

Herald

ANTIPAS

"Antipas, My faithful witness" (Rev 2:13)

No 12

GOD'S COMMON GRACE

An essential perspective on the world in which we live

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THE PROBLEM

No one can look through the spectacles of God's standards at himself, the world around him, or the course of history, and fail to be deeply impressed by the universal and disastrous fact of sin.

Of course, the believer should not be surprised, because this is exactly what the Bible teaches. Look at passages like Romans 3:9-20 and Ephesians 2:1-3. In fact, the Bible contains so much revelation about this that original sin and the total depravity of man are among the most basic doctrines of the Christian faith. They are truths without which the Bible cannot be understood.

This leads, however, to all kinds of questions in the minds of thinking Christians. Believers often struggle to make things tally. Why is it that people who live in blasphemous rebellion against God are still tolerated by Him? Why is it that those who live under God's wrath and are on the way to everlasting damnation still receive so many good gifts from His hand? How is it that millions who have not been renewed by the Holy Spirit can have so many wonderful gifts and qualities? What about man's achievements in science, technology and art? What about the dignity and compassion that can still be found everywhere among unbelievers?

Thus: *how can a sin-rotten and hell-doomed humanity enjoy so much favour and goodness from the hand of a holy and just Creator?*

THE SOLUTION

The answer lies largely in the fact of *God's common grace*.

The Bible reveals that God's Spirit also works in and for unbelievers and the non-elect. Admittedly this is not a saving work – it is not regenerating or sanctifying – but it is nevertheless a *work of grace*, because everyone really deserves the opposite. And it is *common* (or general) because every person has a part in it one way or another, albeit to a greater or lesser extent.

God's common grace is His love, compassion, goodness and patience towards the fallen creation, especially humankind, as it finds expression in His protection of and provision for everyone.

Because the Bible is largely concerned with God's plan of redemption in Christ – His *particular* grace – believers are inclined to forget about His common grace. But this is an extremely important Scriptural truth. It helps us to know God better, to understand the world around us better, to find our place in it, and to deal with it in a healthy manner.

May the perspectives below help the reader to maintain the balances of a godly life more easily. After all, each of us wrestles with the already-and-the-not-yet tensions of our redemption. "We are in the world, but not of the world", is easier said than lived.

EXPRESSIONS OF GOD'S COMMON GRACE

The Word gives clear indications that common grace has two sides: the negative side that finds expression in restraint, control and tempering, and the positive side of care and provision.

Firstly, the negative side of God's common grace.

□ *God prevents man's depravity from degenerating into extreme decay.*

The fallen creation, and particularly fallen man, bears the seed of self-destruction. Sin is destructive by nature, but the Lord holds the reins tightly so that matters do not completely follow their natural course.

This aspect of God's common grace must be clearly distinguished from His sanctifying work in His children – which lies in the area of His particular or saving grace. No, the intention of this aspect of common grace is merely to keep the world liveable. People are not made good, they are merely restrained from tumbling into the full potential of their wickedness.

- Romans 1:18-32 gives much insight in this regard. Three times it is mentioned that those who continue to harden themselves against God's general revelation (vv.19-23) are *given over* to sexual impurity, to shameful lusts, to a depraved mind (24, 26, 28).

Although the accent here lies not on grace but on judgement, the verses nevertheless allude unmistakably to God's *control* over the moral level of a society. Were it not for the Lord's goodness and patience, nothing would have prevented us from becoming just as bad as the fallen angels, the demons. In addition, it is clear from these verses that God's control is also *variable*. That is why the moral level can vary so much from person to person, from society to society and from period to period.

- Psalm 81:11-12 talks about the same thing: "But my people would not listen to me; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices."¹

- Wonderfully blessed are they who live in a time when God grips the reins more tightly. However, when He lets them go it is one of the most terrible things that can happen to an individual or a culture.

Second Thessalonians chapter 2 describes such an apostasy – probably the worst of all times – immediately before the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. "Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man

1. Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV).

doomed to destruction" (v 3). "For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way" (v 7). "The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness" (vv.9-12).

□ *God prevents the destructive forces in the physical world from getting completely out of hand.*

Man was worst affected by the Fall, but the wider creation was not untouched – far from it (Gen 3:17-18). Romans 8:19-22 offers a fascinating perspective on this matter. Due to the Fall, creation was not only subjected to "frustration", but also placed in "bondage to decay". Nature is here personified, and it is frustrated because it cannot achieve its created purpose. What is more, in it a principle of decay is at work.²

- Due to the Fall there is an

2. For the informed: the Second Law of the Thermodynamics (i.e. the Law of Entropy), is an expression of this principle of decay.

unnatural disharmony between man and animal. Although it is not as real in today's *tamed* world, Genesis 9 nevertheless offers a very interesting perspective on this matter. After the Flood, man would still be threatened by wild animals (v.5), but God would limit this by giving the animals a fear of man (v.2).

- For every epidemic, every raging cyclone, every devastating earthquake, every erupting volcano, our Creator in His goodness draws a limit: thus far and no further!

- The fact that God continuously tempers the principle of death in the human body is clearly suggested in Genesis 6:3: "The LORD said, My Spirit will not contend with man for ever, for he is mortal; his days will be a hundred and twenty years."

□ *God refrains from pouring out His full and final divine wrath over the fallen creation – until His plan of redemption has been brought to completion.*

We are living in a time of grace. The dispensation between the first and second comings of Christ is harvest time. People are being saved from every nation. But, and we forget this too easily, the day will dawn when the "invitation to the great banquet" will no longer stand. That will be the terrible day of God's great judgement (2 Pet 3).

- Many Scriptural pronouncements remind us of this

facet of God's common grace. Compare, among others: "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30). "Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you towards repentance?" (Ro 2:4). "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pt 3:9).

Secondly, the positive side of God's common grace.

☐ *God cares for His whole creation and especially for human beings.*

Strikingly beautiful is Psalm 65:9-13: "You care for the land and water it; you enrich it abundantly. The streams of God are filled with water to provide the people with grain, for so you have ordained it. You drench its furrows and level its ridges; you soften it with showers and bless its crops. You crown the year with your bounty, and your carts overflow with abundance. The grasslands of the desert overflow; the hills are clothed with gladness. The meadows are covered with flocks and the valleys are mantled with grain; they shout for joy and sing." (Cf. also Ps 104).

Matthew 5:44-45 appeals to us to love even our enemies, because our Father in heaven "... causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and

unrighteous." Acts 14:16-17 is crystal clear: "In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy."

- Some will now ask how disasters, with all their accompanying misery, are to be interpreted.

What we have to understand is that God's common grace does not do away with the fallenness of this world. What it does indeed do, is ensure that particular regions or societies are not destroyed completely, and also that they do not experience permanent disaster conditions. And this is grace, for wouldn't such destruction be our just desert?

Therefore, the *real* question that one should ask is why a certain disaster did not also occur last year – and the previous years? And above all we should ask why it didn't strike us as well.

☐ *God gives a rich variety of excellences and abilities to man, believing and unbelieving.*

Go to any place on earth – and human excellence is sown thick. Look at the arts, the sciences, technology – and stand amazed that fallen man is capable of such things. Yes, there is much misery, but in how many places do not wonderful freedom, compassion, integrity, family harmony, dignity and loyalty also

reign?

Behind it all is God's common grace!

- The Bible often says of people who have no share in God's saving grace, *that they do good* (2 Kgs 10:29-31; Mt 5:46; Lk 6:32-34; Ro 2:14-15). Naturally this goodness does not measure up to the absolute standards of God's Law. As far as motivation, principle and purpose are concerned, it can never please God. But in a *relative* sense an unbeliever can live a morally excellent life and even be used mightily by the Lord in the outworking of His counsels.

Take, for example, the tragic history of Saul. And what about the mysterious heathen king, Cyrus – the Lord's "anointed"? (Is 45:1ff.). Not only did he please God when he set the exiles free and supported them; he was specifically raised up and equipped for that task by the Almighty. Jehu, king of Israel, and Joash, king of Judah, were far from serving the Lord with undivided hearts. Yet it is said of them both that they did well in the eyes of the Lord (2 Kgs 10:29-31; 12:2).

Does this mean that all these people were saved? Not at all. The Bible gives no such indication.

THE PURPOSE OF GOD'S COMMON GRACE

☐ *Assuredly, as with everything, God's own glory is the ultimate purpose of His common grace.*

Eventually all people, including

those who here and now ignore, abuse and despise His kindness, will know that every breath they take, every crumb on their tables, every moment of peace and prosperity – was a gift from His hand. They will acknowledge that He gave them infinitely more than they ever deserved. In fact, they will admit that they actually deserved the opposite of what they received. With bowed knees (Ro 14:11) they will confess that God is a God of love, compassion, patience and faithfulness.

☐ God's common grace also has a more immediate goal. While no one must question the sincerity of His goodness towards a fallen world, *common grace, in a very special sense, serves His plan of redemption.*

This world, and the progress of history, is the packaging in which the gospel is proclaimed and the harvest brought in. Until the last of the elect is saved, this world will be preserved. The moment that he or she takes refuge in Christ, the days of history are numbered! After all, the weeds are spared for the sake of the wheat (Mt 13:24-30, 36-43). Compare also 1 Timothy 2:2 and context.

A FEW REMARKS

☐ *God works mediately; He uses instruments.* In this restraint of total moral disintegration, three of His most important tools are the government, the parental home and cultural-social group pressure.

- We should never forget that the government is a gift of God's common grace. The New Testament states this in the plainest of terms (Ro 13:1-7; 1 Pet 2:13-14).

Despite every government's failings, it remains a fact that even a bad government is better than no government at all. Notwithstanding the atrocities of so many regimes, it is a fact that any society quickly degenerates into barbarism and anarchy without the machinery of government.

- The role of dedicated parental upbringing and discipline in the maintenance of order and moral standards in a society can hardly be overestimated. When Dr Spock replaced the Book of Proverbs (13:24; 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15,17) in western households, the civilisation's death-knell started tolling. To "spoil" a child means exactly what the word says. Leave him (or her), and his innate depravity will see to it that he who should really have been an "olive tree" (Ps 128:3) degenerates into some wild weed!

In this regard, the school – and church youth ministry – naturally plays an extremely important role. However, they never remove the primary responsibility from parents; indeed, they are merely extensions of and aids to the parental home.

- "What will people say?", is widely scorned today – and it certainly can become stifling. But any

thinking person will know that a society's established norms of right and wrong play a wonderfully conserving role. In God's common grace, this "voice of the nation" is normally of a preserving nature. How does it work? Romans 2:14-15 provides the answer: "Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show *that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts*, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them."

~ Why does moral decline usually begin in cities? The answer lies here. Due to the conglomeration of people, our natural disposition towards our fellow man simply cannot keep up. Overtaxing of this faculty leads to its breakdown – with the result that we no longer acknowledge and consider one another. Hence the typical attitude: my neighbour, with his opinions about *my* morals – or lack thereof – can go and jump!

☐ *God's common grace often flows through His children to this world.*

- When God called Abraham to be the Father of His covenant nation, He promised: "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I

will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:2-3).

Of course, this blessing for the nations points in the first instance to God's plan of redemption in Christ (Gal 3:8), but it does not exclude God's common grace. Believers are in many ways instrumental in channelling the Lord's kindness to the world.

~ Sometimes unbelievers are blessed simply for the sake of believers. Thus Laban could say to Jacob: "If I have found favour in your eyes, please stay. I have learned by divination that the LORD has blessed me because of you" (Gen 30:27). So too was Potiphar's house blessed for the sake of Joseph (Gen 39:5). If Paul had not been on the ship that took him to Rome, one wonders how many people would have survived the shipwreck (Acts 27:24, 42-44).

~ When believers live out their faith, they have an ennobling influence on their environment – they are the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world" (Mt 5:13-16). However, from the context it is clear that this only happens if their lives answer to the description given in the Beatitudes (5:3-12).

Could this be what Isaiah is alluding to when he says that Judah would have been like Sodom and Gomorrah unless the Lord had not allowed a small group of true believers to survive (Is 1:9)?

~ Believers are also called actively and purposefully to minister

their heavenly Father's love and care to a fallen world. How many times does Jesus not call on His disciples to show mercy towards the poor – even to their enemies? (Mt 5:44-48; Lk 6:35-36).

~ Here we have important Biblical light on the way in which Christians should regard their working lives. A believer can express himself as a minister of the Lord's common grace in almost any occupation. Doctors, teachers and social workers, for example, can surely grasp this easily. But how many Christian employers realise that their talents and enterprise help to provide for employees and their families? And how many farmers think in these terms about their crops?

- One of the most remarkable illustrations of this truth can probably be seen in the development of western civilisation since the sixteenth century Reformation. What informed person can doubt the extensive and uplifting effect of Calvin and his Institutes? What would England have been without the Puritans, and America without the Pilgrim Fathers? Historians agree: without the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century, England would have followed the route of the French Revolution. Instead, the church in the British Isles was, for almost two centuries after that, on the forefront of the missionary explosion which still rocks the world today.

- Alas, the opposite is also true. Scarcely has the church begun

to decline, when moral decay commences in the world around it. Without doubt, the theology of unbelief has much to do, not only with the deformation of the church in Europe (and elsewhere), but also with the present decadence of western society.

What does our present moral nosedive say about the faithfulness of the South African church in recent years?

❑ Disregard for and abuse of God's good gifts will one day be *the reason for a stricter judgement* of those who are lost. "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded . . ." (Lk 12:48). It is not difficult to understand why trampling the Lord's mercy provokes His wrath. In this way, the kindness that was intended to arouse repentance (Ro 2:4) one day becomes the merciless accuser and basis for judgement. That is why it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgement than for Capernaum – which was privileged to experience Christ's glorious works of love, kindness and power (Mt 11:20-24; Luke 10:13-15).

❑ *It is utterly essential to understand aright the relationship between God's saving grace on the one hand, and His common grace on the other.* Indeed, any thinking, responsible Christian struggles continually to keep these two in a healthy balance.

- The distinction between these two aspects of God's grace must constantly be maintained without compromise. The two differ radically: their nature is completely different, their expression divergent, and their purpose poles apart.

It is highly naïve, and it is Biblical nonsense, to think that someone is saved simply because he or she is a "good person". Of course true Christianity is also recognised by its morality, but this does not mean that it is only Christians who live morally excellent lives.

The Pharisees maintained high moral standards. And what about Cornelius? In Acts 10:2 we read: "He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly." Even so, when Peter reports later on, he tells how an angel had said to Cornelius beforehand: "Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved" (Acts 11:13-14).

No one is saved by virtue of his morality! People are saved by virtue of Christ's mediatory work. And this is appropriated through *faith alone*. Note, however, that faith has content. Cornelius had to hear Peter's message – the gospel – before he was saved. Cf. also John 17:17-20; Romans 10:13-17; 1 Corinthians 1:21; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14; 1 Timothy 4:16; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23.

Faith without works is dead (Jas

2:14-26), but works without faith – with "true truth" as content – are worthless.

- Nevertheless, we must beware of a false dichotomy, as if God's saving grace places the good gifts of His common grace out of bounds for believers. After all, the latter also come from the Lord Himself.

~ God's saving grace in a person's life impacts the good gifts of His common grace in a sanctifying way: such a person soon learns to harness these gifts for the service of the Lord and the propagation of His gospel. After all, true discipleship is not world-avoiding, it is world-reaching.

~ Precisely here lies the key to the ennobling influence of thoroughbred and vigorous Biblical Christianity: it has a deep respect and appreciation for that which is good and noble and exalted in this life. After all, it knows where these things come from.

It delights itself in the Creator's fingerprints on the world of matter, and plant, and animal, and man. It embraces the Father's endless liberality in everyday things, not only in necessities, but also in delights. It marvels at the many shades of human skill, and it harnesses science, technology and art in the service of the King.

It makes almost every occupation glorious. Everything it does is done from the heart – as for the Lord (Col

3:23). In His Name it plans and ploughs and plays (Col 3:17). To glorify Him, it designs and builds and maintains (1 Cor 10:31).

With devotion it receives everything God created as good (Ro 14:14; 1 Tim 4:4-5). It sings Psalm 24:1 at the top of its voice: "The earth is the LORD'S, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it . . ."

- Of course, true Christians are aliens and strangers here – in search of a fatherland (Heb 11:10, 13-16; 1 Pet 1:17; 2:11). But with the eyes of faith they see the pilgrim's road strewn with good gifts from their Heavenly Father. And they know that these are splashes of promise – which remind them again and again of the new earth towards which they are travelling.

- True Christianity is demanding – very much so! Entering the kingdom requires forceful effort (Mt 11:12). And the road runs through many hardships (Acts 14:22). Actually it is war, nothing less! (Eph 6:12).

As far as God's common grace is concerned, this means that the Christian's narrow path has yawning chasms on both sides.

~ This war is so fierce that he cannot, on the one hand, afford to fight with wrong enemies as well. Too many spiritual Don Quixotes fight against God's good gifts – with the sword of asceticism and the spear of withdrawal (Ro 14:17).

~ On the other hand, it is simply a fact that one is made soft and lazy by an excess of good things. Christian warriors know this. They understand the irony – that even the Lord's gifts, fastidiously and greedily misused, can be deadly. They therefore chastise their bodies and deny themselves all kinds of things – for the sake of an imperishable crown of victory (1 Cor 9:24-27).

~ But there is a still greater reason why true disciples, the cross-bearing kind, do not enjoy the good gifts of God's common grace so often: they simply do not get around to doing so! They are so busy with the excellent that the good has to play second fiddle. They always have more to do than they can manage. Like Elisha's slave, their eyes have also been opened to see what others do not even know about. Around them the world is vibrant with the Lord's work and gifts and challenges. But one passion towers above all: the coming of the kingdom! And *this* is where their time and resources and energy gravitate to again and again.

It is not always easy for them. They know that there is no opposition between the good and the excellent. But the excellent requires everything. Consequently, the kind invitations of the good must regularly be refused. Thus, although everything is theirs (1 Cor 3:22), the sifting of priorities described in 1 Corinthians 7:29 - 31 remains an experiential reality that almost tears one apart: "What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none;

those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away."

Therefore, mature disciples of the Lord are free to delight in the good gifts of God's common grace. They know this, and when they get the opportunity, they do so – with gratitude in their hearts and praise on their lips. But their hearts are somewhere else, somewhere higher. Their hearts are with the knowledge of the Lord, with His gospel of truth, with His church. And with the crown of life!



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