

## Irresistible Grace—Is It Biblical?

“Irresistible grace” is a phrase that is used to summarize what the Bible teaches about the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in the salvation of sinners. It is represented by the “I” in the acronym TULIP that is commonly used to enumerate what are known as the five points of Calvinism or the doctrines of grace. The doctrine is also known as “effectual calling,” “efficacious grace,” “efficacious call of the Spirit,” and “transformed by the Holy Spirit.” Each of these terms reveals some aspect of what the Bible teaches about the doctrine of irresistible grace. However, what is important is not the name assigned to the doctrine but how accurately the doctrine summarizes what the Bible teaches about the nature and purpose of the work of the Holy Spirit in the salvation of sinful, spiritually dead men. No matter which name you use to refer to the doctrine of irresistible grace, a thorough study of the Bible will reveal that, when properly understood, it is an accurate description of what the Bible teaches on this important subject.

Simply put, the doctrine of irresistible grace refers to the biblical truth that whatever God decrees to happen will inevitably come to pass, even in the salvation of individuals. The Holy Spirit will work in the lives of the elect so that

they inevitably will come to faith in Christ. The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit never fails to bring to salvation those sinners whom He personally calls to Christ ([John 6:37–40](#)). At the heart of this doctrine is the answer to the question: Why does one person believe the gospel and another does not? Is it because one is smarter, has better reasoning capabilities, or possesses some other characteristic that allows him to realize the importance of the gospel message? Or is it because God does something unique in the lives of those whom He saves? If it is because of what the person who believes does or is, then in a sense he is responsible for his salvation and has a reason to boast. However, if the difference is solely that God does something unique in the hearts and lives of those who believe in Him and are saved, then there is no ground for boasting and salvation is truly a gift of grace. Of course, the biblical answer to these questions is that the Holy Spirit does do something unique in the hearts of those who are saved. The Bible tells us that God saves people “according to His mercy ... through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit” ([Titus 3:5](#)). In other words, those who believe the gospel and are saved do so because they have been transformed by the Holy Spirit.

The doctrine of irresistible grace recognizes that the Bible describes natural man

as “dead in his trespasses and sins” ([Ephesians 2:1](#); [Ephesians 2:5](#); [Colossians 2:13](#)), and, because man is spiritually dead, he must first be made alive or regenerated in order to understand and respond to the gospel message. A good illustration of this is seen in Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. In [John 11:43](#), it is recorded that Jesus told Lazarus to “come forth” and that Lazarus came forth out of the tomb. What had to happen before Lazarus—who had been dead for several days—would be able to respond to Jesus’ command? He had to be made alive because a dead man cannot hear or respond. The same is true spiritually. If we are dead in our sins, as the Bible clearly teaches, then before we can respond to the gospel message and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ we must first be made alive. As Jesus told Nicodemus in [John 3:3](#), one must be “born again to see the kingdom of God.” [John 1:12–13](#) tells us that being born again is not the result of something we do—“the will of man”—but is a sovereign act of God. Just as Lazarus could not bring himself back to life or respond to Jesus’ command without being brought back to life, neither can sinful man. [Ephesians 2:1–10](#) makes it very clear that while we are still dead in our trespasses and sin God makes us alive. The Bible is also clear that the act of being born again or regenerated is a sovereign act of God. It is something He

does which enables us to believe the gospel message, not something that comes as a result of our belief.

The reason this doctrine is called “irresistible” grace is that it always results in the intended outcome, the salvation of the person it is given to. It is important to realize that the act of being regenerated or “born again” cannot be separated from the act of believing the gospel. [Ephesians 2:1–10](#) makes this clear. There is a connection between the act of being made alive by God ([Ephesians 2:1, 5](#)) and the result of being saved by grace. ([Ephesians 2:5, 8](#)). This is because everything pertaining to salvation, including the faith to believe, is an act of God’s grace. The reason God’s grace is irresistible and efficacious (always bringing forth the desired result) is that God “has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into His kingdom ([Colossians 1:13](#)). Or, as [Psalm 3:8](#) puts it, “Salvation belongs to the Lord.”

To understand the doctrine of “irresistible grace,” it is important to recognize that this is a special grace given only to those God has chosen for salvation (His elect) and is different from what is known as “common grace” which God bestows on both believer and unbeliever. While there are many aspects of common grace, including life and all that is necessary to sustain it, common grace is what

is often referred to as the “outward call of God.” This is God’s revelation of Himself given to all men through the light of creation and their consciences. It also includes the general call of the gospel that goes out anytime the gospel message is preached. **This call can be resisted and rejected by those that receive it.** (Matthew 22:14; Romans 1:18–32). However, God also gives an “inward call” which always results in salvation. This is the call of God that Jesus spoke of in John 6:37–47. The certainty of this inward call is seen in John 6:37: “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.” John 6:44 confirms this: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him and I will raise him up at the last day.”

Other verses where irresistible grace can be seen include 2 Corinthians 4:1–6; Acts 13:48; Acts 16:14 and Romans 8:30. In 2 Corinthians 4:1–6, after explaining why some people do not believe the gospel (it is veiled to them and their minds have been blinded toward it), Paul writes, “For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6). The God who said, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3) is the same God who gives the light of salvation to those He chooses, and the result is just as sure. The same truth is

seen in a different way in Acts 13:48. Here it is said that “as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.” God saves those He chooses to save; therefore, His saving grace is always effective or efficacious. In Acts 16:14, we have another example of God’s irresistible grace in action. The Lord opened the heart of Lydia “to respond the things spoken of by Paul.” Finally you have what is called the “golden chain of redemption” in Romans 8:29–30. Here we see that everyone God calls to salvation (the inward call) will be saved (justified).

**A common misconception about the doctrine of irresistible grace is that it implies men are forced to accept Christ and men are dragged kicking and screaming into heaven.** Of course, neither of these is an accurate description of the doctrine of irresistible grace as revealed in the Bible. In fact, the heart of irresistible grace is the transforming power of the Holy Spirit whereby He takes a man dead in his trespasses and sins and gives him spiritual life so that he can recognize the surpassing value of God’s offer of salvation. Then, having been set free from the bondage of sin, that man willingly comes to Christ.

Another misconception concerning this doctrine is that it teaches the Holy Spirit cannot be resisted at all. Yet, again, that is not what the doctrine teaches because that is not what the Bible teaches. **God’s**

grace can be resisted, and the Holy Spirit's influence can be resisted even by one of the elect. However, what the doctrine does correctly recognize is that the Holy Spirit can overcome all such resistance and that He will draw the elect with an irresistible grace that makes them want to come to God and helps them to understand the gospel so they can and will believe it.

**The doctrine of irresistible grace simply recognizes that the Bible teaches God is sovereign and can overcome all resistance when He wills to.** What God decrees or determines will come to pass. This truth is seen throughout Scripture. In [Daniel 4:35](#), we see that “He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay His hand!” [Psalm 115:3](#) declares, “Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.” God’s grace in salvation is irresistible because when God sets out to fulfill His sovereign purpose, no person or thing can successfully resist Him.

The doctrine of irresistible grace accurately summarizes what the Bible teaches about the nature of saving faith as well as what must happen to overcome man’s depraved nature. Since natural man is dead in his trespasses and sins, it stands to reason that he must be regenerated before he can respond to the outward call

of the gospel. Until that happens, man will resist the gospel message and the grace of God; however, once he has been “born again” and has a heart that is now inclined toward God, the grace of God will irresistibly draw Him to put his faith in Christ and be saved. These two acts (regeneration and faith) cannot be separated from one another. They are so closely connected that we often cannot distinguish between them.