

THE ESSENTIAL MEANS  
**OF GRACE**



# THE ESSENTIAL MEANS **OF GRACE**

Paul Washer



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*The Essential Means of Grace*

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## The Means of Grace

Do you lament your lack of spiritual growth? Do you long to be more conformed to the image of Christ? If you answered in the affirmative, then this brief work is for you. However, you must be forewarned that you will find no easy answer or quick fix to your spiritual life in these pages, nor will you discover something novel or new. Here you will find only an ancient remedy to an ancient problem. A hard medicine will be offered to you that most people would rather bypass for a more pleasant elixir. However, if you are sick of being sick, if you have wandered long enough in the foothills and are willing to take the hard path up the mountain, then this little work may offer you some help—some means of growing beyond where you are!

There is a very important theological phrase in Latin that every Christian of every language ought to learn and apply to his or her life. The phrase is *media gratiae*, and its English translation is *means of grace*. For centuries the church has employed this little phrase to describe those means or gifts that the Lord Jesus Christ has given to the church for its ongoing sanctification or growth in holiness.

The most prominent and essential of these means are the study of the Scriptures, devotion to prayer, and participation in the life and ministry of the local church. These means are *not works* that must be accomplished in order to earn or merit salvation, but they are gifts from God through which the believer may grow in the salvation that he or she has received by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ. As the apostle Paul wrote, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Eph. 2:8–9).

The Scriptures prove over and over that salvation is *monergistic*—that is, the work of one. God is the author and agent of our salvation and we are the objects of His saving work. However, with equal force the Scriptures also teach that our growth in sanctification is *synergistic*—that is, the collective work of two or more. This is wonderfully illustrated in Paul’s admonition to the church in Philippi: “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12–13).

Take note of the perfect balance. Since it is God who works in us both to will and to do for His good pleasure, we are to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling—that is, with the greatest reverence toward God and the most profound solemnity with regard to the task. There is no room in biblical Christianity for apathy, a lack of discipline, or a “let go and let God” attitude.



To more fully understand what is meant by the phrase *media gratiae*, it is helpful to add the Latin adjective *ordinarius*, or ordinary. *Media gratiae* refers to the ordinary means of grace or the ordinary way in which God has decreed that Christians will grow in conformity to Christ. We live in a day when it seems that everyone in the church is waiting for something extraordinary—a move of the Spirit that will correct all our spiritual maladies in a moment’s time and with little effort or cost on our part. Although such an extraordinary revival is altogether possible and should be desired, it is not God’s ordinary means of growing His church. Our desire for the extraordinary should never lead us to neglect the ordinary means that God has given us to grow. In fact, in God’s economy He usually does not perform the extraordinary until His people have exhausted the ordinary means that He has provided.

Having stated the above, it is highly unlikely that the contemporary church or the individual Christian has exhausted the ordinary means of grace—that we have learned all that the Scriptures have to say, that we have emptied all of God’s promises in prayer, that our intimacy with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has no more room to grow, or that we have reaped every benefit that is to be gained from fellowship with a local church. Is it not more likely that we have been derelict or at least careless, even slothful, with these ordinary but essential means of grace? We must be careful that we do not despise the day of small things (Zech. 4:10). In fact, Jesus taught, “Take heed what you hear. With the same measure you use, it will be measured to you; and to you who hear, more will be given” (Mark 4:24). And again, “He who is faithful in

what is least is faithful also in much" (Luke 16:10). The believer who neglects the ordinary will rarely ever witness the extraordinary!

Although the phrase *media gratiae* is for the most part unknown among modern evangelicals, it is only because we are ignorant of many of the historical truths of biblical Christianity that once served to strengthen and purify Christ's church. There was a time when the phrase *media gratiae* or "means of grace" was a part of every Christian's vocabulary. This is proven by question 88 in the Westminster Shorter Catechism that was used to teach children and new converts about the basics of Christianity:

*Question:* What are the outward means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption?

*Answer:* The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption are, His ordinances, especially the word, sacraments, and prayer;<sup>1</sup> all of which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.<sup>2</sup>

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1. "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen." (Matt. 28:19–20).

2. "Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.... So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:41–42, 46–47).

It is important to note that giving emphasis or even priority to the “means of grace” was not confined to Presbyterian or strictly Reformed churches, but was widely taught by early Baptists and other evangelicals. Question 95 of the Baptist Catechism, written by the well-known Particular Baptist, Benjamin Keach (1640–1704), follows word for word the Westminster Shorter Catechism’s definition of the means of grace.

We live in an age when too many sincere believers rely upon internet preachers, blogs, tweets, and sound bites. Although some of this may be useful, nothing will replace the simple but efficient means that the Lord Himself has given His people to grow. We must turn our feet toward the ancient paths<sup>3</sup> of the Scriptures and the paths of those faithful men and women who have gone before us. In the pages to come, we will briefly consider the three ordinary means of grace that God has graciously bestowed upon the individual Christian and the church at large to promote the godliness that finds its desire in greater conformity to the image of Christ: the Scriptures, prayer, and the ministry and ordinances of the local church.

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3. “Thus says the LORD: ‘Stand in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where the good way *is*, and walk in it; then you will find rest for your souls’” (Jer. 6:16).

**Chapter Questions and Reflections**

1. What is the meaning of the Latin phrase *media gratiae*?
2. Identify the means of grace that are listed in this chapter.
3. Why are the means of grace often referred to as *ordinary* means of grace?
4. What are the dangers of neglecting the ordinary while we wait for the extraordinary?
5. Explain the meaning and implications of question 88 in the Westminster Shorter Catechism.