

**TIM
MUEHLHOFF**

**FOREWORD BY
J. P. MORELAND**



Eyes to See

**RECOGNIZING
GOD'S COMMON GRACE
IN AN UNSETTLED
WORLD**



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Eyes to See* by Timothy M. Muehlhoff.
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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.
www.ivpress.com.

Common Grace

GOD IN ACTION

“Houston, we have a problem.”¹

Not the words you want to utter when you’re 205,000 miles from Earth. While performing a daily task—stirring oxygen tanks—the crew of Apollo 13 hears a bang that shakes the entire space rocket. The crew learns they are rapidly losing oxygen and have lost the ability to maneuver their craft. A worst-case scenario comes true!

The good news is that the bang is also heard by Mission Control in Houston, Texas, which carefully monitors every step of the flight. Immediately, the best of the best spring into action. Technicians begin complex problem solving, while test pilots jump into flight simulators to figure out how to navigate a damaged rocket back home. Psychologists, doctors, and priests check in regularly to help the stranded astronauts cope. The rest is history as Apollo 13 eventually lands safely in the South Pacific Ocean at 12:07 p.m. (CST) on April 17, 1970. A tragedy averted.

Imagine Mission Control didn't exist: the three crew members are left to figure it out themselves. No outside help or guidance. Alone. There's little doubt the story of Apollo 13 would have ended tragically without the guidance of Mission Control. Gladly, that wasn't the case. We encounter the same good news with the doctrine of common grace, which argues that God is figuratively humanity's Mission Control. As we face hardship, God not only monitors our situation but helps us. God—eminently wiser than NASA experts—is not only aware of the struggles of our wayward planet but actively works with us to cope.

I used the above illustration to conclude a talk to an adult fellowship group at my church. A week later I received an email from a woman who said she couldn't stop thinking about my illustration. "To be honest, I'm jealous of Mission Control." She explained that at least the stranded astronauts could directly talk to experts on the ground resulting in a two-way conversation. "I pray and get nothing from God. I'm pretty much ready to give up."

I resonated with her frustration. During the entire ordeal, NASA had *direct* contact with the crew of Apollo 13. Through sophisticated communication links, the three-man crew could directly converse with experts in Houston. Not so with God. His interaction is often indirect and not always easily detected. The result is that during trying times, we—like this woman who emailed me—often find ourselves doubting God.

I shared with this woman that many of the giants of the faith have equally wrestled with this issue and longed for God to definitively show himself. One of those was Blaise Pascal, who in the 1600s wrote a thought-provoking exploration of faith

titled *Pensées*. In this series of notes, he gives voice to the frustration that God could, if he wanted, remove all doubt and reveal himself. With frustration apparent, Pascal longs for God to either put up or shut up.

I am in a pitiful state. I have wished a hundred times over that, if there is a God supporting nature, she should unequivocally proclaim him, and that, if the signs in nature are deceptive, they should be completely erased; that nature should say all or nothing, so that I could see what course I ought to follow.²

I deeply resonate with Pascal's desire that God gives us an undeniable sign he exists and is ready to intervene during times of turmoil.

Ironically, it's not just believers who long for an unequivocal sign that God is real. Often, those outside the Christian community also long for God to show himself during hard times. In autumn 2020 when Covid rates were spiking and the news was dominated with dire stories, I mentioned to a non-Christian friend that I was preaching via Zoom at my church. He asked what I was speaking on. "God's faithfulness in hard times," I responded. "Good luck with that," he said laughing.

He didn't mean to offend, but his laugh spoke volumes and reminded me how odd my faith must seem to him at times. A pandemic rages and I still want to argue that God is not asleep at the wheel but is attentive to the needs of a world seemingly spinning out of control. I get his skepticism. Rather than getting defensive, I decided to continue the conversation by telling him that I often feel like a character from my favorite television show—*The Walking Dead*.

FAITH DURING A ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE

Depending on what metrics you use, *The Walking Dead* may have been *the* most-watched show on television—period. With strong global viewership, millions tuned in to see how a ragtag group of human survivors face an ever-increasing zombie uprising. Be warned, the show is graphic and emotionally grim. Yet, amid such gore one character, Hershel Greene, surprisingly starts each morning by reading his King James Bible and praying. “Surprised you still do that,” sarcastically notes another survivor. He’s got a point—with a world in disarray how can faith survive? If ever there was a time for God to show up and intervene, it would be now. Yet clues of God’s activity are hard to come by. Still, Hershel feels compelled by his faith to help others. “Now, I can make these people feel better and hang on a little bit longer. I can save lives. And that’s enough reason to risk mine,” he informs his concerned daughter.³

I most relate to Hershel when hard times hit, a loved one suffers through seemingly never-ending cancer treatments, or finances are shredded by an unexpected pandemic. But like Hershel I’m still compelled by faith to continue on. What has most fueled my faith is changing my idea of what it means for God to show up during hard times.

What Does It Mean for God to Show Up?

Expectations play a key role in shaping our perspective. How do you expect a spouse or child to act toward you? What expectations do you have for your boss or coworkers? Unmet expectations can dramatically affect any relationship. The same is true with

God. How do we expect him to answer prayer or to come to our aid in time of need? Jewish theologian Martin Buber speculated that God often seems silent and distant because we expect that he'd always communicate to us in dramatic ways, such as a thunderclap or undeniable epiphany—"Thus saith the Lord!"⁴ When we long for God to act, is that what we envision? Before we can talk to our non-Christian friends about God's response to a world in turmoil, we have to determine how we envision God responding. Do we expect answers to prayer to be dramatic and undeniable or subtle? The answer to this question will determine whether our faith flourishes during hard times or falters.

One way I've found it helpful to surface expectations—of both Christians and non-Christians—is to share an old joke.

FLASH FLOODS, ROWBOATS, OR GOD

An emergency announcement breaks radio programing. A flash flood is imminent and residents are to seek higher ground. A God-fearing man ignores the report, "I have nothing to worry about; God will save me!" As the flood water rises, he finds himself looking out a second-floor window as a rescue boat floats past his house and the captain says, "Get into the boat, we have room!" He waves them on, confident God will save him. As the waters rise, he takes refuge on the roof as a FEMA helicopter flies over and a rescue worker shouts, "We are here to help! Take hold of the ladder!" Again, he waves them on, assured God will come through. Eventually, he drowns and stands before God. "Why didn't you help me?" the man asks in an angry tone. God responds, "What more did you want? I sent you a radio warning, a boat, and a helicopter!"



We ignore God's common provisions due to an expectation of the supernatural. If you were the man stuck on a rooftop surrounded by flood waters, what would you expect divine intervention to look like? Do you imagine supernatural crosswinds parting the water around your house, or do you accept a helicopter as an act of God? Can't God do both? Yes, there is plenty of scriptural evidence of God parting seas, performing miraculous healings, and feeding thousands from a few loaves of bread. But should that be our expectation of how God will *regularly* act? My experience is that dramatic or overtly supernatural answers to prayer are few and far between. Does that mean God is delinquent or immune to our pleas for help? No. It may mean that our expectations of God are blinding us to more subtle ways he acts. The man on the roof brushes off a radio warning, a rescue boat, and a helicopter as he seeks the supernatural. But is such a view too limiting? Can't a radio message, brave rescue workers in a boat, or a FEMA helicopter count as God's intervention? Consider the curious—and perhaps divine—genesis of the idea of a helicopter.

A FLYING BOAT BECOMES REALITY

In his dream he's walking down a narrow passageway filled with elaborate doors. Suddenly, a strong vibration lifts his feet from the ground. The boy is carried straight up in a marvelous flying boat. Who knew the dream of an eleven-year-old Igor Sikorsky—secluded in Kiev, Ukraine—would eventually make aviation history with the creation of the modern helicopter? Sikorsky couldn't shake the dream, and by age twelve he was designing complex models of his flying boat. He desired to create a flying machine that would help save people in difficult-to-reach areas. After

moving to America, Sikorsky, now an adult, founded the Sikorsky Aero Engineering Corp. and designed the VS-300 helicopter in 1939. To him flying a helicopter “is like a dream to feel the machine lift you gently up in the air, float smoothly over one spot for indefinite periods, move up or down under good control, as well as move not only forward or backward but in any direction.”⁵ His desire to help people also became a reality. Each year his company gives out awards to pilots who rescue people in Sikorsky helicopters. According to pilot self-reporting, in the past eleven years alone over 24,358 people have been saved. To wear a Sikorsky rescue pin is seen as a badge of honor within the industry.⁶

Sikorsky himself believed that God had given him his original dream and had guided him throughout the process. Might our flood victim view a helicopter differently if Sikorsky was right and God was assisting him in dreaming of, designing, and producing a helicopter? Is it possible that years before the flood waters arrived, God had, via a dream, put in motion a rescue plan for this man watching treacherous waters rise?

I assert that God is intervening through common grace much more than we think. This concept may be new to you or your friends, so it’ll be important to define and illustrate it. As we do so, perhaps God will become less hidden.

Defining Common Grace

Common grace has long been acknowledged by theologians. Consider the following definition:

Common grace is so-called because it is common to all mankind. Its benefits are experienced by the whole human

race without discrimination between one person and another. . . . To common grace, then, we must thankfully attribute God’s continuing care for his creation, as he provides for the needs of his creatures, restrains human society from becoming altogether intolerable and ungovernable, and makes it possible for mankind, though fallen, to live together in a generally orderly and cooperative manner, to show mutual forbearance, and to cultivate together the scientific, cultural, and economic pursuits of civilization.⁷

From this definition notice that God’s continuing care for his creation involves key aspects. Through the creation of government, designed in part to enforce laws, and our moral conscience, which makes us aware of good and bad choices, he keeps us from being intolerable. If God didn’t intervene and give us the idea of what a just government looks like or provide us an intuitive awareness of right and wrong, we’d live like animals. However, God isn’t just a cosmic police officer. He in turn provides for our needs through scientific, cultural, and economic insights that cause us to flourish. Don’t miss the key part of this definition—God doesn’t merely help people who worship him. In addition to the laws of nature and the regularity of seasons by which we grow crops, he generously gives key insights, skills, and moments of inspiration to *both* those within and outside the Christian community.

Theologian Wayne Grudem makes an interesting point when he asserts that “we should recognize that unbelievers often receive more common grace than believers—they may be more skillful, harder working, more intelligent, more creative, or have more of the material benefits of this life to enjoy.”⁸ A key part

of having engaging conversations about God with those outside the Christian community is showing how they exhibit the traits of common grace described in this book. Acknowledging the good and virtuous actions of our neighbors will allow a conversation to start positively and build from there. Many of the illustrations recorded here focus on how non-Christians have used God's gifts to better our collective lives.

Illustrating Common Grace

“Every good and perfect gift is from above,” asserts the Scriptures, “coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (Jas 1:17). Notice a few things about this statement. First, these good gifts come down to everyone—the good, bad, and indifferent. Don't take this for granted. Second, if God were punitive, he could send good gifts to those who love him and give little to nothing to those who reject him! Last, James's reference to God as the Father of heavenly lights is to communicate that his gifts are as plentiful as the vast array of stars!⁹

This idea of God's gifts coming down to us is certainly poetic, but it reminds us that God is aware of our struggles and responds by sending gifts. “They come from above,” notes commentator Paul Cedar, “because that is James' concept of where God is. Literally, they come from God.”¹⁰ James's language reminds me of a vivid example in the widely popular young adult series *The Hunger Games*. Suzanne Collins's postapocalyptic world resonates with readers of all ages and has been translated into twenty-six languages. In this disturbing world, children fight for their lives but can also find they are the unexpected recipients of timely gifts.

HUNGER GAMES AND PARACHUTES OF ASSISTANCE

In a postapocalyptic future the leaders of the nation of Panem punish dissenters and discourage rebellion by forcing each of the twelve districts to select a boy and girl from their own to compete in the Hunger Games. The entire nation watches as children fight to the death until a sole winner arises and is granted immunity. Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark are selected to fight on behalf of District 12. Soon after the game begins Peeta is severely injured and hiding in a cave. While looking for food, Katniss sees a canister attached to a parachute floating to the ground. Inside the canister is a healing balm meant to save Peeta's life. Where did the canister come from? A unique part of the Hunger Games is that benefactors watching in elaborate viewing rooms can, if so moved, send the fighters precious gifts (medicine, food, a compass). These gifts often prove to be the difference between life and death!

The same is true with God. As he watches a world in rebellion, he graciously sends to the warring world gifts such as medical discoveries (penicillin, antibiotics, X-ray machines), survival tools (bows and arrows to hunt, traps for catching animals, staffs to assist walking), the sense of morality (being able to distinguish between justice and injustice), ideas of what a virtuous government looks like (laws that punish evil and reward good), artistic expressions that help us conceive of the good life (poetry, music, art, live presentations), and so on. Instead of idly standing by and watching us suffer, he—like the benefactors in the Hunger Games—strategically sends gifts to us that make a sinful world more bearable.

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