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**CONSIDERATION OF A THEOLOGICAL
QUESTION: WHETHER THE GRACE OF
GOD IS A FORCE, AND WHETHER IT IS
EITHER RESISTIBLE OR IRRESISTIBLE**

I. If Augustine once judged the question concerning the grace of God to be difficult and intelligible to few, what, I ask, would he judge now if he were brought back to life? For unknown to Augustine's century was this intricate disputation full of conflicts: Whether the grace of God is a certain force, and whether it is either resistible or irresistible.

We have undertaken to consider this question here in the fear of the Lord. May God grant that this consideration of ours may result in praise of God's glorious grace, and in the consolation and joy of very many of the elect: Amen.

APHORISMS

1. The word "grace" - which for the Hebrews is *Chen* from the verb *Chanan*, and for the Greeks is χάρις (*charis*) from the verb χαρίζομαι (*charizomai*) - Scripture does not use in only one way.

2. Sometimes it signifies a relationship between humans and humans, as when Abraham, thinking he was addressing a foreign man, said, "If I have found grace in your eyes" (Gen. 18:3). In this sense Solomon says, "He who reproves a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with his tongue" (Prov. 28:23). Sometimes it signifies a relationship between God and humans, and this in two ways.

3. For it either signifies something that proceeds from man and terminates in God, as when humans are said to give thanks to God for benefits received; or something that proceeds from God and terminates in man, as when God is said to show and bestow grace upon humans. And indeed it is in this latter sense that we use the word "grace" here.

4. Again, when the grace of God is named, which is derived from God to humans, then either it denotes God's favorable and benevolent affection toward humans, by which God favors humans who deserve no such thing - which the scholastics call "grace freely giving" (*gratia gratis dans*), also "active grace"; or it denotes God's effect in humans, that is, the gift which God graciously confers upon humans whom He has previously favored with His favor - which the scholastics call "grace freely given" (*gratia gratis data*), also "passive grace."

5. Thus indeed the Apostle distinguishes grace from gift, so that by grace he understands God's benevolent favor and love toward us, but by gift the actual present or singular benefit which God confers by reason of that primary benevolence (Rom. 5:15). Andreas Hyperius, *Theological Method* 1.2, concerning grace, p. 484.

6. To this fits that statement of John: "From His fullness" - namely of Jesus Christ - "we have all received, and indeed grace upon grace" (John 1:16). The Greek particle ἀντί (*anti*) is placed in place of the Hebrew *tach*at (תַּחַת), as a

certain learned man reports, whom Beza follows, and whom Piscator follows in his annotations. For beyond that grace by which God loved and chose us in Christ, He has also heaped upon us many and great benefits through and on account of Christ.

7. It must also be known that grace implies mercy, because grace concerns that which is given freely, and what is given freely is given mercifully, as Thomas teaches on Titus 3.

8. For although the grace of God, spoken of generally, extends more broadly not only to wretched humans but also to blessed spirits and angels, while mercy properly seems to regard the wretched and sinners, nevertheless when the discourse concerns man, the following are taken indifferently in the Scriptures: the grace of God, the mercy of God, kindness and benevolence, love and charity of God.

9. The Apostle calls God's grace toward humans by the choice word *φιλανθρωπία* (*philanthropia*), which Beza and Erasmus translate as "love toward humans," Jerome as

"clemency," the Vulgate interpreter as "humanity," Strigelius as "sweetness of humanity." Paraphrastically, Erasmus renders it as "God's charity toward humans," Bullinger as "God's outstanding love toward humans." The Germans elegantly express the force of the original word with one term: *φιλανθρωπία θεοῦ* (*philanthropia theou*), *Leutseligkeit Gottes* (God's graciousness) (Tit. 3:4).

10. These things suffice concerning the genuine meaning of the word "Grace" and its use or sense in the present matter. From this it cannot but be manifest to everyone that the phrase is at least harsh by which the grace of God is called a force, whether resistible or irresistible.

11. For it is the grace of God that visits us, liberates us, saves us, and endows us with holiness, righteousness, and remission of sins, as the priest Zacharias testifies (Luke 1:68 and following).

12. Therefore that grace does not inflict force upon us, whether resistible or irresistible, neither resistibly nor irresistibly - whichever of these you might say, you could seem to be saying something harmful and hostile. But that

grace, according to the testimony of the same priest, brings us peace, salvation, and mercy.

13. However, in the consideration of this question, it must be examined more carefully and extensively:

1. Whether in some suitable sense the grace of God can be called a force,
2. Whether similarly in some suitable sense the grace of God can be termed resistible and irresistible.
3. What are the principal divisions of grace that must necessarily be maintained in the decision of this question.

14. In the ancient theological school of the Prophets and Apostles, and likewise of the Fathers and other orthodox doctors who lived after them, that term "The grace of God is a force" was not employed - indeed, it was not even heard.

15. But it was invented not many years ago by those who began to despise the ancient doctrine, and who delighted in obscuring the very doctrine of the Reformed Church through the obscurity and harshness of terms, and in

bringing it into hatred - whether these were Jesuits or others.

16. Although therefore we could leave this term to its authors, nevertheless, lest true doctrine should suffer because of it, we shall first of all consider whether in some suitable sense the grace of God can be called a force.

17. The word "force" signifies either virtue, power, and efficacy; or violence, coercion, and assault.

18. In the former meaning, the grace of God which operates in humans is rightly called a force, since it is the virtue of God, the power of God, and the efficacy of God in us, when it effects in us not only to will, but also to accomplish. In this sense it is no more absurd to call the grace of God in us a force than it is absurd that our Catechism says, "The providence of God is an omnipotent and everywhere present force." For providence is either gracious or judicial. And if concerning the genus - namely, concerning providence - it is pronounced without absurdity that it is a force, then also in the same sense concerning grace, or the gracious providence of God, as a species

comprehended under the genus, it is permitted to pronounce the same. But those who first devised the term we mentioned, in hatred of our doctrine, seem to have paid little attention to this sense.

19. If you take the word "force" in the latter meaning, namely as violence, coercion, and assault, we say that a distinction must be made between the enemies of grace and the sons of grace.

20. To the enemies of grace, that very grace uses force, and with violent assault weakens and breaks them, often impedes and scatters their plans, endeavors, and attempts - namely, whenever it pleases God to rule in the midst of His enemies and to destroy those who touch the apple of His eye, that is, whenever it pleases God to snatch the Church, which He loves as His own possession acquired by His own blood, from the hands of enemies.

21. But to the sons of grace, that same grace uses no force at all; rather, it embraces them lovably and amicably, and cherishes and refreshes them with that lovable embrace. Therefore, just as it is absurd to call that grace by which a

most clement prince attracts and receives certain of his subjects to himself a "force," so indeed it is absurd - and much more absurd - to call the grace of God by which He embraces us and by which He invites and leads us to the heavenly wedding a "force."

22. But enough has been said about that attribute of grace by which it is defined as a force. It follows that we should discuss briefly those epithets by which that force is called resistible or irresistible.

23. Words are acknowledged to be signs of things. Hence, just as these new adjectives "resistible" and "resistible," "irresistible" and "irresistible," likewise the substantives "resistibility" and "irresistibility," and furthermore these adverbs "resistibly" and "irresistibly" are not approved by all critics, so the very dogma that grace is either a resistible or irresistible force is scarcely approved by all theologians.

24. Nevertheless, as we have done before, so we shall also do here - that is, we shall consider whether in some suitable sense the grace of God can be called resistible and irresistible.

25. There are those who write concerning this matter in these words: "We consider that the virtue and operation of God's grace, which is not entirely impeded, nevertheless remains resistible - namely, because humans were able to resist it. If the brethren accept this, we obtain what we want, provided however that we acknowledge the irresistible virtue of the Holy Spirit in our mind when God reveals His will to us, since our mind cannot escape knowing it, and in our soul when He strikes it. For whether we will it or not, we are compelled to feel it. Therefore there is no question about perception, but about assent; not about the mind, but about the will, insofar as it concurs in those works which man does voluntarily, such as believing, converting, etc. Not even concerning the prior grace by which it illuminates the mind, but concerning that by which our will is determined to good and the Holy Spirit works in us the act of faith and the whole work of obedience which God requires from us in the Gospel. We say this is resistible, because man can oppose it with his will, impede it, and turn it away."

26. We would now like to ask the authors of these words whether they think they are doing well or poorly, since they seem to want to appear to bear it with difficulty and annoyance that the brethren, whom they name, call the grace of God irresistible, when nevertheless they themselves in this place concede that grace and the virtue of the Holy Spirit are irresistible - in perception, though not in assent.

27. But if in perception grace and the virtue of the Holy Spirit are irresistible, certainly it cannot be denied that in some suitable understanding the grace of God can be called irresistible. Although no place has yet been shown where those brethren of ours and their predecessors, in whose footsteps they piously follow, speak thus: "grace is irresistible." We know indeed that there are among those brethren who teach that to call the virtue of God irresistible is the same as to call God's operation efficacious in those who are regenerated; but they were not the first to use that term or phrase, but wanted to explain suitably what had been used by others and objected to them.

28. In the same sense others prefer to call God's grace not irresistible but insurmountable - which is not overcome but always overcomes; others call it inevitable - which achieves its effect without impediment; others call it infallible - which most certainly accomplishes the outcome proposed by God.

29. But let these things have their place - we have not proposed to quarrel tediously about words. Meanwhile we are persuaded that the Church could have done without that term of resistibility and irresistibility without any detriment to sound words (υγιαινόντων λόγων).

30. However, we cannot but wonder what came into the minds of the authors we just mentioned, when they establish that grace, when you consider perception and illumination of the mind, is irresistible; but when you consider assent and bending of the will, is resistible. As if, namely, God's power and efficacy were less in bending man's will than in illuminating his mind.

31. It remains that we consider the principal or some of the more illustrious divisions of divine grace, which we judge can bring some light to the decision of this question.

32. Grace is first divided by theologians into common and particular. The former is that which is offered to all externally in the Church, to which pertains the hearing of the divine word, the use of sacraments, the tasting of the powers of the age to come, etc. The latter is that which befalls only those who, elected in Christ from eternity, are called not only externally through word and sacraments commonly, but also inwardly through the efficacious operation of the Holy Spirit, to share in the inheritance of the saints in light (Col. 1:12-13).

33. Reprobate men resist common grace and its bestower - stiff-necked, uncircumcised in heart and ears, as Stephen testifies (Acts 7:51).

34. Here, however, we give everyone to consider whether that grace can rightly be called a force - and indeed an irresistible one - with respect to the reprobate, since it inflicts no force upon them, and that grace yields to the

resistance, or opposition and refusal, of those most ungrateful men. And this very thing is proved by those words of Christ: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you would not" (Matt. 23:37). Likewise this same thing is proved by the words of those two authentic theologian doctors Paul and Barnabas: "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you Jews. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46).

35. Particular grace does not befall the reprobate; therefore he errs who contends that the reprobate resist it. Nor does he err less who asserts that with respect to the reprobate it is resistible, distinguishing between the act of resisting and the power of resistance.

36. But this particular grace befalls men of good pleasure, as the angels speak, or the elect. But he also seems to err who calls that grace a force - and indeed an irresistible one. He who offers you a rich inheritance and actually

confers it, and that with a seal confirms it to you, he does not inflict force upon you, nor is there reason for you to complain that force has been inflicted upon you irresistibly. Similarly, when God confers saving grace upon His own whom He knows, and through the Holy Spirit as a pledge graciously makes them certain concerning the heavenly inheritance, certainly He uses no force upon them, much less does He act irresistibly - that is, in such a way that when they wish to resist, they nevertheless cannot.

37. For the matter is arranged thus: Men considered in themselves cannot but resist God's saving grace, but those whom God benevolently favors with His grace cannot but - indeed, do not wish not to - embrace it. But when this grace comes to the elect, no force is inflicted upon them, much less such force that they would indeed wish to resist but be unable to oppose it.

38. Next, grace is divided into operating and cooperating. Concerning this division Augustine writes excellently: "God by cooperating perfects what He begins by

operating, since He who works that we might will when beginning is the same who cooperates with those willing when perfecting" (*De gratia et libero arbitrio*, c. 17).

39. Concerning the same thing Fulgentius also writes clearly: "No one of men can be suitable for working any good unless he has been aided by the free gift of divine assistance. Just as he cannot subsist without the operation of Him who made him, so he cannot will or do good unless God deigns to help continually. From Him is the beginning of good will, from Him the faculty of good work, from Him the perseverance of good conduct."

40. Each drew this opinion from the words of Paul, who writes to the Philippians: "I am confident that He who began (by operating) a good work in you will perfect the same (by cooperating) until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6).

41. But neither operating nor cooperating grace uses force upon us. Yet both work efficaciously, and the former indeed effects that we seriously will our salvation; the latter that we infallibly obtain it.

42. Let the same judgment be made concerning the division of grace by which one is called preventing and another subsequent, which is mentioned in the prayer that was once read after the litanies: "O God, who by inspiring dost prevent our actions, and by helping dost follow them up, grant that all our prayer and work may always begin from Thee, and through Thee, being begun, may be ended."

43. In the same opinion Augustine writes: "God's grace prevents the unwilling that he might will; it follows the willing lest he will in vain" (*Enchiridion*, 32). And Gregory: "He (God) by inspiring prevents us that we might will, who by helping follows lest we will in vain, but that we might be able to fulfill what we will" (cf. Ps. 39:11).

44. Each drew that opinion from the psalms of David: "The mercy of God prevents me," which they understood concerning preventing grace (Ps. 59:10); and "The mercy of God shall follow me all the days of my life," which they understood concerning subsequent grace (Ps. 23:6).

45. But neither preventing grace nor subsequent grace inflicts force, even though it is virtuous and powerful in the elect, to such a degree that although man considered in himself cannot but resist it, nevertheless he does not resist grace when it operates. Indeed, preventing grace makes a man naturally unwilling become willing; subsequent grace helps the willing man so that he wills constantly and, persevering in that will, is infallibly preserved.

46. That division of grace by Erasmus does not dissent from this, by which he makes three graces: beginning, helping, and perfecting (*De institutione christiani*, lib. 3, c. 6), which he illustrates with that saying of Thomas à Kempis: "O how greatly necessary to me, Lord, is Your grace for beginning, for advancing, and for perfecting. For without it I can do nothing, but I can do all things through Your grace strengthening me." Who will dare to call this grace that strengthens us for beginning, advancing, and perfecting a force - that is, violence? Who will call it resistible, when it efficaciously effects that we not only will but also do what we ought to will and do?

47. Notable also is that division of grace by which one is called restraining and another renewing, which, as a finishing touch, we shall add while omitting the other divisions that can be read everywhere among the scholastics.

48. Restraining grace is that which does not remove and abolish man's innate depravity, but only restrains and bridles it lest it break out into external acts.

49. This grace is universal, common to all men equally, both bad and good, but it operates unequally in them. We shall bring forward an example of it from Scripture.

50. To King Abimelech, who desired Sarah the wife of Abraham, God said in a nocturnal dream: "I also knew that in the integrity of your heart you did this, and I also restrained you from sinning against me; therefore I did not allow you to touch her" (Gen. 20:6). That Abimelech did not commit adultery is due to God's restraining grace, not to his native character. For God restrained him - that is, He showed him this grace, He conferred this gift upon him, that he was able to check and bridle his wandering lust and

innate desire. But God did not inflict force upon him when He restrained him, or as it follows immediately, did not allow him to touch another's wife - just as one who prevents your fall into a hidden ditch or pit does not inflict force.

51. Renewing grace is that which not only restricts and bridles man's native depravity, but also abolishes, mortifies, and kills it, and more and more restores in man the image of God lost through the fall - indeed, it vivifies the whole man.

52. Although that grace which restricts, bridles, abolishes, mortifies, and kills might seem rightly to be called force or violence, since those epithets denote something violent, nevertheless that grace is not really force, insofar as the word implies something hostile and harmful, which appears from the fact that the same grace is called restoring and vivifying.

53. For just as a physician who abolishes and removes disease and restores health; a master who abolishes and takes away servitude and grants freedom to a slave; a lord

who breaks and destroys a prison and releases a captive and exalts him to the highest dignity - these are not said to use force upon the sick man, the slave, or the captive. So neither does God use force upon one to whom He provides that renewing grace. And just as it is foreign to debate whether a sick man is restored to health irresistibly, a slave to liberty, a captive to dignity, so it is foreign to this matter to dispute whether God's renewing grace operates irresistibly.

54. For those who become sons of God do not resist that grace which makes friends of God from His enemies, sons and household members from strangers - nor do they desire to resist, nor are they able to resist, whatever may be the case concerning the possibility of resisting, which (alas!) is found in every man insofar as he is considered as man. But for resistibility to be inherent in saving grace itself, by which it happens that when man himself wills to resist God who wills to work efficaciously for salvation, he resists and impedes that operation of God - what is this, I ask, other than to suspend the will and virtue of the

Omnipotent Creator by the will and operation of a
wretched and impotent creature?