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John 1:16–17, English Standard Version.

¹⁶For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Grace within us.

A cornerstone of Methodism is a notion called Prevenient Grace. This arose as a way of countering the movement of Calvinism, originated by John Calvin. He was a French theologian who believed that God predetermined, before any humans were created, that only some people were to be saved and spend eternity with God. The notion became more extreme after Calvin died, and Calvinism became more radically focused on this notion of predestination. Calvin died on May 27, 1564, and after he died, a Dutch theologian named Jacobus Arminius, is credited with developing the notion of “Prevenient Grace” to counter the rise of Calvinism. The notion behind Prevenient Grace is that God offers salvation to everyone, not just a few, and that any person has the option of entering the Kingdom of God. John Wesley, an Anglican priest who introduced the world to Methodism, and lived from 1703 to 1791, was a huge proponent of Prevenient Grace - and it became core to Methodism. The word “prevenient” means “antecedent” or “anticipatory”, and

the notion of Prevenient Grace is that all people are born with Prevenient Grace inside of them, drawing them toward God, prompting them to become believers. Prevenient Grace operates on us long before we are aware of God's presence, and it is through Prevenient Grace that all people have the option of entering the Kingdom of God. No one is denied the presence of God's Grace.

There is tremendous debate about whether Prevenient Grace is biblical or if it is entirely the fabrication of humans like Arminius and Wesley. Here are some intriguing facts. Not only is "Prevenient Grace" not in the Bible, the word "grace" itself is never spoken by Jesus and it only appears in the Gospels a handful of times. Most of what we learn about God's grace comes from the letters of Paul and other letters in the New Testament. The word "grace" does appear in the Gospel of John, but the references are written by John and are not attributed to Jesus himself. In Chapter 1 we read: ¹⁶ *For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.* ¹⁷ *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.* This is a very simple statement: The Old Covenant was based on following the law and the New Covenant is based on the forgiveness of God through completely unearned Grace; in other words, Jesus introduced the idea of being forgiven even if we don't, in some concrete sense, "deserve it". But the notion of Grace itself is somewhat complicated. The idea of "Grace" has been refined over the centuries.

In the Methodist tradition, we look at Grace from three perspectives: Prevenient, Justifying, and Sanctifying Grace. The existence of Prevenient Grace is a way of arguing that all people, no matter what their relationship with God, no matter what exposure they have had to Christianity or any faith tradition, do have God's Grace working within them. It prepares us to accept God at some point in our lives. It makes us open and potentially receptive. Justifying Grace refers to God's Grace in action when we accept God, and, as Christians, accept Jesus Christ and the Gospel. Justifying Grace gives us forgiveness and salvation. John Wesley used the word "pardon", drawing a parallel between being justified in God's eyes and being set completely free from some criminal charge. While Prevenient Grace refers to God's Grace working within us from the time we are created until we accept God's forgiveness, Justifying Grace refers to an event with no duration: it happens all at once, like stepping through a door – another analogy used by Wesley. Sanctifying Grace refers to God's Grace working within us to help us become more mature as believers, to come more and more into alignment with God's will. We could split hairs and argue that Sanctifying Grace doesn't impact us until we have been justified and have become a believer. But we could also argue that Sanctifying Grace is always within us, from the start, pulling us closer to God, with its power becoming far stronger once we are indeed justified. The process of Sanctification

continues throughout the entirety of our lives, and as Christians, this means that we are always drawing on the power of God's Grace, using it to become holier as time goes on. We cannot become fully sanctified in this life on Earth.

We can look at it from the perspective of the two great commandments of Jesus Christ. Jesus says the following in the Gospel of Matthew: *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."*^[a] ³⁸ *This is the first and greatest commandment.* ³⁹ *And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'*^[b] ⁴⁰ *All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*

Prevenient Grace is what makes us curious about these two commandments and motivates us, perhaps very slowly, very incrementally, to grasp them and make them our own. Justifying Grace pushes us over the edge, forces us to go before God and admit that we have not followed these commandments in our lives - and makes us determined to do so in the future. Justifying Grace erases what has happened in the past, allows us to start from scratch and become dedicated to following the teachings of Jesus. Sanctifying Grace allows us to more and more fully, throughout the remainder of our lives, truly live by these commandments. There are degrees of belief, in other words, and our faith can indeed become stronger. Having faith is a yes/no thing, but Sanctifying Grace allows us to live out these two commandments in more and more powerful ways. This is beautiful news

for the faithful. It gives us a goal, a way to grow, a joyful, radiant purpose for living once we have indeed become believers.

But Jesus never differentiated three kinds of Grace. He is never even quoted as using the word in the Bible. If you have a “red letter” Bible, with the words of Jesus in red, and if that Bible is translated properly from the Greek, “Grace” is never printed in red. Grace is our way of envisioning the workings of God within us. All of us have the Holy Spirit living within us once we accept God. So, another way of looking at Grace is the following: Prevenient Grace lives within all people, period. Once we accept God, the Holy Spirit comes to live within us. We have God active and alive in us. We have direction and motivation and inspiration. We are justified in the eyes of God. It is the Holy Spirit who plants Justifying Grace within us. It is the Holy Spirit who continues to fill us with Sanctifying Grace for as long as we live. Remember, Grace comes from God. Prevenient Grace is something we are born with. God, through the Holy Spirit, gives us Justifying and Sanctifying Grace.

Here is what’s true: other Christian denominations use different words for talking about the ways that Grace works within us. No single categorization is inherently correct or perfect. Indeed, there is only one kind of Grace. We simply use some adjectives to help us more fully understand how Grace acts within us. But remember that Methodists do believe that all people have Grace within them.

I recently had an extended discussion with someone who had a powerful sense of God's Grace within her. She had been through at least three major medical journeys: cardiac disease that led to heart valve surgery and the placement of a defibrillator, vascular disease that led to the amputation of a leg, and a stroke that required an extensive period of recuperation and physical therapy. She smiled as she told me that her small dining room table is mostly dedicated to her many pill bottles. She was raised Christian, moved around a lot as a kid, and while she was growing up, her family attended a variety of churches, typically choosing whatever church happened to be near their home and had an active Sunday School program. She said that if she hadn't felt the powerful presence of God's Grace constantly at work within her, she would not have had the energy to survive so many medical procedures, hospital and rehab stays, and instances of doctors delivering grim news to her. She always felt the presence of God's grace - no matter what.

She told me about waking up in an Emergency Department of a hospital after having her stroke. She had had the stroke at home, alone, and had known that it was happening. The next thing she remembered was a doctor asking her if she could lift her arm or give him a smile. We'll call her Olivia. Olivia said that at that moment, she felt two things: a vague, dusky fear, and the soft, somewhat distant presence of God. As that day wore on, and as she went through a series of tests,

of having imaging done, being given medications, moved to an ICU, and with various doctors and nurses talking to her, in calm, supportive, reassuring ways, she felt a competition growing inside her. Olivia knew that only one of two things could thrive within her: fear or Grace. A passage from 2 Corinthians came to her:

⁷So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.

This is a famous passage because of the first verse, number 7. Paul talks about God preventing Paul's incredible gift of being appointed an evangelist to the Gentiles from allowing him to become conceited. God does this by giving him a thorn "in the flesh". This thorn acts like a messenger of Satan, harassing Paul whenever he starts to think that he's important. This verse has been analyzed over the centuries by innumerable people. Some have suggested that it was literally the Devil making him suffer. The "messenger" refers to the people who have hunted him, arrested him, beaten him, imprisoned him, and tried to kill him. Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican priest and theologian who lived in the thirteenth century, thought that the "thorn" was sexual temptation; remember that Paul was living as a single man wandering and preaching. Aquinas said that if it had been anything

less sensitive, Paul would have been blunter about the nature of his thorn. Martin Luther thought the thorn was doubt or depression. Others have suggested that Paul had a speech impediment, or an eye disease, epilepsy, or various other physical ailments. There is some very thin biblical evidence to back up each of these medically based conjectures. But the real point is that Paul apparently had something chronic and significant bothering him throughout his missionary journeys. He goes on to say that he prayed to God three times to relieve him of this “thorn”, but God replied that Paul only needed God’s grace to do his work, that having a weakness makes God’s power within him “perfect”. Paul then declares that he is *“content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities”*. Paul then concludes: *“For when I am weak, then I am strong.”*

Here is what Olivia said to me: it was important that Grace, not fear, win the battle within her. Olivia desperately wanted the Grace of God to thrive within her and for fear to die within her. She knew that she would never get to the point where she was glad that she had been through all that she had experienced medically. But there were times, often when she was with other people, talking and laughing, and distracted and feeling the gift of having family and friends with her, that she felt just like Paul, that when she was weak, she was strong. The more she went through, the more Grace God poured into her. That Grace brought her

closer to God, and she was sure of this. She said that God never made anyone sick or put them through pain or any kind of suffering, without giving them an even greater share of Grace. In fact, she was sure that if she had never been sick, if she had just breezed through life, through the last decade, she wouldn't be as close to God as she is now. It was because of all that Grace.

It doesn't matter how you categorize Grace, whether you call it Prevenient, Justifying, and Sanctifying Grace. What's important is that we realize that Grace is something we're born with, that it's the reason we have faith, and that it is the way in which we grow our faith in God, our trust in God, our proximity to God throughout our lives. Here is something intriguing. The Bible does not say that we stop receiving Grace after we die, after we enter the Kingdom of God for all of eternity. In the first chapter of the Gospel of John, we are told:

¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

When we have done something wrong and experience true regret, God forgives, God treats us with mercy. We do deserve mercy. But Grace is something that we do not deserve. Grace is an eternal gift, freely given, and totally undeserved. God created us out of love. God wants all of us to live in joy, and that means being as close to God as possible – for eternity. Celebrate the Grace within you.

Please pray with me.

God, we thank you for placing grace within us simply because you love us, and you want us to live in joy. Thank you for bringing us to faith through your Grace. And thank you for letting us become more and more aligned with your ways, all through your Grace. May we always treasure and honor this gift, and may we always treasure and honor all those made in your image – because all people have your Grace within them. Amen.