

PREVENIENT
GRACE

A 4-WEEK STUDY

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WEEK 1

WHERE
IS GOD?

I am fascinated by the last book of our Holy Scripture, the Revelation of Jesus to John. In a world that is awash with superhero imagery, who wouldn't be intrigued by bright red horses, beasts out of the bottomless pit, and grasshopper armies? For those who think the story of God is bland, read Revelation! I also love that it is filled with more titles for God than any other book. It seems like the writer ran a rake over the other sixty-five books of the Bible and collected all the titles. My favorite appears near the beginning: "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (1:8).

This title locates God in time. This is the Revelation of the God who is the beginning, the first, the Alpha, the A of our story—and also the God who is the end, the last, the Omega, the Z of our story. Our life is sandwiched between the presence of this God. The A-to-Z letters that spell out the story of our existence are all within the alphabet of God. From first to last breath and beyond, our life is lived in the presence of God.

There has not been a moment when God was not engaged with us. This was good news to people suffering in the wake of the Roman Empire and its beastly rule. The story of the Revelation placed them squarely inside the story and activity of God. They were not forgotten players on the world stage but people who mattered to the Almighty. They were living in the presence of the God *who is* with them in their present crisis, *who was* with them and

with every human across time, and *who will be* with them in the next moment of consciousness.

We speak of prevenient grace as God seeking or finding us rather than us seeking or finding God because God has always been here. God is our past, present, and future. God is before us, with us, and in front of us. It's why the Revelation speaks of God as the beginning and the end, the first and the last, the Alpha and the Omega (the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet).

So how do you encounter God? By studying ancient scriptures to find divine fingerprints in human history? By watching the news to detect the activity of God in the present events? By peering into the morning sky and wondering what the future may bring? Yes, God is there. Past. Present. Future. God is there whether we know it or acknowledge it or experience it. Prevenient grace is the gift of God that opens us to experience God in our past, present, and future. God has gone ahead of our knowing, seeking, and experiencing to make us capable of receiving revelation.

As I think about the people to whom Revelation was written, I think they needed a reminder that the God who had been with them in the past, and was also with them in the present, was coming to them from their future. We know God because the God who has always known us stands in our future, enabling us to experience him. This is the gracious gift of prevenient grace—the grace that goes ahead of us and the grace that comes to us from the future.

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Imagine if a young parent were teaching their crawling baby to walk for the first time. They get behind the infant, place their hands on the diaper, and aim the child into a room that is filled with wires to trip over, table edges to bump into, and obstacles to obstruct their path. Then they command the child to walk and give a gentle shove from the rear. They expect the child to do what the child has previously been unable to do. We'd give that parent an F, wouldn't we?

Imagine a different parent, who has been watching their child's development closely as the child grows, and knows when they are showing signs that they're ready to take their first steps. This parent clears the pathway ahead of time, positions the child next to something sturdy they can hold onto, crosses the room in front of the child, kneels at eye level with this infant they know intimately, opens their arms, and invites the child to come toward them. In that moment something occurs in the body of a baby. Suddenly they realize they can do what they were incapable of doing a moment before as they lean into and trust the love of the one who knows them. They walk into the future, not because someone shoved them from the rear and demanded it but because someone who knew them went before to prepare their path and then stood patiently waiting in the next moment, encouraging and inviting them forward.

It is hard to walk into our future when we are looking backward, but for some reason, we seem to think we

can explain people into an experience with God simply by pointing to the past and telling them what God has done before. While that may give them some confidence, like a sturdy piece of furniture a child might lean on, it does not open them to the possibility that God has come in this present moment from their future to invite them to walk into life. Prevenient grace is about awakening to the God who stands in our future.

I wish I had understood this truth earlier in life. I've always read the Bible as a story of the *past* activity of God, and I've looked backward in time trying to locate God. But in truth, the Bible is the story of a God who shows up in the future.

In Genesis, God seems to run past the chaotic darkness that hovers over the deep and stands in front of it, from the future, calling creation into existence (see Genesis 1).

God gets ahead of Abram and tells him about blessings upon all people through the tribe that will come from his genes (Genesis 12).

God shows up in Midian before Moses arrives with his flock and burns from within a bush to deliver a people who are crying out in Egypt. These people don't even know that God has gone ahead to call Moses (Exodus 3).

God goes ahead of Mary and sends an angel to explain the upcoming pregnancy. God gets in front of Joseph's reasonable questions about this very pregnancy (Matthew 1; Luke 1).

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**God is always coming
to us from the future,
inviting us into his kingdom
that is coming.**
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God stands in the apostles' future, calling them to fish for a different kind of catch (Matthew 4:18–22; Luke 5:1–11).

God stands at Lazarus's tomb creating the next breath inside a corpse (John 11).

God goes ahead of Saul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9).

These stories from the past should give us confidence that God is standing in our future, creating it even as we live. And we are made capable of experiencing this God and participating in the future that only God can create for us. Prevenient grace does not expire when we experience the saving grace of God. God is always going before us—or, better yet, God is always coming to us from the future, inviting us into his kingdom that is coming.

When we pray, "Thy kingdom come," we are participating in a reality that is past, present, and future. This kingdom is assured by the resurrection of Jesus. Revelation proclaims him Lord of lords and King of kings (17:14). The grace of this kingdom is breaking into the present every time we are opened by God to experience its power and presence. We are stepping into the future that has come to us in Christ.

If this reality is so transformative, why do many people know nothing about it? I often liken it to wireless or radio signals. It is possible that something is present, even at this very moment, of which we are totally unaware. Although we are made capable of experiencing God in this

present moment, we are also given the freedom to resist this awareness. Resisting grace is a human freedom that God does not override. The more we practice this freedom, the easier it is to harden ourselves to the God who is present. I have often suggested to friends who do not know God to act as if God were present for one day: Talk to God. Listen for God. Look for God. See if there is any probing from God in the honest questions of their heart. Be open to a voice that speaks words of loving invitation. Be ready for unexpected gifts. I don't say this because I believe there is a formula of human searching that can always reliably find God. I say it because Scripture and experience both assure me that God is already there.

Sometimes this way of thinking about God standing in our future causes us to believe that God has already dictated the details of our lives. This perception turns God into a divine type of meteorologist or fortuneteller, whose forecasts or predictions—were God to make any—would definitely come true in the days ahead. If God operated that way, it would leave little room for us to fulfill our role as creative partners of God in the making of a life and a world. If it is all predetermined and laid out, God would only show up to tell us the forecast. The Christian life is much more creative than that. God invites humanity—starting with Adam and Eve but including us today—into a creative partnership where we tend creation and rule over it, together with the Creator. The future unfolds in our response to God. Sometimes it is a response of obedience,

and the kingdom comes and God's will is done on earth even as it is done in heaven. Sometimes it is a response of disobedience, which leads to harmful consequences for humanity.

God's desired future for us is that we would be restored in the image and likeness of Jesus. This is the will of God for every creature. And God will stand in every future moment, as long as we have breath in our bodies, inviting us into this reality. Our lives are not pre-plotted. They unfold day by day based on how we do or do not respond to the grace God offers us. If I want to travel from New York to Los Angeles, there are many paths I can take. If I am free to do as I please on any given day, I may find myself moving toward or away from the desired destination. Prevenient grace indicates that God has a destination in mind for us: restoration in the image of Jesus. God will stand at every fork in the road, at every dead-end alley, and at every crossroad inviting us to choose the way that leads to life—but the choice remains our own to make.

God is already out in front of today. What will your next choice be?

PRAYER

Imagine Jesus standing at the foot of your bed as you wake up, calling you into the day ahead. He is at work making all things new. What might Jesus say to you about the day ahead and about how you can join him in his work?

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