



The Five Solas: Sola Gratia

Reformation Prelude, Part 5

David Sunday

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Sola Gratia—one of the banner cries of the Reformation, the great movement of God’s Spirit that began 500 years ago this month. Sola Gratia—grace alone! We love to sing of the grace of God. I loved singing these songs this morning and seeing the testimonies of God’s grace through the baptisms of these young people.

But what if I were to tell you, “There is no such thing as grace”? Would you fire me? The truth is grace is not a “thing.” It’s not a substance that God pours into you spiritually when you need a little extra help from above. It’s not like when my son took me to L.A. Fitness a couple weeks ago to lift weights, and he stood there over the weights as I was lifting them, because he knew I was going to need some help at the end with the last couple of reps. Grace is not like having a spotter when life gets tough.

Grace is an undeserved gift. It’s God’s kindness to my selfishness; God’s benevolence to my malevolence; God’s generosity to my greed. Grace is God saying yes to blessing me when I’m saying no to worshiping Him. Grace is God’s undeserved kindness. It’s not even enough to think of grace as a gift. It is a gift, but it’s not merely a gift.

I found this statement by Jeremy Treat helpful: “Grace is a gift, but God is not only the Giver—He Himself is the Gift. God graces us with Himself.”

I think it’s important for us to remember this as we sing about grace. It’s possible to turn grace into an abstract thing and separate it from God Himself. But that would be a very big mistake. Grace is not something you can separate from God; grace is God giving of Himself to those who don’t deserve it.

Here’s another quote from a book I found very helpful on the Reformation. If you want to read one book about the Reformation this month and what it means for us today, read this one by Michael Reeves and Tim Chester, [Why the Reformation Still Matters](#). They say:

Grace is not a ‘thing’ at all; it is the personal kindness of God by which He does not merely enable us but actually rescues and freely gives us Himself.

There is no such 'thing' as grace; there is only Christ, Who is the blessing of God freely given to us.

Grace is God's gift of Himself. When God gives us grace, He gives us Christ. There are so many places in Scripture we could turn to to explore this wonderful doctrine of grace alone, but one place where it's described so succinctly is in Paul's last letter that he wrote right at the end of his life. Paul was in prison in Rome, passing the baton to Timothy—his young mentee—encouraging Timothy to remain steadfast in the faith and to not be ashamed of the gospel. It's 2 Timothy 1:9-10.

Paul is urging Timothy by telling him, "God has not given you a spirit of fear, but of power and love and self-control" (verse seven). He's saying in verse eight, "*Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God.*" In other words, "Be courageous, Timothy. Don't be ashamed. Be steadfast. Share in suffering." And the way that Paul motivates Timothy to boldness, the way he encourages him to steadfastness, is by reminding him of the doctrine that our salvation is altogether by grace—God's grace alone. Paul motivates Timothy with the doctrine of Sola Gratia.

We see that in verses nine and ten. It's important that you realize that the subject of everything that is being said here is listed at the end of verse eight, and His name is God. God is the subject of verses nine and ten:

God...saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

This is God's Word for us today. This is how God wants to put amazing back into grace in our lives. He wants to help us be amazed at His grace and to never stop being amazed by His grace through these verses.

So let's pray together that this will be the case for us today.

God, I pray for the help of Your Holy Spirit to kindle in me a flame of love and amazement at Your grace that will never die. I pray You would deliver us from a lackadaisical approach to these doctrines. I pray that You would deliver us from apathy, deliver us from the familiarity that breeds contempt. Keep us, Lord, from thinking, "I know all that," and especially deliver us from any sense that we deserve this grace. Deliver us from thinking we don't need this grace that You have shown us in Christ. O God, please deepen in us an awareness of how desperately dependent

we are on Your grace and Your grace alone. We pray this for the glory of Your great and gracious name and for our good. Amen.

What does grace do?

I want to interrogate these two verses—2 Timothy 1:9-10—with some questions.

Question number one, “What does God do by His grace?” We see in verse nine that the answer is two-fold. You can figure out the first answer. If you just look at your Bible, you could preach this message. What does God do by His grace in verse nine? He saved us and He called us to holy calling. That’s Paul’s two-fold answer to this question.

First, God saved us—from what? From being dead in our trespasses and sin. We were dead and dead people cannot make themselves alive. God saved us. He gave us new life. We were following the course of this world, just going along with everyone else. We were following the “spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:1-2), captive to our sin. We were by nature children of wrath. And “as we ran our hell-bound race, indifferent to the cost” (lyrics from All I Have is Christ), God saved us. He rescued us from the wrath that our sins deserve and the judgment that would surely fall on us—the judgment that was hanging over our heads already because we did not believe. It was a judgment that would have resulted in our eternal condemnation, if we had not been saved. That’s what He saved us from.

Or you could turn over to Paul’s little letter to Titus for another description of what we were saved from. Titus 3:3 describes us like this: Apart from grace, “*we ourselves were once foolish.*” God saved us from folly. We were “*disobedient.*” God saved us from rebellious disobedience. We were “*led astray.*” We were like sheep going astray, but God saved us from our waywardness. We were “*slaves to various passions and pleasures,*” but God redeemed us. He liberated and set us free from our bondage to evil desires that would corrupt us, eroding and corroding our lives from within.

We were “*passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.*” God saved us from this implacable hostility that characterized all our relationships in this world. We were haters and we were hated. That’s what He saved us from when the goodness and lovingkindness of our God and Savior appeared. He saved us not because of works done by us in righteousness (Titus 3:5). That’s what we were saved from.

Going back to 2 Timothy 1:9, notice that Paul speaks of salvation as if God did it all—because He did. Salvation is of the Lord. It originates in Him and in Him alone, in the heart of the Father Who Himself loves and Who designed our salvation before we even realized we needed it. He planned it. It sprang from His generous heart. So with Peter, we say, “Blessed be

the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” He has made us alive. He has given us new birth and eternal life. This life is in His Son, Jesus Christ, Who loved us and Who freed us from our sins by His blood. So to Him be all the glory forever and ever. Salvation belongs to the Lord.

If our Lord Jesus came to save people who could have saved themselves, then His coming was not necessary. Spurgeon said, “We cannot believe that Christ came to do what sinners might have done themselves.” The very fact that He came and did what He did and suffered as He did on that cross demonstrates how greatly we needed the salvation He came to bring.

Notice as well in verse nine that Paul says God “saved us” in the perfect tense. It’s done. Believers in Jesus are saved already; not just when we come to die. There is salvation we’ll experience then as well, but it’s the salvation that we’ve already experienced now that’s going to continue being experienced at the time of our death. It’s done. A believer is someone who can say—and does say—“I’m saved. I am saved from the wrath of God.” There’s no doubt there. There’s assurance that is born out by the Holy Spirit in our lives, testifying to the gospel that God reveals in His Scriptures. We have assurance of our salvation.

Everyone in this room is in one of two categories. Either you are saved, or you are lost. Either you are rescued from the wrath your sins deserve, or you are still in peril and danger of God’s wrath falling on you for your sin. It’s either you’re saved, or you’re not.

When Paul says to Timothy, “God saved us,” God is saying to you and me, “Don’t wait until you come to die to obtain salvation.” This is a promise that Christ has secured for every sinner who will trust in Him. Christ paid the price for every sinner who will trust and treasure Him for what He has done on that cross. He paid the price—not in part, but the whole. Jesus took the bill, that was the wages of your sin, and He paid it in full. He nailed that debt to the cross so it can no longer be held against those who believe in Him.

God is saying to you, “This is a promise you must receive. I want you to enjoy it now through putting your trust in Jesus.” Don’t put that off until later. Trust in Jesus now and you’ll be able to say with confidence, like Paul says to Timothy, “God saved me...” Tim Keller says, “If the gospel is by grace alone, then every conversion is a miracle.” If you can say, “God saved me,” that’s a miracle. It’s a miracle of mercy.

Notice, that’s not the only thing Paul says God did. It’s two-fold. Verse nine says He saved us and called us to a holy calling. These are two actions of God that you cannot divide. They’re inseparable. You can’t pick the first, like you might go buy a car and say, “I’ll buy the car, but I’m not going to buy the extended warranty package.” You can’t say, “I’ll take the salvation, but I’ll skip the holy calling.” Or, “I’ll think about that. Could I add that on later?” No. It’s

together. Whenever God saves a person, God also sets about sanctifying that person. That's part of the good news too.

Again, from the book by Michael Reeves and Tim Chester, they say, "Holy living is not the awkward small print of the gospel, a catch hiding behind the good news of grace alone." Sometimes we think of it that way, like, "Oh, yeah. I want to hide that part," because we think that's not good news. But when you've stood before the cross of Jesus, and you've seen how horrible, ugly, destructive and damning your sin is, you don't look at the cross and trust what Jesus has done there, and then say, "I want to go on living in my sin." No. You say, "I want to be free from that. I want to live a holy life. That's what I want now."

So it's good news that God's salvation of us includes this wonderful aspect of sanctification. He calls us to a holy calling. And our holiness—I read this, but I'm not sure where—is a consequence, not a cause of our salvation. So we don't get saved because we're holy; we become holy because we're saved. Or someone else put it like this: "Holiness is not a prerequisite for grace; it is a product of grace." He "*saved us and called us to a holy calling.*" Robert Murray M'Cheyne said, "If Christ justifies you, He will sanctify you. He will not save you and leave you in your sins." Is anyone thankful for that? Is that good news?

Thank You, Lord, that You don't just save me and leave me under the bondage of my sin. You free me from that and You enable me to live a holy life.

Going back to Titus, we see this spelled out with crystal clarity in Titus 2:11. This is beautiful: "*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.*" What does this salvation consist of? Verse 12: "*Training us.*" I heard a young man once preach on this passage and he called it "Professor Grace." He said Professor Grace is training and teaching us. Maybe it's better to use "Coach Grace" Who's training us for the following goals:

To renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

What that's telling me is that the only way I can live a holy life is by grace. It's not by trying harder. It's not by my own will power or my own moralistic efforts that I'm going to become holy. It's by the grace of God training me. The same grace that brought about my forgiveness and justification is now at work bringing about my progressive sanctification. That's what God does by grace.

Why does grace do this?

Now let's ask, "Why does God do this?" Let's go back to 2 Timothy 1. Why does God do this? Why does He save us? Why does He call us to a holy calling? We've already seen that God's the One Who does it. Salvation belongs to Him. Paul wants to underscore that, so he adds a negative. Why does God do this? Well, first of all, Paul says, it's not because of anything in us. It's "*not because of our works.*" Do you see that in verse nine? We did nothing to deserve it.

No list of sins I have not done,
No list of virtues I pursue,
No list of those I am not like
Can earn myself a place with You.

O God, be merciful to me—
I am a sinner through and through!
My only hope of righteousness
Is not in me, but only You.

(From "Not In Me" by Eric Schumacher and David L. Ward)

It's not because of anything you've done. It's not because of your good works. You can't mix fire and water, and you can't mix works and grace. If you want to add works to your salvation, then you've got to be saved by your works alone, from the beginning to the end. And you'll find out that's impossible.

Well, salvation is by works, in a sense—the works of Jesus Christ and Him alone. By His perfect work salvation comes to you, through grace and through grace alone. But you can't add anything to the perfect work of Jesus. If you want God to save you, He insists on being the Author and the Finisher of your salvation (Hebrews 12:2). It's really hard to really believe this.

My friend David Murray says the ten most misunderstood letters in the Bible are "N-O-T-O-F-W-O-R-K-S." Those are the ten most unbelieved letters in the Bible: NOT OF WORKS. Even after we've been saved, we keep thinking God must be more pleased with me and I must surely be in His favor if I do all the right things. When I sin, I wonder, "Is God still gracious to me?" How many times do we have to pray the sinner's prayer before we really know, "God is gracious to me"? It's not of works. God did not look down and say, "Well, there is a person who's going to be a real asset to My Kingdom. I really want to save her. She's really going to be good for Me." It's not because you've achieved this certain standard of morality.

Here's something I really wrestled with. I grew up with some very godly people, some very prayerful people, who were very fervent in their faith. And I remember thinking, "I want to

be like them. I want to be a holy person. I want to be a spiritual superhero.” I know that in my mind it took quite a while to understand that my salvation was not because of my piety or my prayerfulness or my spirituality. I had a youth pastor my senior year of high school who took me out for lunch and asked me if I knew what justification meant. I did not know. I did not know that my salvation was by grace alone, not because of works. Not because of my piety or my zeal.

As the hymn “Not In Me” goes on to say:

No humble dress, no fervent prayer,
No lifted hands, no tearful song,
No recitation of the truth
Can justify a single wrong.

No separation from the world,
No work I do, no gift I give
Can cleanse my conscience, cleanse my hands;
I cannot cause my soul to live.

But Jesus died and rose again—
The power of death is overthrown!
My God is merciful to me
And merciful in Christ alone.

(From “Not In Me” by Eric Schumacher and David L. Ward)

The second part of the answer to why God shows us grace is in verse nine: *“Because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus.”* In other words, I did not purpose to be saved; God purposed to save me. Do you have a problem with that? We’ve got lots of purposes that we want to fulfill with our lives. We admit it’s part of being human to have purposes and goals. Well, God has purposes too. Will we, like God, purpose to do what He purposes? Will we argue with God about His purposes?

What we see from these verses is that behind your choice of God is God’s choice of you. And behind His choice of you is His eternal purpose. And what we see about His eternal purpose is that it is a purpose that is bathed in grace. There’s an eternal, infinite fountain of goodness and kindness in the heart of God. In that kindness God determined to rescue sinners whose own purpose at the time was to live independently of God. And this purpose of grace cost God the life of His Son. Do you see that crucial phrase, *“in Christ Jesus”*? He gave us grace in Christ Jesus.

It cost God more to redeem a sinner than it did for Him to create the world. When God wanted to create the world, He said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. But when God purposed to redeem sinners, He could not just say, “Let that sin be forgiven.” He had to send His

Son in the likeness of sinful man. He had to become an offering for sin, laying His own life down on a tree.

*He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*

*Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his stripes we are healed.*

(Isaiah 53:3-5)

That's what it cost God to carry out His gracious purpose to save us. But, oh, the grace that flows because Jesus paid the price. I love how Martin Luther described the effect this grace has on people who believe. He was so captured by this "grace alone" and wrote:

The law says, DO THIS, and it is never done.

Grace says, BELIEVE THIS, and everything is done already.

Isn't that beautiful? Jesus paid it all. He paid it all. Now, I think that's enough to convince us that salvation is by grace alone, but Paul wants to make sure you really get it. So he goes even deeper.

When did grace begin?

The answer to our third question is breathtaking. Look at the end of 2 Timothy 1:9: "...*his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.*" It took place before the beginning of time, before the world began, before time eternal.

When did God begin being gracious to you, believer? It was not when you made a decision to follow Jesus that God decided to save you. It was not when you prayed the sinner's prayer for the 57th time and got it right that God decided to be gracious to you. God did not decide to be gracious to you because He knew that you would be responsive to Him.

No, when God looked out upon humanity, in His great purpose of grace, He did not find a group of people over here whom He knew would one day respond to Him—so He said, "Okay, I'm

going to choose them, because I know they're going to choose Me." No, what He found when He looked out on humanity is that there is none righteous, no, not one (Romans 3:10). No one understands. No one seeks for God. They have all turned aside. Together, they have become worthless. There is no one who does good—not even one.

On that corrupted, and totally depraved and sinful mess of humanity, God had mercy. He purposed to focus His saving grace on a multitude no one could number, from every tribe, language, people and nation, forgiving their sins and clothing them in His righteousness so they forever will cry out to Him, "Salvation belongs to our God Who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and power forever and ever. Amen" (Revelation 7:10). God chose to save very bad people. He did it on purpose, not by accident, and He made that decision before the world began.

John Stott, reflecting on this, said, "It is plain therefore that our salvation is not due to any merit or good works of our own, because God gave us His purpose of grace in Christ before we did any good works; before we were born or could do any good works; indeed before history, before time and in eternity."

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places....In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace (Ephesians 1:3-6).

Wow! Who saved you—yourself or God? God saved you. Was it because you made a decision to live a holy life? No. God's the One Who called you to a holy life. Was it because of something you had done? No. It was not because of any works in you. When did this saving grace come to you? Well, it was before the beginning of time that God determined to be gracious to you. And on what basis did God determine to be so gracious? It was on the basis of Christ alone.

How is grace made known?

That brings us to the last question: how is this grace revealed and made known to a sinful world? The answer Paul gives is that this grace that was planned before the ages began, "*Now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus*" (2 Timothy 1:10). He was born of a woman, born under law to redeem those who were under the law (Galatians 4:1-7). The angel Gabriel said to Jesus' earthly father, Joseph, "*You shall call his name Jesus, for he will*

save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). John the Baptist saw him coming from afar and cried out, “*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29).

It’s not that God wasn’t gracious before Christ appeared. He’s been gracious from before the beginning of time. But now the grace of God appears in a Person Who is God Himself. It’s like the light has broken through into a deep dark mine, where we’ve all been trapped in the asphyxiating atmosphere of sin. And now suddenly an opening has been made—like those miners who were rescued in Chile a few years back—and the sun has pierced through the darkness for all people to see. The fresh air of heaven’s grace is breathing new life where there was only death. As John Wesley put it:

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.*

*Amazing love! How can it be
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?*

(From “And can it be that I should gain?”)

Friends, this is how the grace of God appeared. It appeared in Jesus Who is grace personified. If you want to know what grace is, don’t start with a theological dictionary. Go to Jesus. Go to His manger and embrace that Infant lowly, the Infant holy, and realize that Christ the babe was born for you. And then follow Him through His earthly life. Watch Him growing up. See Him mingling with men and women as a Friend of sinners, full of compassion, healing the sick, casting out demons, teaching wonderful words of life with authority, loving all and proclaiming liberty to the captives.

Then follow Him to Jerusalem. See Him whipped and scourged and crowned with thorns, carrying your cross—the cross you deserve—all the way up the hill to the dreadful Golgotha, “Place of the Skull.” See Him lifted up on that cross and see the grace of God being manifested to the world.

See Him there upon the cross
Now no longer breathing
Dust that formed the watching crowds
Takes the blood of Jesus

Feel the earth is shaking now
See the veil is split in two
And He stood before the wrath of God
Shielding sinners with His blood

See the empty tomb today
Death could not contain Him
Once the Servant of the world
Now in vict'ry reigning

Lift your voices to the One
Who is seated on the throne
See Him in the New Jerusalem
Praise the One Who saved us!

(From "Jerusalem" by Jonny Robinson, Rich Thompson, & Tiarne Kleyn)

It's all of grace—by grace alone. When He appeared and died and rose again, Paul says this is what Jesus did by grace: He *"abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."* Through death He destroyed the one who had the power of death—that is the devil—that He might deliver all of us who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. He abolished death.

We woke up on Monday morning to the news of the deadliest shooting in U.S. history—58 people currently dead and 489 injured. When will it end? Is this not good news? We have a Savior Who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

Then on Tuesday, Nate Kok, 16 years old—the son of one of Justin Taylor's and Joe Carter's colleagues at Crossway Books—died in a car crash Tuesday afternoon, leaving a family stricken and Aurora Christian School mourning. He's the second young person in that family to be killed.

On Friday morning, Karen Krukiewicz woke to the news that her 19-year-old nephew Nicholas, who lived next door to her, was killed in a car accident. Friends, I know no better news than this, that purely by grace we have a Savior Who saved us from our sin, Who called us to a holy life, Who abolished death itself, Who brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. When I see this, I ask, "When will we ever get beyond God's grace?" And my answer is, "Never." We'll never get beyond the grace of God. We'll only grow into an ever-more profound understanding of it through all the ages. And "when we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise" —for His amazing grace— "than when we first begun."

Let's bow before the Lord in prayer.

Thank You, Lord, that salvation is all of grace. Someone has said, "It's grace at the start, grace at the end, grace in the middle, grace without fail, grace without mixture, grace without addition, grace that allows no boasting, grace that precludes all glory but in the Lord alone." We glory in You today and we thank You that this grace is available to all who believe in Jesus.

We pray for people in this room right now who don't yet know Your great grace and salvation. We pray, Lord, that they would realize there's nothing they could add, there's nothing they could do to deserve it, there's nothing they can add to make it more powerful for them. In fact, if we try to add anything, we ruin it. So Lord, I pray that You would give grace today to people, to believe that You have done it all in Jesus. Salvation is free for all who will believe on Him.

I pray for those of us who do believe, because we don't believe it enough. Lord, we often want to go back to an idea of our own works. We often doubt Your love for us and Your grace toward us, because we know how wretched our hearts can still be. So we either run away from You in pride and pretend we're better than we are, or we stay away from You in fear. Thank You, God, that You are gracious to us, that You're calling us to draw near to the throne of grace to receive mercy and help in our time of need. Help us to believe this, Lord. And believing it, help it to make a difference in the way we treat others. Lord, deliver us from our critical, cynical, judgmental spirits. The grace that our brother or sister needs is the same grace that I need. Lord, let us see one another through the lens of grace alone.

All glory to You, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, for so great a salvation. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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