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## HOLINESS TODAY

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GOES BEFORE

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**16** THE GOOD NEWS

**32** THE PURSUING POWER OF GRACE

\$4.95 SEPT/OCT 2020  
HOLINESSTODAY.ORG  
CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE

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Subscription price: \$16.00 (U.S.) per year.

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***POSTMASTER***

Please send address changes to:

*Holiness Today*, PO Box 351

Congers, NY 10920-0351

Periodicals postage paid at Kansas City, MO.

Canadian GST No. R129017471.

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*Holiness Today* (ISSN 1523-7788) is published bimonthly by The Church of the Nazarene, Inc., Global Ministry Center, 17001 Prairie Star Parkway, Lenexa, KS 66220.

PHOTO CREDITS: iStock—1-4, 7-8, 10-12, 14-15, 20-21, 23, 27, 32, 35.  
Unsplash—OFC, 4, 12, 16-17, 19, 20-21, 25, 28-29, 31.

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# HOLINESS TODAY

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2020

VOL. 22, NO. 5



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# A PEEK INTO DIVINITY

EDITORIAL  
FRANK M. MOORE

**W**hat is God like? Countless books on this subject line library shelves, written by scholars in multiple languages from diverse cultures around the world. Speculation abounds with possible answers. Jesus Christ answered that question plainly for all to understand during His earthly ministry. He often spoke in parables: stories with word pictures that describe spiritual truths in practical ways.

One of my favorite parables, offering a word-picture peek into divine realities, is found in Luke 15:3-7. The story of the lost sheep focuses more attention on the heart of the shepherd than the absence of an animal.

Notice the admirable qualities of the shepherd:

- He demonstrated great concern for every single member of his flock.
- He focused attention on details as he counted individual sheep entering the fold of safety.
- His deep concern for the one absent sheep caused him to rearrange his schedule and go on a search-and-rescue mission.
- His restless heart refused to allow him to return empty-handed, continuing the search until he located the lost one.
- His compassion reached out and rescued the vulnerable loner.
- His loving embrace carefully placed the sheep over his shoulders for the journey home.
- His deep emotion gathered friends and neighbors together for a time of celebration.

Verse 7 indicates that Jesus intended His listeners to apply this story to spiritual realities. Perhaps Jesus had Ezekiel 34:31 in mind as He spoke: "You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Sovereign LORD." If that is the case, the shepherd represents our heavenly Father. The lost sheep represents every man, woman, youth, and child lost in sin. Thus, to this day we refer to individuals held in sin's grip as "the lost." The flock represent God's children already safely in the fold. The restless, searching heart of the shepherd represents God's prevenient grace longing, seeking, and reaching out to every least, last, or lost one.

Some in contemporary culture imagine God as disconnected from our reality: irrelevant; an out-of-touch doting grandparent; a relic of a primitive, ancient faith. Others describe a stern cosmic law enforcement officer waiting in the shadows to condemn anyone who breaks a moral law. Jesus, on the other hand, set the record straight

with the authority of One who knows the Father intimately. Jesus said our heavenly Father cares deeply for both the community of faith and for lost individuals. His care manifests itself in daily involvement in the lives of all who remain outside the fold of safety.

God's involvement does not end when He rescues and restores those who are lost. These acts of God throw the door wide open to personal, daily relationship with Him. Restoration opens channels of conversation and fellowship between God and His children that give new meaning to life on earth. Beyond that, it anticipates a deepening of those conversations and that fellowship for all eternity. Luke 15 reminds us that the prevenient nature of God's grace to us is simply one aspect of a divine grace so magnificent and abounding that we will grow to understand it more and more, not only in this life, but forever when we reach our eternal home. "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen" (2 Peter 3:18).

**Frank Moore** is editor in chief of *Holiness Today*.

# PROVIDENCE AND PREVENIENCE

FOREWORD  
DAVID BUSIC

There is a difference between providential grace and prevenient grace. Providence is how God provides for the sustenance and provision of His creation.<sup>1</sup> God “sees to” (Gen. 22:8, 14) what is needed to sustain the world and to provide for individual persons. How God’s providence affects each person’s life is profoundly mysterious. When and where and into what family one is born is a question of providence. Why one person is born into a Hindu family in India in 1765, while another person is born into a Christian family in Canada in 2015 are matters of providence. God’s providence carries varying degrees of spiritual responsibility. One born into a devout Christian family will be held to more stringent account than one born into a Buddhist environment. One who is given opportunity to hear the Gospel throughout their life will be judged differently from someone who has never heard the name of Jesus.

Jesus’ parable of the faithful and wise servant is about more than material possessions; it involves stewardship of God’s grace. “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Luke 12:48). Not all are given equal opportunity and the same ground on which to stand. Some are given more and some are given less. With the gift of ‘more’ comes an increased requirement for return and response. These are matters of Divine providence.

If providence is where God places us, prevenience is the multifaceted ways God meets us. Everyone receives the same grace that goes before salvation. But opportunities for response differ. Nevertheless, God extends Himself to everyone, persistently and patiently. This distinguishes Christianity from other world religions that teach that if humans first move toward God, God will respond. Christianity reverses the order; God always acts first, thereby enabling response. God initiates the good work of grace and peace. Redemption and new creation always begin with God’s initiative. Nothing reveals this more than the conviction that the Father sent Jesus Christ into the world. God always acts first. The Holy Spirit awakens persons to their need for salvation, convicts them of sin, and applies the atonement of Christ as they respond in faith. For John Wesley, spiritual awakening is more than mere conscience.

There is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly devoid of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called natural conscience. Every man has some measure of that light ... which lightens every man that comes into the world. And every one ... feels more or less uneasy when he acts contrary to the light of his own conscience. So that no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath.<sup>2</sup>

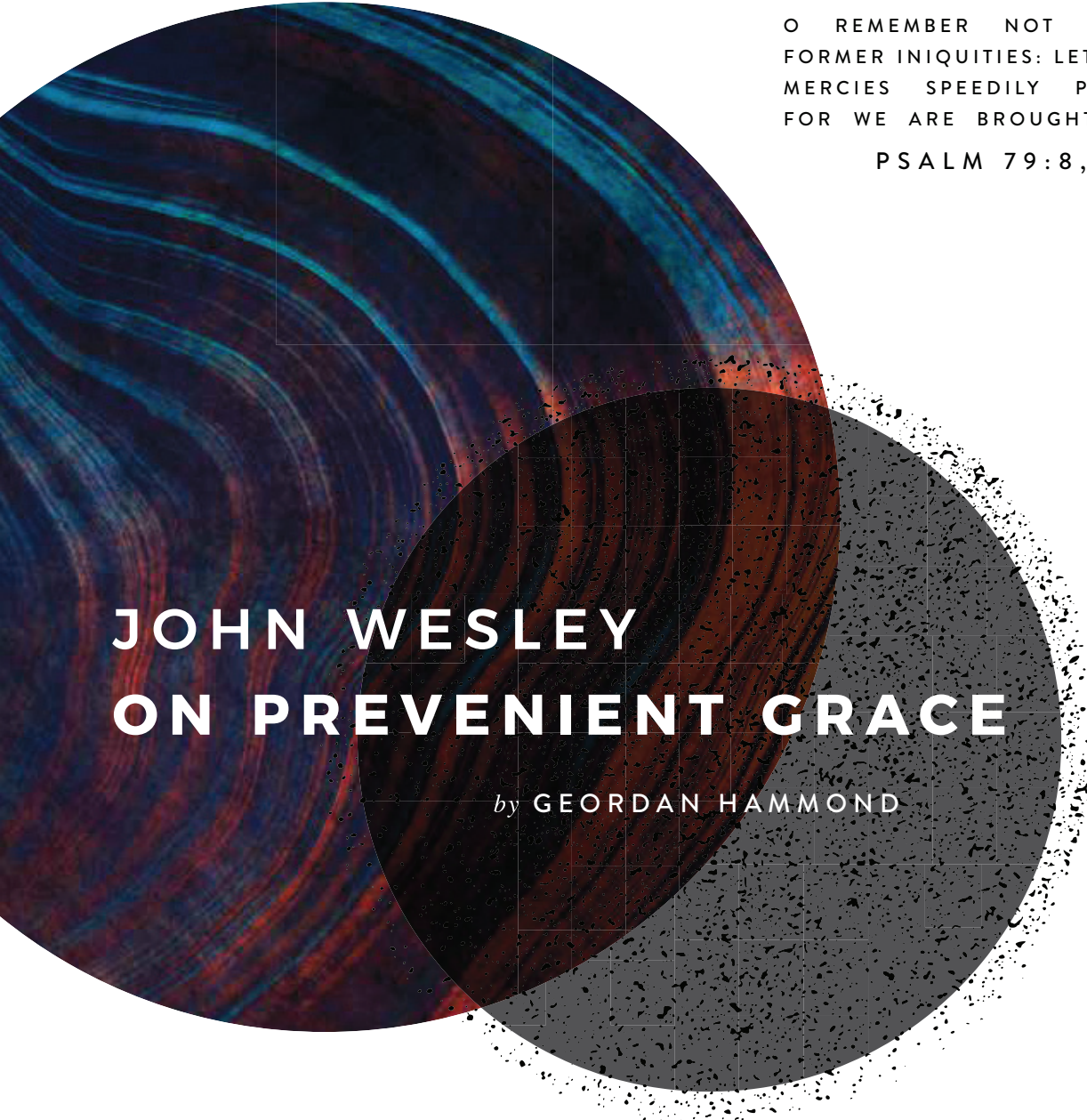
An uneasy conscience, an increasing awareness of right and wrong, and awakening spiritual awareness are God’s gracious gifts to everyone. This confidence has important implications for evangelism in the Wesleyan spirit.

**David Busic** is a general superintendent in the Church of the Nazarene.

1. The word providence comes from two Latin words: *pro*, which means “forward,” or, “on behalf of”; and, *vide*, which means “to see.” Providence is sometimes distinguished into two categories of “general providence,” or God’s care for the universe, and “special providence,” God’s intervention in the life of people.

2. John Wesley, *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley* (Kansas City, MO: Nazarene Publishing House, n.d.; and Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958, concurrent editions), VI, 512.

NOTE: This is an excerpt from “Providence and Prevenience,” a chapter of a forthcoming book, *The Grace That Goes Before: Prevenient Grace in the Wesleyan Tradition*. Used with permission from The Foundry Publishing, [www.thefoundrypublishing.com](http://www.thefoundrypublishing.com).



O REMEMBER NOT AGAINST US  
FORMER INIQUITIES: LET THY TENDER  
MERCIES SPEEDILY PREVENT US:  
FOR WE ARE BROUGHT VERY LOW.

PSALM 79:8, KJV

**JOHN WESLEY  
ON PREVENIENT GRACE**

*by* GEORDAN HAMMOND

## **PREVENIENT GRACE HAS A FOUNDATIONAL PLACE**

in John Wesley's theology. Why is this so? Because salvation is central to the Christian faith. Wesley stated, "salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) 'preventing grace.'"<sup>1</sup> Prevenient grace, as a crucial aspect of Wesley's doctrine of grace, needs to be set in the larger context of that doctrine and his theology as a whole.<sup>2</sup> This enables us to have a clear view of prevenient grace and its functions in Wesley's theology and, hopefully, to avoid misunderstandings. For Wesley, prevenient grace was not his innovative contribution to Christianity but an essential, gracious gift of God to fallen humanity revealed in Scripture and rooted in and reflected upon in the Christian tradition.

Because of borrowed words from other languages into English and the resulting changes in word meanings, the term prevenient grace, like Christian perfection, can appear odd and even confusing. Prevenient is from the Latin *praevenire*, meaning to precede or come before. Wesley, as was common in his day, usually used the term "preventing" grace in a sense that was in harmony with its Latin root word. This is very different to the common meaning of "prevent" in English today (as stopping something from happening). If defined in line with Wesley and classic Christianity, alternative terms such as "preparatory grace" or "enabling grace" may be used. Prevenient grace can be described as the work of the Holy Spirit in drawing us to God.

While the term prevenient grace is not found in the Bible, the concept is, nonetheless, deeply embedded in it. In Scripture and in the life of the believer, grace is supremely revealed and embodied in the incarnation and atonement of Jesus Christ. Reconciliation with God is made possible by the prevenient work of the Holy Trinity in sending to us the Son of God.

Wesley saw the incarnation of Christ—“the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (John 1:9)—as a gift of prevenient grace to all people. Prevenient grace can also be implicitly linked to God’s work in directing “his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). Wesley framed prevenient grace in reference to the Trinity: it is the drawing of us to the Father, the light of the Son, and the work of the Spirit in convicting us of sin. As this suggests, salvation is a supernatural, divine work enabled by the grace of God.<sup>4</sup>

In relation to the history of Christian thought, Wesley’s view of prevenient grace was drawn especially from the early church and the Church of England. As with the Church of the Nazarene’s Article of Faith Seven, grace/prevenient grace is found in the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England. Article Ten addresses grace and free will stating that “after the fall of Adam . . . we have no power to do good work . . . without the grace of God by Christ preventing us.” This understanding of the relationship between grace and free will was fundamental to the Protestant Reformation. It highlights both human inability to turn to God apart from grace, and, more importantly, the power of God’s grace to save us, personally and corporately.<sup>5</sup>

It is not uncommon to hear Wesleyans today discuss free will in such a way as to suggest that we can simply choose to be saved. Wesley denied this view of “natural free will,” yet he believed “that there is a measure of free will supernaturally restored to every man.”<sup>6</sup> This restoration by

God’s prevenient grace allows us to cooperate with that grace and to move to repentance, justification, regeneration, sanctification, and ultimately glorification.

As God’s initiative, prevenient grace enables us to respond to God—in Wesley’s terms to “co-work” or “cooperate” with God. While the doctrine can be found in many of Wesley’s writings, the single place in which it is most clearly expressed is his sermon “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” which uses Philippians 2:12-13 as its text: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God that worketh in you, both to will and to do of his good pleasure.” Wesley memorably sums up this teaching as “first, God works; therefore you can work. Secondly, God works; therefore you must work.” Here Wesley underscores the universality of prevenient grace; therefore, “no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath.”<sup>7</sup>

In reference to salvation, prevenient grace is “the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight, transient conviction of having sinned against him.”<sup>8</sup> Although it should be remembered that there is only one united grace of God, for the purpose of explaining how God’s grace progressively operates in human experience, Wesley described a fourfold process of grace. Being awakened by prevenient grace, convincing (or convicting) grace is the movement and desire toward repentance. Justifying grace allows us to trust in Christ for our salvation. Sanctifying grace brings our salvation to its fullness—salvation from the power and root of sin and restoration in the

image of God. Wesley asserted, “all experience, as well as Scripture, shows this salvation to be both instantaneous and gradual.”<sup>9</sup>

**FOR WESLEY, OUR  
CONSCIENCE IS A  
SUPERNATURAL  
GIFT GIVEN BY GOD  
THROUGH WHICH  
PREVENIENT GRACE  
WORKS.**



For Wesley, our conscience is a supernatural gift given by God through which prevenient grace works. This teaching is present in “On Working Out Our Own Salvation” and built upon in his sermon “On Conscience,” where Wesley defines conscience as “that [universal] faculty whereby we are at once conscious of our own thoughts, words, and actions, and of their merit or demerit, of their being good or bad, and consequently, deserving either praise or censure.”<sup>10</sup> Recognizing that God’s Holy Spirit speaks to us through our conscience is another way of comprehending Wesley’s conception of the working of prevenient grace.

Prevenient grace, while part of the broad Western Augustinian tradition, came to Wesley particularly through the Arminian and Anglican traditions. Wesley, as an inheritor of and contributor to these traditions, stressed that God’s grace is “free grace.” That

is, it is an unmerited gift of God preveniently given to us “while we were yet sinners” and it is a universal, supernatural gift given to all people. This is distinguished from any doctrine that limits God’s saving grace to a select few. For Wesley, every person is enabled to cooperate with God as they are convinced, justified, and sanctified.

In summary, “prevenience” is a reality of all manifestations of God’s grace. By its very nature, God’s grace is prevenient grace. Therefore, prevenient grace is not a stage of grace that we leave behind once we respond to it; we need God’s grace continually throughout our lives, and God graciously extends it to us so that we might be born again having our affections, mind, and will transformed by God, leading us to “go on to perfection” (Hebrews 6:1).

Prevenient grace suggests that we should hold unconditional love as central to ministry. A pastoral and evangelistic task of all Nazarenes

is to preach the gospel in word and deed as a means of awakening people to the prevenient work of God already present in their lives. The Holy Spirit enabling us to see the work of God’s prevenient grace in the lives of those around us should activate the call to discipleship in the church. When we heed this call, we co-work with God to help people encounter God’s free grace that leads to liberation from sin and the joyous life of holy living.

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*All Scripture quotations in this article are taken from the King James Version.*

1. John Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation” (Sermon 85), The Wesleyan-Holiness Digital Library, <http://whdl.nbc.edu/working-out-our-own-salvation-sermon-85> (accessed June 15, 2020).
2. For example, for Wesley, grace/prevenient grace is intimately related to and at times indistinguishable from God’s love and God’s providence.
3. See Wesley’s sermon “The Scripture Way of Salvation.” Prevenient grace should be seen as the Holy Trinity’s gracious action, not a substance that God places within us.
4. There is wide consensus among Wesley scholars that grace is the center of Wesley’s theology. In Albert Outler’s oft-cited phrase, it is the “axial theme” of his theology. This has been refined by Randy Maddox as “responsible grace”: God’s grace and our grace-empowered and willing participation co-operate in the *via salutis* (way of salvation); by Kenneth Collins as the conjunctive of “holiness *and* grace”; and by Henry Knight as “the relationship between love and grace” with an emphasis on Wesley’s “optimism of grace,” and “grace as the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.” This should underscore that it is crucial to place prevenient grace within Wesley’s doctrine of grace as a whole. Prevenient grace is a useful way of thinking about God’s grace as long as it is understood that there is only one unified grace of God. It is not a separate grace from the grace of God that enables repentance of sin, salvation, and sanctification.
5. Throughout this article, “us” refers both to us personally *and* corporately as the body of Christ.
6. Wesley, *Predestination Calmly Considered*.
7. John Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation” (Sermon 85).
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. John Wesley, “On Conscience” (Sermon 105), The Wesleyan-Holiness Digital Library, <https://www.whdl.org/conscience-sermon-105>, (accessed June 15, 2020).

