

COMMON GRACE

T. M. MOORE

A REVISION RESOURCE

The Fellowship of Ailbe



Common Grace

Common Grace
A *ReVision* Resource from The Fellowship of Ailbe
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Welcome to *Common Grace*

Welcome to *Common Grace*, an overview of the many and varied ways God supports, sustains, and blesses us every day, and a consideration of the implications and opportunities this affords us as His people. *Common Grace* is one of our *ReVision* resources from The Fellowship of Ailbe.

These studies are designed for individual or group use. While you may derive much benefit from studying on your own, that benefit can be greatly enhanced by joining with a friend or a group to read, discuss, share, challenge, and pray for one another.

Take one lesson at a time, reading the Scriptures and narrative aloud, and pausing to reflect on and discuss the questions provided. Don't be in a hurry. Be willing to take more than one session on a lesson if it will allow you to delve more deeply into the subject matter.

If you're in a group, make sure you prepare for each study by reading through the lesson in advance and answering the questions in writing. Take turns leading your group. Let every member share in the privilege and responsibility of facilitating discussions. Group leaders should not feel like they have to "have all the answers." Their task is simply to lead the group through the readings and questions, and to help everyone participate.

These studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others. May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 What Could Be Common about Grace?

“But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” Matthew 5.44, 45

Reason not enough

In his book, *How the West Won*, Rodney Stark argues that Western culture and the modern worldview came to prevail through the centuries on the strength of sound reason. If we want to understand why science, the arts, technology, business, education, and government, based on Western models, are the preferred forms and systems throughout the developed world, the answer is the power of sound reason.

Dr. Stark makes some very good points. He even credits the strong presence of the Christian faith over the centuries as helping to shape sound reason so that it functions for human flourishing.

But every human being operates on the basis of reason. Everyone wants his or her life to make sense, no matter what the social or cultural context in which that person exists. Human beings are reasoning creatures, and all human beings employ reason, in one form or another, to make their way in the world.

Reason alone is therefore not a sufficient explanation for the triumph of Western institutions, not even *sound* reason, for such a qualifier only begs the question, “What do we mean by *sound*?”

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If we follow Dr. Stark’s argument, his point is that Western *values* – which shape the use of reason in Western societies – have produced more overall good for the world than the values of any other culture, past or present.

Western values have indeed led to the creation of societies based in law. They have encouraged universal education, the development of the arts, and the right to private property, free speech, and lawful assembly. Western values have promoted business and industry, led to tapping the resources of the earth for the common good, and to advances in science, medicine, and technology, the likes of which no other culture has even come close to achieving.

The sound reason which has led to such achievements thus reveals some distinctive values, including, a recognition of individual human worth, a demand for justice, freedom for creativity and cultural development, the creation of powerful institutions, and a sense of responsibility toward the future.

But even these values are shared, to some extent, by every culture, as C. S. Lewis argued in *The Abolition of Man*. So the question of where such values arise, and how they are developed into enduring social and cultural norms and forms, lies beyond the scope of human reason, and even beyond Western culture. Human beings are reasoning creatures, and it is inherent in human reason, at least to some extent, to seek justice, beauty, goodness, dignity, and the good of one’s neighbors, at least in some culturally-relevant form.

These values are not the product of reason nor of Western culture; rather, they come from the grace of God – His *common* grace. They may be more pronounced and have borne more fruit in Western cultures, but that they exist among *all* human beings, in some form and to some degree, can be clearly seen.

The loving kindness of the Lord

By “common grace” we mean what Jesus outlined in our text. There is an expression of God’s grace – His

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immense and unfathomable loving kindness – which reaches to all people at all times, even those who are His avowed enemies. Because every human being is made in the image of God, and owes his or her existence to Him, God regards all human beings as the objects of His love. God loves all people, and He desires all people to come to the knowledge of eternal life (2 Pet. 3.9). He has bestowed His goodness and loving kindness on all human beings in a wide variety of ways, as we shall see, and the purpose of His so doing is to encourage people to seek Him, their great Benefactor, and to know Him as their Creator, Savior, and Shepherd (Acts 17.26, 27).

God's common grace is not at all "common" as in "not extraordinary." Common grace is common in that it reaches to all creatures, every human being, at every moment, in every place and situation, bringing goodness, beauty, and truth into lives that otherwise would be utterly impossible. Without the common grace of God the world could not exist, creatures could not function, and nothing of what people everywhere cherish and delight in would be even remotely possible.

While it may be, as Rodney Stark argues, that Western culture, more than any other culture, has been the source of benefits to the world as a whole, this is only because the common grace of God has been greatly enhanced by the stream of special, saving grace, which flows through the heart of Western history, beginning with the Roman Empire and extending into the present.

But the common grace of God abounds even where His special grace is yet withheld. And understanding the nature and value of common grace can wondrously enlarge our vision of God and greatly assist us in our callings as followers of Jesus Christ.

For reflection or discussion

1. How would you explain the idea of "common grace" to a new believer? Why is it important that we understand this doctrine?
2. Take five minutes and quickly survey your surroundings, right where you are. Jot down everything that strikes you as an example of the common grace of God.
3. How do the objects you jotted down above speak to you of God's love?
4. How might you expect a better understanding of common grace to enhance your walk with and work for the Lord?
5. What are your goals for this study? What do you hope to learn?

Next steps: Reflect on the text which opens this column. How many different examples of "common grace" can you cite within your own [Personal Mission Field](#)? Talk with a Christian friend about your observations.

Prayer:

2 The Extent of Common Grace

The earth is satisfied with the fruit of Your works. Psalm 104.13

So loved

The basis for common grace – grace that reaches to every nook and cranny and creature in the creation – is nothing other than the love of God.

Jesus explained that God loves the cosmos, loves it so much that He gave His only-begotten Son for its redemption (Jn. 3.16). How could He not? He made it, after all, and He sustains and upholds it by His Word of power (Jn. 1.1-13; Heb. 1.3). One does not exert continuous attention and sustaining strength on something he does not care about deeply. God loves the cosmos, the whole vast creation and everything in it. The common grace of God thus flows from the depths of His eternal and unchanging being.

Grace reaches to and sustains the creation because God is love and the creation is His (1 Jn. 4.8; Ps. 24.1). In no single place in Scripture is this truth more concisely explained and celebrated than in Psalm 104.

A catalog of common grace

Psalm 104 represents a kind of catalog or *précis* of the common grace of God. Here we are invited to consider the greatness, majesty, and power of God, together with the impact and implications of His being and work on the things He has made. Common grace reaches from the heights of the eternal heaven to the beginning and continuation of time, creatures animate and inanimate, and to the very depths of the sea and the heights of the heavens. God has pitched His tent over everything He made, and He blesses, cares for, and keeps His creation out of the depths of His eternal love and power.

Let's take a closer look.

The majesty and might of God

Psalm 104 begins with a proclamation concerning the majesty and might of God. He is “very great” (v. 1) and clothes Himself in honor, majesty, and light (vv. 1, 2). He dwells over His creation and traverses it freely and continuously, like a shepherd keeping watch over his flock (v. 3). God dispatches His angels as messengers of fire and light to perform His bidding in, through, and on behalf of all He has made (v. 4).

Further, God established and rules the creation by His powerful Word (v. 7). He has made the cosmos such that it is firmly established and shall not be moved, except by His Word. The creation is fixed and knowable, but not by virtue of any inherent properties or strength; the Word and will of God make the cosmos function and continue as it does. Earth, which in Scripture is the stage on which the drama of glory and redemption unfolds, teems with creatures of various sorts, and each of them is provided with shelter, food, and water by the command of their Creator (vv. 8-14).

God, Who is all glory, beauty, power, and life, has made and sustains a creation which declares, in its diversity, splendor, mystery, and strength, the glory and will of Him Who made it. God provides the water which all life requires (vv. 10-13). He causes food to grow from the ground to delight and sustain His creatures (vv. 14, 15). He gives life to trees and plants; provides shelter and work for His creatures; and sustains them in the times and seasons of their lives (vv. 16-20). The creatures “seek their food from God” (v. 21), and man pursues the work appointed to him by the Lord (v. 23; cf. Ps. 90.16, 17).

How manifold are Your works!

By the time the psalmist is ready to compose verse 24, he is filled with wonder, delight, amazement, and joy at the enormity of God's grace and power. He blurts out, “O LORD, how manifold are Your works!” God has

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brought His great wisdom to bear on the creation, and the psalmist acknowledges that “the earth is full of Your possessions.” Of course it makes sense that such a great, powerful, all-providing God would exercise loving stewardship over the things He has made.

This extends even to the depths of the sea, “In which *are* innumerable teeming things,/Living things both small and great” (v. 25). But the sea also provides advantages to humans, who use it for transport and as a source of food (v. 26). All the creatures of the sea, like all the creatures of the earth “wait for” God to sustain and bless them, and to cause them to flourish (vv. 27, 28).

As long as God looks with favor upon His creatures, they flourish. He is the Lord of life and death; His Spirit sustains all that He has made (vv. 29, 30). The purpose of all this wondrous, all-encompassing grace is that God may be glorified. The psalmist cries out exultantly, “May the glory of the LORD endure forever;/May the LORD rejoice in His works” (v. 31). God rules His creation with a mere look and a mysterious touch (v. 32). And all this wonderful, all-comprehending, all-sustaining grace of God leads the psalmist to worship (vv. 33-35).

Common grace reaches to the entire creation, from the deepest sea to the remotest distant galaxy and every sub-atomic particle and power. And why? Why all this lavish, continuous, marvelous, powerful, breath-taking display of beauty, goodness, wisdom, and wonder?

Because God is.

For reflection or discussion

1. Meditate on John 1.1-4 and Hebrews 1.3. How would you describe Jesus’ relationship to the physical cosmos?
2. God loves His creation. How is this apparent?
3. What are the implications for us of God’s love for the creation? How should we be expected to reflect God’s love for the creation?
4. Why do you think a meditation on common grace, like Psalm 104, would end in worship? How does your understanding of God’s common grace affect your worship?
5. In what, if any, ways does the doctrine of common grace feature in or enhance the worship service in your church?

Next steps: Every day we are immersed in, surrounded by, suffused with, sustained by, and confronted with the common grace of our amazing God. Like the psalmist, such a realization should lead us to worship. How might you all the common grace of God to bring more worship into your daily walk with and work for the Lord? Talk with some believing friends about this matter.

Prayer:

3 The Witness of Common Grace

“Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.” Acts 14.17

The doctrine of common grace

We have been considering the Biblical teaching concerning the doctrine of common grace.

Common grace is the life-sustaining, fructifying love of God which brings everything into being, endows every creature with purpose and significance, and makes of the cosmos a showcase of beauty, wonder, delight, power, mystery, and wisdom. Common grace reaches to everything in the cosmos, because God created everything and everything belongs to Him. And because God is love, His stewardship of everything He has made is characterized by love as well.

Hence, the love, or grace of God, reaches to everything, all the time – common grace.

An alternative belief

Over the past 200 years practitioners of the theory of evolution have evolved another explanation of the cosmos, one that dispenses with any *need* for God and, thus, with God Himself. According to evolutionary theory, the cosmos continues to exist on the energy of a great, long-ago cosmic explosion, the effects of which explain the existence and continuance of all things, including life.

It should be obvious that this view of cosmos and everything in it cannot be proved; it must be accepted by faith. But if we begin using reason from this starting-point, everything we examine will only prove our initial premise – that we don’t need “God” or any spiritual realities to make sense of the world around us.

This faith has become the secular religion of our generation, carried forward by determined advocates and enforced by law, especially in the schools of this land.

But do the laws of physics and the powers of the material cosmos *necessarily* exclude the existence or involvement of God? That is, just because we can demonstrate consistently, over and over again, that matter and energy behave in certain kinds of ways, as though the properties causing them to behave in these ways were inherent in the cosmos itself – because we can demonstrate this consistently, does this *of necessity* witness to the fact that the cosmos is its own explanation, and God does not exist?

Not so fast

Not according to Robert C. Bishop and Joshua Carr. In an important article in the Spring, 2013 issue of *Christian Scholar’s Review*, Bishop and Carr demonstrated the *religious* way in which evolutionists employ reason to “prove” their *a priori* assumptions about the nature of the cosmos. Beginning with the *belief* that God is not necessary and non-existent, evolutionists then “demonstrate” the “truth” of that assumption by performing all manner of scientific experiments which, they insist, show that the universe runs by itself, awaiting the mind of man to explain it. Science leads us to discover things that cannot be denied – the physical laws and operations of things, for example – and it exposes as untenable things that cannot resist the evidence clamoring for their denial. The authors write, concerning this process, “Not surprisingly, [evolutionists] find God not to be among those things resisting denial.”

In other words, start with the assumption that God does not exist and is not necessary, and all your most sophisticated reasoning and scientific analyses will only reinforce that basic belief. All reasoning is circular, and if your powers of reason are bounded by an anti-supernaturalist conviction about the nature of what is real, you will always reinforce that bias through all your uses of reason.

But what if we start at another place in our reason? What if, Bishop and Carr suggest, we begin our examination of the cosmos with the idea that God *does* exist, and the He *is* sovereign over all He has made by the operations of common grace? To what *then* does the cosmos witness?

The authors explain, “the Christian, who trusts the intuition that such things as beauty, morality, and purpose are real (perhaps even more fundamental than the material phenomena that bear them), quite naturally finds their existence to hinge on God’s, so that modes of inquiry besides the natural sciences are needed to generate fuller accounts of reality.”

Put another way, if we start our examination of the material cosmos from the revelation of God in Scripture, trusting that God’s Word is right and true and reliable in what it tells us about the *material* cosmos, just as we find it to be true and reliable concerning *spiritual* matters, then we will see that the cosmos itself bears witness to God as almighty, all-wise, all-loving, all-sufficient, all-and-everywhere present and working – a God of power and grace, common grace.

The Apostle Paul insisted that God was bearing witness to Himself in the operations of plants and soils and the gifts of culture, and this is because God is present in and through such things by His wisdom, goodness, and love. The world is what it most beautifully and wondrously is because of the common grace of God, not because of any inherent properties of powers. This is the witness of common grace.

For reflection or discussion

1. Evolutionists seem to find a witness to evolution in just about everything in creation. Why do you suppose this is so?
2. What are you learning so far about common grace that might help you in bearing witness to others?
3. Evolution is a *process* affecting aspects of God’s creation, but it is not the *explanation* for God’s creation. Explain.
4. *Creation* is the explanation for, well, creation, and *common grace* is its corollary. Explain.
5. “The world is what it most beautifully and wondrously is because of the common grace of God, not because of any inherent properties of powers. This is the witness of common grace.” Suggest some ways believers could help one another improve their understanding and use of the doctrine of common grace.

Next steps: Paul observed a cultural practice common to human beings – agriculture – and declared that it bore witness to God. In what ways? And what about other cultural practices? Do they also bear witness to God? Raise this point and these questions with an unbelieving friend.

Prayer:

4 Common Grace to Humankind

“But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” Matthew 5.44, 45

In your face

In his 1903 novella, “The Beast in the Jungle,” Henry James tells the story of John Marcher, a young man persuaded that something amazing or catastrophic lay ahead for him in life. One day it would leap out at him, like a beast in the jungle, and he would either wrestle it into submission or be overwhelmed and destroyed by it.

Marcher makes the acquaintance of the young and gracious May Bartram, who comes to love him in spite of his egoistic tendencies. She provides him company and companionship and the pleasure of her charms and beauty, but he never seems to “get it” where she’s concerned, not even when, on one occasion, as he’s babbling away about his beast in the jungle, she rises from her chair and stands very near to him, right in his face, as it were.

Only after May Bartram has died does John Marcher realize that *she* was what awaited him, what had been prepared for him, and he had missed her. The story closes with Marcher, face down on May’s grave, weeping uncontrollably.

Grace in spite of ourselves

By now it’s becoming clear that human beings are a lot like John Marcher – self-important, vain, narcissistic, and quick to take for granted the everyday blessings of their lives.

We see this essential self-centeredness just about everywhere, and we wonder what the world is coming to where all people can think about is what’s good for them. Everyone’s so busy looking out for number 1 (Robert Ringer) and proclaiming the virtues and entitlements of “I, Me, Mine” (The Beatles) that it’s a wonder anything like compassion exists anywhere in the world.

But it does – and many other good, useful, and wondrous virtues as well. As human beings, it’s true, we are by nature self-interested, self-important, and unconcerned for anybody’s interests and needs beside our own.

That’s how we are *by nature*; but *by grace* – by God’s *common grace* to human beings – we are much more noble and beautiful creatures, indeed.

Let me quickly enumerate some ways that God’s common grace overcomes our natural self-centeredness to spread His love and bear witness to His existence.

Evidence of common grace

I’ll have to be brief. First, God’s common grace is revealed in our mere *continuance* as human beings. God made us and God sustains us, and the evidence that people know this can be easily marshaled.

What do people do who suddenly are the victims of some great catastrophe or disaster? They may weep and cry, like John Marcher, but they will also turn to prayer. Recall George Bailey in the film, *A Wonderful Life*. At the moment of his deepest tragedy he turns to prayer, saying, “God, I’m not a praying man, but...” Similar stories could be easily multiplied, thus bearing witness to what everyone knows in the depths of his or her soul: Our lives are in God’s hands.

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Second, the fact that human beings can *comprehend* the world – that they have minds and can reason – sets them apart from all other creatures. Scripture explains this, as well as our ability to be *creative, convivial, and compassionate* toward others by the fact that we are made in the image and likeness of God. There is good in all of us, not because we have dropped down from the trees and evolved in a world red in tooth and claw, but because we are the image-bearers of God, and He continues to express that in and through us in our ability to reason, to make things, and to share with others.

This holds as well for our ability to live peaceably with others in *community*. Where does law come from? Or the idea of justice? Or property rights? Or traditions, manners, or social graces? These emerge into human consciousness and come to expression in societies because the works of God's Law have been inscribed on the hearts of every one of His image-bearers (Rom. 2.14, 15). Animals live in communities, but only for the purpose of exploiting other communities, not for the general betterment of all creatures and the creation itself. Humans do so – albeit, to a greater or lesser extent – because of the common grace of God, working with their own inherent image-bearing humanity, to bear witness to and glorify the Creator.

We could say more, much more. For now, it's important that we understand that the beast in the jungle for every human being is staring us in the face every moment of every day. And the beast that waits to pounce and subdue is none other than the God Who created and sustains us, Who charms and blesses us with His presence and bounty, and witnesses to His love in ways it would be tragic to miss.

For reflection or discussion

1. Why are the fruits of God's common grace so prominent and many among human beings?
2. Do you agree that human beings are essentially self-centered and narcissistic? Why or why not?
3. What does it mean to say that God has written the works of His Law on the hearts of all people? How is this an evidence of His common grace?
4. Besides the ones mentioned in this lesson, what other evidences of common grace can you see in the lives of people?
5. Do you think the fact of common grace might provide a kind of "common ground" for talking with others about God and His love? Why or why not?

Next steps: How many different ways can you observe the common grace of God at work in your life today? Write them down, then pray them back to God before you go to bed tonight. Tomorrow, share your list with a friend, and invite him or her to praise the Lord with you.

Prayer:

5 Common Grace Every Day

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
And the firmament shows His handiwork.
Day unto day utters speech,
And night unto night reveals knowledge.
There is no speech nor language
Where their voice is not heard.* Psalm 19:1-3

A neglected discipline

I suppose I could muster several convincing arguments for why you should spend more time reading and contemplating poetry.

Instead, I'll let Dana Gioia argue for me. Gioia, a poet and critic, and former head of the National Endowment for the Arts, has written a very useful article entitled, "Poetry as Enchantment," in the summer, 2015, issue of *Dark Horse* magazine. The idea that poetry can "enchant" seems directly aimed at our secular age, the way evolutionary and naturalistic thinking has "disenchanted" the world, in the words of Charles Taylor. Poetry can help us to bring some wonder back to life.

In his article Gioia explains that one of the important uses of poetry is to give human beings "the words to get through life."

Isn't that an appealing notion? The idea that poetry can help us to make it through the day, and not only make it through, but understand, enjoy, delight in, and make sense of what's going on around us every day? Gioia continues, "The aim of poetry...is to awaken us to a fuller sense of our own humanity in both its social and individual aspects." I agree. And I also agree when Gioia writes, "Poetry proffers some mysteries that lie beyond paraphrase." That is, poetry presents things in ways that mere narrative can never capture, so that we actually *experience* an object, a situation, or a possibility in ways words alone can't describe.

I suppose this explains why almost half the Bible is written in poetry? Like Psalm 19?

A poet for everyday

I was once asked by a friend who expressed an interest in reading more poetry where he should begin. I didn't hesitate to answer: Gerard Manley Hopkins. Hopkins has been described as the greatest of the minor English poets. And, while he may be a second-tier versifier, few in the English canon surpass him when it comes to bringing out the common grace of God in everyday objects and situations.

As a boy, Hopkins wandered the English countryside observing everything, making notes and drawing pictures in a variety of notebooks. Those experiences would come to fruition in some of the loveliest and most delightful – common grace-full – poetry in the English language.

Hopkins' verse is distinguished by its vividness, simplicity, and joyous creativity. Hyphenated words, strange but apt accent marks, alliteration and apostrophe sparkle throughout his works, creating a poetry full of life and imagination, and richly reflecting of the common grace of God.

Here is Hopkins' poem, "Pied Beauty":

Glory be to God for dappled things –
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;

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For rose-moles in all stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise Him.

In this poem Hopkins celebrates all the everyday, ordinary ways God brings beauty to light in our sad world. The patterns of creation – finches and fish – and culture – the “gear” of men’s work and their cultivated fields – all bear witness to Him “whose beauty is past change” and speak of the relentless goodness of the Lord. As he reflects on these everyday objects and situation, Hopkins is led to glorify God, and he calls on us, his readers, to join him in his praise.

Poetry like this can teach us to look, wonder, see, and rejoice in all the many and varied ways the common grace of God works to bless, sustain, and delight us every day. By reading and contemplating the poems of Hopkins and others, we can become more alert to and in tune with a world that everywhere declares the glory of God, and join our voices with it to bring praise to Him Who loves His creatures unfailingly.

For reflection or discussion

1. How do you understand the “glory of God”? How do you experience it?
2. What does David mean by saying that the heavens “declare” the glory of God? What does the cosmos – creation in all its forms – “declare” about the glory of God?
3. Why do *you* suppose God wrote so much of the Bible in poetry? Is it important, in reading the poetry of the Bible, to make sure we understand *how* to read poetry?
4. How do you respond to the poem by Hopkins? Jot down your thoughts, impressions, feelings, and so forth.
5. How does knowing God in His glory help us to recognize His glory in His works of common grace? Is this something we should seek to improve in our walk with and work for the Lord? Why or why not?

Next steps: Make a list of things that fit the descriptions Hopkins summarizes in his poem. For example, “couple-colour” things, that is, as we might say, “two-toned” objects, like saddle shoes or a new skirt. List as many as you can in all the categories suggested by this poem. Then praise God for them all!

Prayer:

6 Common Grace and Worship

Praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD from the heavens;
Praise Him in the heights!
Praise Him, all His angels;
Praise Him, all His hosts! Psalm 148.1, 2

The goal of common grace

As we saw in Psalm 104, as well as in the poem, “Pied Beauty,” the common grace of God leads those who observe it to worship and praise the Lord. This is precisely as God intends. The end for which God does anything, including pervade and sustain the world with common grace, is to glorify Himself.

By the glory of God we understand the presence of God, come to light in our midst, so that we know Him and are drawn into the experience of His presence, majesty, and might. This can be a crushing experience, as we might imagine. That’s why the presence of God’s glory is often described as a kind of “weight.” In Scripture, whenever people are confronted with the glory of God, they fall down on their faces in fear and trembling, as though some great weight had suddenly fallen upon them, and their lives were in danger.

But very often those same people, cowering before the presence of God, will give God praise and thanks and say ridiculous things like, “It’s good for us to be here.”

The glory of God is what the world and everything in it is made for – including we ourselves. To know God in His glory is to know ultimate reality – defining beauty, goodness, and truth. It is to enter into the heart of reality itself and to glimpse eternity in a most personal, intimate, and loving way. This is what God desires for us, that our hearts might soar within His glory and rejoice in things too wonderful to express.

And God’s common grace is designed to bring out His glory, until the knowledge of the glory of the Lord covers the earth as the waters cover the sea (Hab. 2.14).

Psalm 148

In Psalm 148 all the creatures outlined in Psalm 104 are represented as praising God. Angels and heavenly hosts (v. 2); the sun, moon, and stars (v. 3); sea creatures (v. 7); the weather (v. 8); mountains and hills and fruit-bearing trees (v. 9); all creatures on or in the earth (v. 10); and all human beings of every rank and status (vv. 11, 12).

These, we recognize, are the same creatures mentioned in Psalm 104 as having been created by God and now being sustained by Him. Those creatures – all creatures – which are the beneficiaries of God’s common grace are intended for His praise, Who made and cares so lovingly for them.

But how does this happen? The heavens declare the glory of God, as we’ve seen, but very few people seem to be paying attention. The evolutionist looks at the creation and sees pointlessness, purposelessness, death, and oblivion. How does creation, which is the object of God’s common grace, fulfill its God-given purpose of bringing glory and honor to Him?

This is where we come in.

A people near to God

Psalm 148.14 describes the redeemed people of the Lord as “exalted” in the earth yet “near to Him.” By virtue of our being “near” to God we come to know Him in His glory. We experience His beauty, are infused

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with His presence and power, know what it's like to be in the midst of goodness and wisdom and uprightness. Glory is something with which we become familiar, and which we long to know more of every day. By virtue of our being “exalted” in the earth we stand over all the creatures in a way that allows us, like Gerard Manley Hopkins, to observe and celebrate the common grace of God in every creature, and to point out His glory, “fathering-forth” in all the many and varied ways it does every day.

In other words, as the common grace of God works within the creation, and as He reveals His glory in so doing, our calling, who *know* God in His glory, is to “give voice” to the creation and to observe, explain, and celebrate the glory of the Lord, as far as His common grace reaches and as often as we see His glory, coming to light.

Certainly we won't all become poets. But we all have a calling from God to “glorify” Him in every situation and in everything we do (1 Cor. 10.31). As we become more conscious of the common grace of God – His wondrous and unfailing steadfast love – we will, like the psalmists, give glory and praise and worship to Him, thus bringing His common grace to its full and proper conclusion.

For reflection or discussion

1. What are the implications of God's people being both “near” to Him and “exalted” over the creation?
2. In what sense might we say that God's people are the “interpreters” of the creation?
3. What can keep us from becoming more active and consistent as interpreters of the creation, giving the creation a voice to worship God? How can we overcome these hindrances?
4. Meditate on 2 Corinthians 3.12-18. What is the role of Scripture in helping us to become more familiar with the glory of God? Is your present investment in Scripture – time, focus, study – sufficient to help you grow in your experience of God's glory?
5. Suggest some ways you might begin to become more consistently aware and mindful of the common grace of God.

Next steps: How can a growing awareness of the common grace of God bring more worship into your walk with and work for the Lord? Talk with a church leader about this question.

Prayer:

7 Common Grace and Witness

“Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.” Luke 12.27

Two cheers for PBS

Susie and I are PBS fans and supporters. Not *big* supporters, mind you, but supporters. What we benefit from we generally try to support when we can.

Some of my favorite PBS programming relates to the creation and its many wonders. Oh, of course, the people who produce and narrate those programs, with all their spectacular and beautiful cinematography, don't consider that what they're presenting is creation. They call it “nature.” And no one does it better than PBS in bringing the gospel of nature and evolution to the American viewing public.

PBS is to evolutionary theory as the pulpit is to the Gospel – well, in some churches anyway. All PBS nature programs make a point not only of presenting the beauty and wonder of the creation, but of telling us how evolution has made all this wonder possible.

Creation, for the evolutionist, represents a powerful tool for propagandizing his religion. And PBS is a most accommodating platform for evolutionary evangelists to spread their false gospel.

But there's something for us to learn from this evolutionary programming, and it's this: The creation, pervaded, suffused, and sustained by common grace, offers a powerful resource for bearing witness to God.

Why shy away?

Why should we shy away from this challenge? Those who believe in the religion of evolution don't. Why can't we point to the creation like they do and wax eloquent about the beauty, goodness, wisdom, and truth of God? We have plenty of Biblical teaching and authorization for using the creation to bear witness to God. Look at Jesus, pointing out the lilies of the field. They testify, He insisted, to the common grace and steadfast love of God.

Why can't we do this?

I can think of two reasons. First, because we actually agree with evolutionary theory where the material world is concerned. We know what the Bible teaches about creation and the sustaining power of Christ, but we have been so harangued by evolutionary thinking that we've drunk their Kool-Aid, and we figure God manages the creation by the vehicle of evolution and the physical laws of the universe. We fail to realize, as Jonathan Edwards pointed out long ago, that what we call “physical laws” are only descriptions of how God upholds the universe and all things in it consistently, coherently, and revealingly, for His glory and praise.

And second, we don't do this because we haven't learned to *read* the common grace of God in creation so that we could actually point someone to it, give voice to the various creatures around us, and draw out the glory of God for all to see. We haven't followed the example of our forebears, like Gerard Manley Hopkins, and our contemporaries, like Robert C. Bishop and Joshua Carr.

But these are only excuses, and an excuse, as Jim Kennedy used to say, is only the skin of a reason stuffed with a lie. When we give ground to the lie of evolutionary theory – and I don't mean to say there's no such thing as evolution, merely that evolution is not *the* explanation for everything – when we give ground to evolutionary theory we embrace the lie, and that lie then begins to color everything. By tacitly agreeing with that religion which makes God no longer necessary, we can hardly talk with someone about God, can we?

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So because we have denied the common grace of God as the sustaining and explaining paradigm for all creation, we can hardly hope to introduce God into everyday life as though He actually, you know, mattered.

All or nothing

Our witness to the Lord Jesus Christ is all of a piece. The Gospel is all or nothing. Jesus is the Source and Explanation of everything, or He explains nothing at all. What the doctrine of common grace reveals to us concerning our Lord Jesus is two very important matters.

First, that there is literally no end or limit to the love God bears for us. He surrounds us with His love every day, invites us to consider His love at every turn, and supports and sustains us by a love we can never escape and only with great spiritual exertion consistently deny. Any God Who loves us so much, and so constantly, is worth hearing when He reveals the extent to which He has gone in revealing the full measure of His love.

And second, common grace reminds us that we need God, in every detail and aspect of our lives. And if we need Him merely to survive, and to enjoy life to any extent, how much more do we need Him to enable us to overcome the finality of death and the horrors of hell?

The doctrine of common grace deserves more attention from us, beloved, for it can help us in our calling and mission to glorify and enjoy and bear witness to God in every aspect of our lives.

For reflection or discussion

1. What is the Gospel? Suppose you had an opportunity to share the Gospel with someone. What would you say?
2. How does the doctrine of common grace relate to the Good News of Jesus Christ, or help us in explaining the Gospel?
3. Do you think a more consistent awareness of common grace, and a more studied approach to observing and celebrating it, would enhance your witness for the Lord? Why or why not?
4. What's the most important lesson you've learned through this study?
5. How are you planning to incorporate that lesson in your walk with and work for the Lord?

Next steps: What can you identify of the common grace of God that might serve as a conversation starter leading to the Gospel? Talk with some believing friends about this question, then try it out with an unbeliever.

Prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our mission is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the donate button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.