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### **Titus 2:11**

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

#### **God's grace can protect.**

We all know that God's grace can protect us from spiritual harm. Sometimes we talk about Prevenient Grace, a form of grace that protects us even before we are consciously aware of God's presence, before we come to believe in God. Many have said that the notion of Prevenient Grace shows us that God does love all people since all humans are born with Prevenient Grace within them. It's not truly a different kind of grace: it's one aspect of how grace in general can act in our lives. 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 into our lives. It is indeed 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 were not consciously aware of it. Thus, we don't have to initiate our own salvation, but at some point, we do have to accept God's offer of love and salvation – because God is reaching out to us. We see that God's grace is so powerful that it can protect our spiritual – and eternal – lives before we even fully and deeply believe in God. But does God's grace protect us in other ways, physical ways?

Before we look at that, here is a brief passage from Titus: *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 the Book of Titus as a whole, we get insight into Prevenient Grace's true importance. The Book of Titus is a letter thought to have been written by Paul to Titus, but many believe was actually written by a follower of Paul. Paul or our pseudo-Paul is writing to a young pastor of the church on Crete, a large island in the Mediterranean Sea. Paul instructs Titus to appoint spiritual leaders. He also tells Titus to focus on sound Christian teachings that lead to holy living – something for which Crete was certainly not known 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. Thus, the message in the letter to Titus came in the

context of a powerful warning. 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, they 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? Perhaps it's Prevenient grace - God working within us without us knowing it. That is our path to salvation, God blessing us long before we can even remotely claim to have earned it.

In many ways, we are living in times very similar to the times that young Titus preached in. His little church was surrounded by a world that lived for the things of this world, not the things of God’s world. He had to work very hard to motivate the people in his church to be bold, to stand up to the condemnation of society, and to help others come to God. And today, we are taught as Christians

to never be afraid to be public about our faith, to witness, even in a world that is very unfriendly to Christians.

So, let's talk about God's grace protecting us in physical ways. We are told this over and over while we're growing up, that God through his grace can keep us from coming to harm. Ancient believers believed this.

I'd like to 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. 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.

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 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.

Here is a short Psalm, Psalm 121 in its entirety, and it does feel like a prayer for travelers.

- 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.*

This gives us a broader view of God's grace. It shows us that grace is much more than just Prevenient Grace. Yes, grace is there, 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, and to be safe. The problem, of course, is that many bad things happen to people. As a hospital chaplain I frequently see people who have been

gruesomely harmed, and often all they were trying to do is earn a living. Does this mean that God is indiscriminate in his protection? Does it mean that we are on our own, and those of us who are not harmed are just lucky? But Christians do not believe in luck. God does let us do whatever we want to do in life, and yet God does indeed step in from time to time. I'd like to suggest that it's us, not God, who is indiscriminate.

Let's get back to 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. 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.

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. Many people would see that woman's presence as simply coincidental. I do not.

Here's another one. When Wendy was pregnant with our son Julien, she was working in Fort Collins. We were living in Boulder, an hour south. One day, when she was

maybe seven months pregnant, there was a sudden blizzard when she was driving home from work. 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 to safety. Did God plant that man there at that moment? Or was it this man who did this on his own?

God lets us do evil, if that is our choice. But when we go out in the world dedicated to doing good, to living by the two commandments that Jesus left us in the Gospel of Matthew, to love God with all our hearts, minds and souls, and to love people in the same way, God gives us the incredible opportunity of being his hands in this world. God is more than happy to make use of us.

God's grace allows us to hear God whispering in our ears, telling us how we can reach out and be the ones who ease both the spiritual and the physical suffering of other people. We can bring them to God, or we can bring them to safety. Perhaps this is the point: it's not that God does not protect us. And yes, God does protect us from physical harm – but not always. There are true accidents. I do work as a hospital chaplain two days a week. I assure you that there are times when people who are very good people get hurt



badly. There are also countless illnesses that no one can prevent. But there is so much suffering in this world that we can help prevent. We just need to be listening to God and let God's grace guide us through life. God's grace was working on the woman who picked up a kindergartener and the man who rescued Wendy in a blizzard.

God fills us with grace before we are even born. We are made in God's image. We are to love God and love people. We are given the opportunity to protect others in the name of God. We can be agents of God in this world. It is indeed true that all of the evil that exists in this world comes at the hands of humans. All of it. That means that all of the evil in this world could disappear if humans listened to God's grace within us, pulling us toward God, giving us an incredible gift, the gift of partnering with God. It is God's grace that motivates us to abandon the desires, the goals, the trinkets of this world, and to instead live for the things of the Kingdom of God. The world is a place where we do more than just live until we die. We can live in the Kingdom of God now, and we can do so much to mitigate the evil in this world and the accidental harm that comes to others, and in general, to lower the world's suffering.

God's grace can protect – through our hands.