

In Search of the

GOLDEN STRAND

Living Together Well with
the Doctrines of Grace

DEAN DAVIS

Praise for *In Search of the Golden Strand*

A pastor's heart, a love for the Bible, a love of clear doctrine, reverence before the mystery of the triune God, love for Christ, love for the gospel, love for the redeemed, and love for lost sinners—all of these come through clearly in Dean Davis' new book, *In Search of the Golden Strand*. In it he looks for a theological space where Calvinists and Arminians can stand together as one, and where true fellowship can be enjoyed and exhibited. To this end he spotlights the two great paradigms of God's redemptive action in history: the Sovereignty Perspective and the Test Perspective. His goal is to help Christians understand and profit from the Doctrines of Grace, which belong to the Sovereignty Perspective. But this, he argues, is possible only if we allow the Test Perspective to keep those doctrines in proper balance. Davis' theological reasoning, biblical exposition, and experiential application are edifying and expansive to the heart. Every reader will be drawn to look with greater intensity and reverence at the Word of God, both in its clarity and its mystery; both in its celebration of divine sovereignty and its loving summons to take and pass the test of life.

– **Thomas J. Nettles, PhD**, professor of Historical Theology, the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; leadership team, the Founders Ministries, SBC.

Dean Davis has written a warm, accessible book on the five points of Calvinism. Drawing upon J. I. Packer's notion that divine sovereignty and human freedom are best explained in terms of antinomy, Davis charts a biblically rich and pastorally sensitive course. Lay Christians in particular will benefit from this work of practical theology.

– **Ryan Rindels, PhD**, pastor of Sonoma First Baptist Church, Sonoma, CA; author of *Andrew Fuller's Theology of Revival*

Dean Davis is what you might call a "humble Calvinist." Rather than leveraging his intellectual powers against Arminian "opponents," he treats them as beloved brothers with valuable, balancing insights—even as he seeks to win them to his point of view. If you've ever been frustrated by the Calvinist/Arminian debate, or if you just want to learn more about it, this book is a

much-needed breath of fresh air. I've read more than a few on the subject, and *In Search of the Golden Strand* is now my very favorite. Do yourself a favor and read this book today!

– **Michael Rowntree**, pastor of Wellspring Church, North Richland Hills, TX; co-host, The Remnant Radio

The desire of every pastor's heart should be the glory of God and the joy of his flock. Far too often we are robbed of this joy through tribal squabbling, confusion, and unnecessary division. In his book, *In Search of the Golden Strand*, Dean Davis undertakes—among other things—to identify from Scripture the “balancing factors” that will serve to unite believers on both sides of the Calvinist/Arminian divide. With gentleness, reverence, and a pastor's heart, Davis encourages the Church to find understanding and unity in all the glorious truths that bind us together. No matter where you stand on these controversial issues, I trust you will find *In Search of the Golden Strand* to be immensely edifying.

– **Stephen Saucier**, pastor of Sunfield Baptist Church, Du Quoin, IL

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For Jonathan, Gary, Austin, and all everywhere
who are using their freedom well
to wrestle with the sovereignty of God

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as he chose us in him before the founding of the world, so that we would be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to himself, in accordance with the good pleasure of his will, and for the praise of the glory of his grace, which he freely bestowed upon us in the Beloved. (Ephesians 1:5–6)

Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. (Joshua 24:14–16 NIV)

These two truths [i.e., God's election and predestination vs. man's freedom and responsibility] I do not believe can ever be welded into one upon any human anvil, but one day they shall be in eternity. They are two lines so nearly parallel that the mind which shall pursue them farthest will never discover that they converge; but they do converge, and they will meet somewhere in eternity, close to the throne of God, whence all truth doth spring.

—Charles Spurgeon

What should one do, then, with an antinomy [i.e., two biblical truths that appear to be contradictory]? Answer: . . . teach yourself to think of reality in a way that provides for their peaceful coexistence, remembering that reality itself has proved actually to contain them both.

—J. I. Packer

Christianity got over the difficulty of combining furious opposites by combining them both and by keeping them both furious.

—G. K. Chesterton

Make inscrutable mysteries into footstools for faith to kneel upon.

—Charles Spurgeon

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As in the biblical parable of old, this book began as a tiny seed, but unexpectedly grew into a large tree where all sorts of doctrinal birds found a resting place. I started the project thinking simply to compile a long list of Scripture texts teaching and supporting the Doctrines of Grace. Soon enough, however, I realized that we already have many such lists, but relatively few books written by Calvinistically oriented authors who are eager to hear the hearts, honor the insights, and address the concerns of their Arminian brethren. And so, sensing from the Lord a keen desire to promote spiritual unity on this war-torn theological front, I thought it well worthwhile to try to write one. Though not without fear and trembling, I gladly offer it here to the Body of Christ. And if, in some small way, it should cause birds of a feather to flock together, I will be pleased indeed.

Before heading out for our destination, I want to acknowledge the rich contributions of friends and co-laborers who helped make this book possible.

Very special thanks to my long-time colleague and trusty copy-editor, Susan Roush, who proofread the book several times, made many valuable suggestions, and graciously forced me to humble myself beneath the Chicago Manual of Style. I am a better writer for it, and all the more grateful for the excellent providence that has teamed us up.

Thanks also to my old (and new) friends at Redemption Press: Athena Dean, Dori Harrell, Hannah McKenzie, Carrie Stevenson, Cathy Sanders, and Jon Stewart. As ever, their interest, availability, cheerfulness, and professionalism have won my admiration and gratitude. Lord willing, we will have one or two more hills to climb together!

IN SEARCH OF THE GOLDEN STRAND

Many thanks to Dr. Tom Nettles, Dr. Ryan Rindels, Pastor Michael Rowntree, and Pastor Stephen Saucier, busy Christian leaders who kindly took of their valuable time to read and endorse this book. Brothers, your affirmation of my journey to the high places of Holy Scripture was a precious staff that steadied my legs beneath me.

Special thanks to my wife, Linda, and to my five (adult) kids, all of whom eagerly weighed in on the cover design and format of the book, and whose united counsel carried the day.

Finally, heartfelt thanks to the Lord himself, who, I trust, inspired and enabled me to complete, not simply this book, but also the arduous and exhilarating spiritual journey that it recounts. For the flaws herein, I take full responsibility. But for whatever is useful for opening eyes, warming hearts, and bringing his dear family to greater spiritual unity, I gladly give him all the glory.

INTRODUCTION

IN SEARCH OF THE GOLDEN STRAND

IN HIS LETTER TO THE CHRISTIANS IN EPHESUS THE APOSTLE Paul addresses the theme that moved me to write this book: the spiritual unity of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So then: I, the prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling by which you were called: in all humility and gentleness, with great patience, bearing with one another in love, and making every effort to guard the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. For there is one body and one Spirit—just as you also were called to the one hope that belongs to your calling—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all . . . And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, for the building up of the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. And he has done this so that we will no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves, and swept along with every wind of doctrine, by means of the trickery of men who craftily carry out their deceitful schemes. Rather, as we speak the truth in love, we are meant to grow up in every respect

into him who is the head—into Christ himself. From him the whole body—being joined and knit together by every supporting ligament as each individual member does his part—effects its own growth, and so builds itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:1–16)

In this text the apostle issues a plea, cites a procedure, and makes a prediction. As we begin our journey, let's take a moment to look at all three.

First, he issues a *plea*. Because we *are* one, we need to *live as* one, come hell or high water. And hell and high water will indeed come. The devil will do his best to toss us to and fro on waves of error, to sweep us along before wild winds of bad doctrine. Until the Lord returns, the world, the flesh, and the devil will continually try to weasel their way into the family of God and tear it apart. Paul says we mustn't let them do it.

Secondly, he cites a *procedure*. With a view to the safety, maturity, and unity of all Christians, Christ himself has given his people gifts: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastor/teachers, and, in due season, the New Testament (NT) Scriptures. These are the “supporting ligaments” of the Body of Christ. Using the Scriptures, Christian leaders are to feed and tend the flock of God. But note also that each individual member must do his part. We *all* are called to make every effort to guard and develop the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Yes, doctrinal battles are inevitable. But when they come, God's procedure is clear: He would have us act like good Bereans, searching the apostolic writings to see if this, that, or the other thing is really so (Acts 17:11).

Finally, he makes a *prediction*—and what strong encouragement we should draw from it! For Paul tells us that spiritual unity is part of God's eternal purpose for his people. Yes, in one sense it is already ours, for God has placed us in Christ and united us in him and around the fundamentals of the faith. But in another sense spiritual unity is waiting for us up ahead. It is an *eschatological* unity and a *perfected* unity: a unity that will find us in perfect doctrinal agreement and sharing

a perfect spiritual knowledge of the Son of God. Indeed, this will be the perfect unity of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. For when God has finally brought the Body of Christ into full conformity with its Head, the whole universe will at last behold the Perfect Man: the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. And what a day *that* will be!

Will we see this perfect unity in our lifetime? Will it be granted prior to the return of Christ in glory? No, it will not. But this much is sure: Since God purposed it in eternity, predicted it in Scripture, gave us a procedure for developing it, and exhorts us to strive for it, we can indeed draw near to it, if only we are willing to enter by the narrow door (Luke 13:24).

The Battleground Ahead

Taking this exhortation to heart, I have made it my goal in this book to promote spiritual unity on one of the most war-torn theological battlegrounds in Christendom: the Doctrines of Grace, otherwise known as the Five Points of Calvinism.

It will take some doing. All throughout Church history—but especially since the time of the Reformation—Christians have wrestled with these doctrines and divided over them. So-called Calvinists, emphasizing the sovereignty of God over all things, have defined and defended them. So-called Arminians, emphasizing man's freedom and responsibility, have rejected them and replaced them with views of their own. It is difficult to think of a subject over which Bible-believing Christians have more frequently disagreed, debated, hardened, and finally gone their separate ways.

I am aware that not all division is bad. In his words to the Ephesians, Paul obviously anticipates it. Elsewhere he tells us that in the midst of doctrinal conflicts and corresponding factions, Providence is secretly at work, bringing to light the teachers who are approved, thereby strengthening the Church's grip on God's truth. Church history demonstrates this very thing. One may justly view it as a long, painful, yet fruitful march towards doctrinal and spiritual unity. All of this is to the good (1 Cor. 11:19).

But *long-standing* doctrinal division in the Body of Christ is not to the good. As we have just seen, God's ultimate purpose in giving us his truth is never to divide us, but always to build us up as a family in our most holy faith, and to equip us to fight side by side in the cause of the gospel. Yes, some things in the Bible are hard to understand (2 Pet. 3:16). And yes, the Doctrines of Grace are eminent among them. But this is not an excuse to divide over them. Rather, we must view all such impasses as God-ordained opportunities to become better Bereans; as a divine call to search and see if these things are so. Happily, with that call come rich promises. If we will keep on asking, we will receive. If we will keep on seeking, we will find. If we will keep on knocking, the door will be opened to us (Matt. 7:7). We *can* attain to a deeper understanding of the Doctrines of Grace. We *can* attain to a richer unity around them. And in so doing, we *can* attain to a fresh measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

But how exactly are we to accomplish this? Might there be a scriptural key—a fresh biblical insight—that would enable Calvinists and Arminians to lay down their arms and come together as one around the biblical table of the Lord? Is there a plot of biblical ground upon which they might find themselves standing together, an exceedingly great and powerful army, gathered as one around the Captain of the Lord of Hosts for the advance of his gospel (Ezek. 37:10; Rev. 6:2)?

I believe there is. I believe there has to be. And after years of pondering and wrestling with the subject, I believe I have caught a glimpse of it. So too, I will suggest, have some of my heroes in the faith: brothers like Charles Spurgeon and J. I. Packer, whose wise words are placarded on the opening pages of this book. Here, then, in three basic points, is the gist of what they have to say, and the gist of what I will be saying at greater length in the pages ahead.

First, with respect to his redemptive work in human history, God has given us two separate streams of divine revelation: two paradigms, two perspectives, two ways of looking at things. One stream, to which our Calvinist brothers gravitate, may be called the Paradigm of God's Absolute Sovereignty Over All Things, or simply the Sovereignty

Perspective. The other, to which our Arminian brothers gravitate, may be called the Paradigm of Man's Freedom on Probation, or simply the Test Perspective.

Secondly, while these two perspectives *seem* to be mutually exclusive, in reality they are somehow complementary. We ask: How can God be in absolute control of all things and man be free at the same time? To our finite and fallen minds it seems impossible. Yet in the Bible God affirms that it is not only possible, but also true. Moreover, he makes it quite clear that both perspectives are vital for a balanced, healthy, and productive Christian walk. Far from being antithetical, the two perspectives actually complement one another, thereby securing the good health of the Body of Christ.

Thirdly, there is a way to handle this mystery, a way to live with the intellectual and spiritual tension that it creates within us. The solution is twofold. Negatively, we are not to deny, cleverly modify, or ignore one paradigm at the expense of the other. Obviously such responses would dishonor the Lord who gave us the paradigms, and would also cut us off from the spiritual benefits we are meant to enjoy through them. Positively, we must therefore humbly recognize that in this matter we are indeed dealing with a true *mystery*, in the sense of an intellectual and spiritual puzzle, which, at least for the moment, is beyond our comprehension.

Here, then, according to my heroes, is how we shall reach the spiritual unity we need and desire: We must surrender to the mystery. We must learn to live with it. We must heartily welcome both streams of divine revelation, just as they are. We must train ourselves to walk in the blessings and practical implications of both. We must recognize that in his perfect wisdom our heavenly Father has chosen to reveal both paradigms to us, and yet at the same time to conceal their perfect harmony. And we must believe that he has done so for his glory and our own highest good. If we can learn to live under this wise discipline, we shall do well.

In short, my heroes have helped me to see that with respect to the Doctrines of Grace, God has indeed supplied us with a stretch of

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holy ground where we all can live, grow, serve, and worship together well. In the pages ahead I will speak of this good ground as the Golden Strand. Let us go in search of it now.

PART I

SPYING THE
GOLDEN STRAND

CHAPTER 1

A LONG-TERM DATE WITH THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE

THROUGHOUT THE HISTORY OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH both leaders and laity have pondered, discussed, and debated the ways in which—and the extent to which—our salvation is by God’s grace: by his free, unmerited favor. Certainly we all can agree that the supreme manifestation of his grace is found in the gift of his uniquely begotten Son,¹ whom he sent into the world as a true human being to live, die, and rise again “for us men and our salvation.”

But what about the other components of our salvation? For example, what about repentance, faith, and perseverance in the faith? Are these also gifts of God, or does man’s free will come into play? And if it does, how crucial is it for salvation? Is God sovereign over man’s free will? Does he rule over it in such a way that all of our choices—and therefore all of his saving purposes and plans—will surely come to pass? Or has God made man’s will so free that it can frustrate, or even annul, God’s saving purpose in Christ? Here is where the disagreements begin.

I repeat: The disagreements have been around for a long time. As we shall see, the Apostle Paul himself was aware of them and eager to address them. In post-apostolic times they first reached high visibility in a fierce contest between the British monk Pelagius, and Augustine, the bishop of Hippo. The former stressed man’s radically free will;

the latter, man's radical bondage to sin, a bondage so complete that it requires an exercise of God's sovereign grace for every phase of spiritual life: spiritual rebirth, repentance, faith, sanctification, preservation, and final glorification. In the years that followed, most medieval theologians tilted towards the free-will side of the debate, arguing that God's election and predestination depended upon his "simple foreknowledge" of whether or not his free creatures would choose him. However, in the 14th to 16th centuries the pendulum swung back towards Augustine, with most of the Reformers (e.g., Wycliffe, Hus, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin) emphasizing fallen man's slavery to sin, his spiritual inability, and his corresponding need of God's sovereign, liberating, empowering, and preserving grace.

Nevertheless, it was not until the 17th century that what we now refer to as the five Doctrines of Grace came fully into view (and ever after into dispute). The scene of their arrival was Holland, where the state church of the day was solidly *Calvinistic*. That is, the Dutch church adhered closely to John Calvin's teaching about salvation, which, like Augustine's, stressed man's spiritual bondage and inability, and his corresponding need of the various manifestations of God's sovereign grace. This understanding had been incorporated into the doctrinal constitution of the Dutch church, which was called the Belgic Confession (AD 1561).

But trouble was brewing. Jacob Arminius, a professor of theology at the University of Leiden, took issue with some of the core tenets of the confession. As a result, he sought to develop what he felt was a more biblical understanding of soteriology (i.e., biblical teaching about salvation). In 1610, shortly after his death, his disciples published a document embodying his views. It was called *The Remonstrance*. Here was a direct challenge to the soteriology of the Belgic Confession, a challenge in which these teachers explicitly set forth what came to be called the Five Points of Arminianism. Not surprisingly, their action produced an equal and opposite reaction. Thus, in 1619 a synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands gathered in the city of Dordrecht. The participating theologians and

pastors not only rejected the Five Points of Arminianism, but also developed and defended what have since been called the Five Points of Calvinism, or the Doctrines of Grace.

The Five Points of Arminianism

Bearing in mind that down through the years there have been slight variations in the thinking of Arminians, we may define the Five Points of Arminianism as follows:

1. Free Will and Human Ability: Man has indeed been spiritually damaged and limited by the fall, so that with respect to salvation he stands in need of God's *prevenient grace*. In other words, in order to repent, believe, and be justified, God must first come to a sinner in the person of the Holy Spirit, and, through the preaching of the gospel, draw him to Christ. Nevertheless, God will not violate the sinner's free will. Through prevenient grace the sinner is now free to choose Christ, and is explicitly commanded to do so. But in the end, the choice is his, and his alone.

2. Conditional Election: God's pre-creation choice of individual men and women for salvation was based upon his *simple foreknowledge*. This foreknowledge was *not* based on what God himself had predestined to occur (the Calvinist view). Rather, it was a miracle beyond all human comprehension, according to which he simply knew ahead of time which of his free human creatures *would* choose Christ. Having performed this miracle, God then elected those whom he knew would elect him.

3. Unlimited Atonement: Arminians teach that on the Cross Christ suffered (the penalty) for all the sins of all the people of all time. However, in order to benefit from this unlimited or universal atonement each person must freely choose to put his faith in Christ. Christ's sacrificial death makes salvation possible for all, but guarantees salvation for none.²

4. Resistible Grace: When, through the preaching of the gospel, the Holy Spirit calls a sinner to Christ, he (the sinner) is free to accept or resist the call. Again, God will not violate the free will of man.

While God makes salvation *possible* through Christ and the gospel call, it is man alone who makes it *actual*. With respect to salvation, God has the first word, man has the last.

5. Spiritual Fallibility: Arminius' disciples followed their teacher in expressing uncertainty as to whether Christians could lose their salvation. Given the decisive role of man's free will in the Arminian scheme, the logical conclusion is that they can, and that full assurance of salvation in this life is therefore impossible. This is likely the majority opinion among Arminians today. Nevertheless, because of the rich biblical witness to the eternal security of true believers in Jesus, many Arminians, even if inconsistently, join with their Calvinist brothers in affirming this doctrine.

The Five Points of Calvinism

At the Synod of Dordrecht (also called Dort) the leading theologians of the Dutch Reformed Church disputed the Five Points of Arminianism and gave us what are now known as the Five Points of Calvinism. These are usually remembered and discussed with the aid of the acronym TULIP. Here I will give a short definition of each point; in the pages ahead we will examine them more closely. Like the good Bereans of old, we will search the Scriptures to see if these things are so.

1. Total Depravity: Because of the fall of man in Adam, all human beings are born in sin. Sin is an inward power and disposition that infects and affects their every faculty: their understanding, conscience, affections, and will. From birth, and by nature, man is spiritually dead in sin, and enslaved to sin. Without the gift of God's enabling grace he cannot make the least move towards God and Christ. This condition is commonly called the *spiritual inability* of the natural (unregenerate) man. The doctrines of total depravity and spiritual inability go hand in hand.

2. Unconditional Election: Before the founding of the world, God, out of his pure mercy and grace, lovingly chose a particular group of sinful people to redeem, call, justify, and adopt into his eternal family through God-given and God-sustained faith in the finished

work of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. He did this out of love for mankind, and with a view to the praise of his glory and grace.

3. Limited Atonement: While God had (and presently has) several different purposes for the death of Christ on the Cross, his primary purpose was that Christ should make an effective payment for the sins of his elect. Christ's death on the Cross was substitutionary and penal. At the Cross God imputed the sins of his chosen people to Christ, who stood in for them as their substitute, and who paid the penalty for those sins, which is spiritual and physical death.

4. Irresistible Grace: Those whom God has chosen, and whom Christ has redeemed, the Holy Spirit will surely call to repentance and faith through the Church's proclamation of the gospel. Importantly, irresistible grace does not mean that God will effectually call his people against their will. Rather, it means that he will graciously work in their hearts in such a way that they will desire and freely choose to come to Christ for salvation and eternal life.

5. Perseverance in the Faith: Those whom God has chosen, those whom Christ has redeemed, and those whom the Holy Spirit has effectually called will indeed, by God's gracious work of preservation, persevere in the faith to the end of their lives and be saved. Again, he will not do this against their will, but rather by renewing their will, so that they are eager to do all that is necessary in order to finish their course with joy. In view of the many texts promising the divine preservation of the saints, Calvinists also believe that it is both possible and important for Christians to have full assurance of their final salvation.

My Long-term Date with the Doctrines of Grace

For over forty years the Lord has taken me on a long-term date with the Doctrines of Grace. And just so you know, I fully expect it to last for the rest of my life—at a minimum!

Here is a fulsome list of the words that come to mind when I reflect on all I have felt and experienced over the course of this date: dawning awareness, shock, scandal, confusion, crisis, doubt, fear, anger, disappointment, temptation, fascination, challenge, test,

determination, surrender, humiliation, abasement, privilege, security, gratitude, hope, assurance, compassion, bafflement, worship, and inexpressible joy. These days I wonder if the single biggest reason for this great kaleidoscope of visceral responses to the Doctrines of Grace is that in encountering them I have actually been encountering the God who gave them to us. As C. S. Lewis liked to say, “He is not a tame lion.”

I reckon that my date began in earnest back in the late 1970’s, when I studied systematic theology under Dr. Daniel Tappeiner, a Reformed Baptist. It fell to him during that particular quarter of the school year to teach us biblical soteriology. At the time I was only a few years old in the Lord, and therefore what I like to call a “default Arminian.” I could not, of course, have told you who Arminius was or what he taught. But I was his follower, nonetheless—not by choice, but by nature. For I am now persuaded that unless and until a new Christian comes face to face with the sovereign God of the Bible, he will naturally think of himself as “the master of his fate, and the captain of his soul.”³ And there is some truth to that; but only some.

As the quarter progressed, Dr. Tappeiner introduced, explained, and defended the Five Points of Calvinism from Scripture. When he did, I was both enthralled and appalled. Enthralled because almost immediately I caught my first glimpse of the sheer unexpectedness, otherness, and “godishness” of God. The prophet Daniel described him like this: “He does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and no one can stay his hand or say to him, ‘What have you done?’” (Dan. 4:35, ESV). In retrospect, I’d have to say that this initial glimpse of the God of Daniel more or less completely spoiled me for any other.

In this encounter I also glimpsed something else: the possibility of profound spiritual comfort. For I saw that if I could know for sure I had been chosen by God, redeemed by Christ, and effectually called by the Spirit to a genuine faith in the Lord, then surely I could also know that I would persevere in that faith to the end. In my recent conversion experience, which was quite dramatic, I had been indelibly singed by dreadful sightings of the fires of hell.⁴ As a new Christian

who was paddling hard to stay afloat in a sea of doubts and fears, the notion of eternal security looked like an island paradise.

Nevertheless, honesty compels me to say that overall I was more appalled than enthralled. The Doctrines of Grace raised enormous questions and profound concerns. Accordingly, for many weeks I pushed back against the longsuffering Dr. Tappeiner with the full force of my average intellect, biblical ignorance, and almost entirely unsanctified mind. Still, the questions and concerns were intensely real, and (as history abundantly proves) not at all peculiar to me. Here is short list of some of the most serious, with more to come later on:

- If God is sovereign in salvation, where does human freedom and decision-making fit in? Are we actually self-conscious robots, living under the illusion of being free and responsible human beings whose choices truly count for time and eternity?
- Can we say from the heart that God is truly just, good, loving, and kind if, before the founding of the world, he predestined some men and angels to eternal life, and others, in effect, to eternal punishment?
- If God really is sovereign in salvation, and if he really is good, why would he choose to save only some and not all?
- Can we who are Christians sincerely proclaim the message of this God and this salvation to all people indiscriminately? Is the Gospel according to Calvinism really good news for the whole world?

Again, this has been a long-term date. In the pages ahead I will be giving you the fruits of my best praying and pondering over these and other questions. For the moment, however, let me complete this autobiographical sketch by saying that about a year after my first encounter with the Doctrines of Grace—and after countless hours of Bible meditation, theological reading, and intense discussion and argumentation—I finally yielded to them all. In recalling this surrender the image that comes to mind is of two male wolves facing off, vying for

the leadership of the pack. In some cases, there will be actual fighting; in others, only a protracted sizing up of the adversary. But in all cases, when the end finally comes, the loser will signal his submission by going low and humbly baring his neck to his opponent. By the grace of God, I bared my neck. He had the right and the power to tear me limb from limb. Instead, he picked me up in the arms of love.

Have I found the answers to all these questions? No. Nevertheless, for reasons that I will share below, I have come to believe that the Doctrines of Grace are indeed biblical. More than that, I have also come to believe that they are vital: vital for the spiritual formation of individual Christians, and therefore vital for the overall health of Christ's Church. As Charles Spurgeon never tired of pointing out, these old doctrines, applied to the Christian heart by the Holy Spirit, have a strange power to comfort, assure, and steady the soul. Rightly understood, they inspire the pursuit of holiness, energize evangelism, and create and sustain fervent worship in spirit and truth. We may not be able fully to understand them, but I will argue that we certainly cannot live without them.

I know many disagree. Many say, "The truth is that we can't live *with* them! They are a continual source of confusion, controversy, and ecclesiastical chaos!" I feel their pain. I've just mentioned some of the deep concerns they produced in me. I have recounted how they do indeed occasion the polarization of Christians, so that they drift into opposing, if not warring, camps. And I freely grant that they are probably at the top of the list of biblical things that are "hard to understand" (2 Pet. 3:16).

But again, in giving us the Doctrines of Grace surely our heavenly Father did not mean for them to frustrate or divide us. Surely he meant for them to test our love of his truth, to elicit a diligent search for it, to enrich us when we finally find it, and to cherish it once we have (1 Cor. 11:19). And surely he knew that we would *need* this truth. Speaking personally, I have concluded that God has given us the Doctrines of Grace because they are in fact indispensable equipment for a fruitful, joyful, and *united* pilgrimage through "the waste howling wilderness"

of this present evil age (Deut. 32:10; Rom. 15:4; Rev. 12:1–17). The poet Leonard Cohen once said of Christ that only drowning men can see him. Perhaps that is true of the Doctrines of Grace as well.

But if indeed we are meant to gather in fruitful unity around the Doctrines of Grace, how exactly can we do so? Given that Calvinists and Arminians have been at theological loggerheads for centuries, is there any real hope of resolving this controversy? Well, as I said earlier, I believe there is. And in my case it sprang to life when this drowning predestinarian suddenly caught a glimpse of a verdant biblical isthmus where he might at last plant his feet on solid ground. In the next chapter I will therefore share with you how he first spied—and finally reached—the Golden Strand.

CHAPTER 2

SPYING THE GOLDEN STRAND

WHILE I WAS NOW A CALVINIST, FOR SEVERAL YEARS I WAS an uneasy one. Yes, I believed in the Doctrines of Grace; and as all Calvinists do, I drew much spiritual comfort from them. But a part of me remained troubled. Calvinism, as I then understood it, seemed to overwhelm, not just human freedom and responsibility, but our humanity itself. For what is it, after all, that separates us from the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, the beasts of the field, and the creeping things that crawl upon the ground? Is it not the stupendous supernatural mystery that is closer than hands and feet: our very soul, lovingly fashioned and sustained in the image of God, and therefore blessed and burdened with the gift of self-consciousness, rational thought, feeling, intuition, spiritual hunger, and conscience? Is it not also the glorious, dreadful, and inescapable sense that we are both free and responsible for *choosing* to use our faculties well? And is it not an accompanying sense that all human dignity, achievement, heroism, and real happiness depend upon our doing this very thing? Alive to all these things, one of my theology professors, in a terribly off moment, curtly dismissed classical Calvinism as giving us a “tyrannical” view of God: a view that somehow crushed and canceled our humanity. He had not yet visited the Golden Strand. Nor had I. And so, for a lengthy season, I wrestled with deep-seated fears that he might be right.

As the years went by I was blessed to serve the Lord as a pastor and a Christian bookstore manager. During this time I experienced a growing interest in apologetics and worldview studies. I also experienced a growing desire to write a book. As a philosophy major in college—and later on as a mystic pursuing enlightenment through Eastern meditation—I had encountered a number of “great books” promoting alternative worldviews. Now I wanted to return the favor. I wanted to write a great book that would offset the others: that would introduce my readers to the biblical worldview, explain why it is reasonable to embrace it, and hopefully win many of them to it.

But let me state the case more carefully: I didn’t just *want* to write this book; I felt I *had* to write the book. There was no escaping it. But there was also no escaping something else: Somehow I would have to incorporate my Calvinism into my writing. What’s more, I would have to do so in a way that didn’t drive my readers away from the faith, but would instead draw them to it. In other words, as far as humanly possible, I was going to have to resolve my doubts and concerns about Calvinism. With 20-20 hindsight I can see now that the Lord had me right where he wanted me to be.

And I can also see that he was more than faithful. For as I prayed, pondered, planned, and perused all I had learned in seminary and my subsequent reading, I finally saw the way forward: I caught a glimpse of the Golden Strand. But prior to visiting it, I want to pave the way with a few words about the Golden Coin.

The Golden Coin

Imagine that you are holding a golden coin in your hand at eye level. Unless you’re standing in front of a mirror, you will only be able to look at one side of the coin at a time. In fact, strictly speaking, there is only one person in the whole universe who can perfectly see both sides simultaneously. That would be God.

In writing my book, I realized the situation was something like this with respect to salvation. When we read through the Scriptures with an eye to that subject, we soon see that the Bible gives us two

different perspectives on God's redemptive dealings with mankind. As finite and spiritually damaged creatures, we find that we can only look at these dealings one perspective at a time; and that when we do, the other perspective seems to be ruled out. God, however, can see both sides of the redemptive coin at the same time. I touched on this matter earlier. Now it is time to consider it at greater length.

The Paradigm of God's Absolute Sovereignty over All things

On the one hand, Scripture gives us a stream of biblical revelation depicting God as the all-controlling King of the universe. Viewed through the lens of these texts, cosmic history is, as it were, an epic movie that plays out, frame by frame, in the great theater of creation.

Some of these texts speak of God's decrees: of how, before the founding of the world, he foreordained all persons, places, things, relations, and events. For example, through Isaiah, God himself says:

Remember this, and be assured; recall it to mind, you transgressors. Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other. I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, "My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure." (Isaiah 46:8–10; cf. Isaiah 37:21–38)

Are God's people tempted to worship pagan deities? Then let them recall that the sovereign LORD not only knows all events from beginning to end, but also brings them to pass according to his purpose, pleasure, and power.

Echoing Isaiah, the Apostle Paul states that in the great theater of the universe God is "... working all things according to the counsel of his will," and that "... from him, through him, and for him are all things" (Eph. 1:11; Rom. 11:36). Many other biblical texts confirm what is stated here, namely, that God's decrees are indeed all-encompassing (Ps. 139:16; Prov. 16:4, 19:21, 20:24; Dan. 9:24, 11:36).

Other texts in this category speak of God's all-controlling providence, through which he brings to pass all that he has foreordained.

Thus, we find the Apostle Paul comforting the saints with the stupendous revelation that at all times the sovereign God is causing “. . . all things to work together for the good of those who love God, of those who are the called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

Importantly, this all-encompassing providence includes the evil thoughts, words, and deeds of free moral agents (i.e., of men and angels). While God does not *directly* cause these things, it is clear that, mysteriously enough, he permits them in such a way that they are sure to take place.

One familiar example of this benign and all-embracing providence is found in the life of Joseph. Through a remarkable turn of events that included the evil decisions of his jealous brothers, he rose to the heights of power in Egypt and brought Israel to safety, security, and nationhood. As it is written: His brothers meant the painful betrayal for evil, but the sovereign God meant it for good (Gen. 50:20).

Another example, still more powerful, is found in a prayer of some of the exalted Christ’s earliest disciples. The members of the Sanhedrin, having ordered Peter and John to cease preaching the gospel, had just released them. When they had rejoined the rest of the saints, all the disciples prayed. As you read their words, note carefully how their prayer reflects a faith both in God’s eternal purpose and his all-controlling providence—a providence that includes even the evil free-will decisions of his enemies:

“Sovereign Lord, you are the one who made the sky, the earth, the sea, and everything in them, and who spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of our forefather David, your servant, saying, ‘Why did the nations rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth stood side by side, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against his Anointed.’ For both Herod and Pontius Pilate—along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel—did indeed gather together in this city against your Holy Servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your purpose predestined to occur.” (Acts 4:24–28)

It is clear that for these disciples God's sovereignty is *meticulous*: that it extends to all events, up to and including the free-will decisions of men and angels, whether those decisions are good or evil. But this entails that it also extends to the salvation of sinners, up to and including the free-will decisions that they make in response to the gospel. And this is precisely what we find Scripture affirming in the Doctrines of Grace. Whether we think of election and predestination, the redemptive work of Christ, the effectual calling of God's children from death to life, or their preservation in the faith until the very end, text after text teaches us to understand this simple truth: "Salvation is from the Lord" (Jon. 2:9).

The biblical texts in this great stream of divine revelation create what is called a *paradigm*: a particular perspective on, or way of looking at, universal history in general, and the history of God's redemptive acts in particular. Again, I have called this *The Paradigm of God's Absolute Sovereignty Over All Things*, or more simply, *The Sovereignty Perspective*.¹

The Paradigm of Man's Freedom on Probation

There is, however, another side of the biblical coin, another stream of divine revelation, another paradigm or perspective on man and salvation. For as we read through our Bibles we also come upon a great many texts—a large majority, I would say—that not only depict God as an all-controlling ruler and king, but also as a personal creator, sustainer, provider, lawgiver, redeemer, and judge who is eager to establish an intimate personal relationship with the apple of his eye: us.

In these texts we find God acting in a wide variety of ways to establish the kind of relationship he desires. We find him creating, blessing, promising, warning, chastising, forgiving, restoring, and more. But unless and until his judgment falls, there is one thing we never find him doing: *violating the free will of his beloved human creations*. Yes, it is clear that he very much wants their love, obedience, and friendship. But it is equally clear that he wants these things to be given voluntarily. Here, then, we have a stream of divine revelation that

depicts God, not as *controlling* his children, but as *testing* them to see if they will use the very special gift of their freedom to love, honor, obey, and glorify him. I have called this stream of revelation *The Paradigm of Man's Freedom on Probation*, or more simply, *The Test Perspective*.

Creation, Freedom, and the Test of Life

Since this perspective is of such great importance for our study, let us take a moment to look more closely at how it appears in Scripture. Three main points may be made.

First, we see that in the very act of creation God fitted mankind for a test. As it is written, "God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). There is no overstating the richness of this foundational revelation. Among all his creatures, man alone was created in God's own image and likeness. Yes, God possesses certain "incommunicable" attributes: attributes that he cannot and will not transfer to his creatures (e.g., self-existence, immutability, eternity, omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, etc.). But in many ways mankind was (and is) a mirror image of God, for it pleased God to share with him such "communicable" attributes as self-consciousness, thought, reason, understanding, language, affection, conscience, and free will.

It is the last of these attributes that sets the stage for the forthcoming drama of universal history. Adam's freedom stood him in a unique face-to-face relationship with his creator. Indeed, in a way it stood him before his creator as an equal: Both shared the communicable attributes, and both shared a certain freedom and responsibility to use them well. But there were also important differences. God was free to create and sustain Adam and his family; and as their creator, he was also free and responsible to govern them both. Adam, on the other hand, was not free to create, sustain, or (supremely) govern. Rather, he was free to use all his faculties to love, serve, and obey his creator. And he was responsible for doing so. Only thus would he be able to enjoy the riches of God's presence and promised blessings.

Adam's original freedom also stood him in great privilege and great danger. A faculty of its own, it gave him the ability to use the rest of his faculties to make decisions. In particular, it enabled him to ponder, judge, and choose between what was good (God's revealed will) and what was evil (what was contrary to that will). This ability was a great privilege, for by freely choosing good over evil he was uniquely capable of loving, pleasing, and glorifying his creator. However, it also placed him in a certain danger, for by choosing evil over good he was uniquely capable of dishonoring his creator, injuring his glory, exciting his anger, necessitating his retribution, and evoking his just judgment. Thus, from the very beginning—and owing to the very nature of God, man, and the unique relationship that bound them together—Adam was positioned to take what I will call *the test of life*.

This brings us to our second point: In the Garden of Eden God did in fact put our first parents to a test. He placed them on probation, giving them a special opportunity to demonstrate their love and loyalty to him. And in the case of Adam—the head and representative of the family of man—he gave him a unique and extraordinarily weighty opportunity: the opportunity to win eternal life for himself, his family, and the universe that was their home (Rom. 5:12ff). Once again there is no overstating the importance of this revelation. As we shall see in a moment, in this primordial test God was laying down the pattern and norm for his subsequent dealings with all mankind. We do well, then, to consider Adam's test with great care.

If we confine ourselves to the data of Genesis 2–3, the terms of the test were remarkably simple. God planted two trees in the Garden of Eden: The Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Implicitly, Adam had free access to the former. Explicitly, he was forbidden to partake of the latter, on penalty of death. Not having the benefit of NT revelation, there were many things he did not know. He did not know what would happen if he ate of the Tree of Life. He had no definite idea of what would happen if he ate of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. He apparently had no idea that his test would have consequences for his children and their world;

nor had he any idea about what those consequences would be. Also, he knew nothing of the redemptive plan that God would inaugurate in the event of his failure. All he knew was that God had set life and death before him, and that he was under strict orders to believe and obey God, thereby choosing life (Deut. 30:18–20).

In passing, and speaking as a retired pastor, I want to stress the relevance of these primordial facts for our own lives. The God of Adam is the God of all: a God who tests his people (Ps. 11:4; Jer. 17:10). Moreover, when his tests arrive, we, like Adam, do not fully know the consequences of our choices. We cannot fully see the blessings that faith and obedience will bring, or the tribulations that unbelief and disobedience will entail. In other words, it belongs to the very nature of God's tests that the full consequences of our decisions are hidden from view. Accordingly, when we are faced with a particular test, and when we are tempted to disbelieve or disobey God's Word, it would be wise to respond as Billy Graham counseled: "God said it, I believe it, that settles it!" If Adam had followed that good advice, our world would be a *very* different place today. Surely we are meant to learn from his mistake.

Guided by the fullness of divine revelation contained in the New Testament, Reformed theologians conclude that in the Garden of Eden, Adam stood with God in a *covenant of works*. A covenant is simply a binding agreement between parties. Covenants between God and man typically involve several key elements: two or more *parties*, a *promise* (offered by God), a *provision* (i.e., a divine gift that makes the covenant possible), a *proviso* (i.e., a condition that requires a choice on the part of man), and a *penalty* (in the event that man rejects or breaks the covenant). Once again, Genesis gives us no indication that God established a formal covenant with Adam, as he did, for example, with Abraham and Israel. Nevertheless, both Scripture and personal experience assure us that Adam was indeed involved in a covenant, that he *felt* himself to be in a covenant, and that at its heart this covenant was a *test*.

We know all this because all the elements of a covenant and a test were present. God (the initiator of the covenant) and Adam were the parties. So too, in a sense, were we; for according to the NT, Adam stood in Eden as our head and representative in this covenant of works (Rom. 5:12ff). The promise, though never explicitly declared, was eternal life, a promise awaiting Adam and his family at the Tree of Life (Rev. 2:7). The provision was the Tree itself. Or perhaps, as Watchman Nee liked to say, the provision was the *fruit* of the Tree of Life, which represented God's Son, "the receivable part of God." The proviso (or human work required by the covenant) was simple faith in God's Word, and obedience to it, both of which required Adam to choose. And the penalty for breaking this covenant was death: physical, spiritual, and eternal, under the wrath and retribution of God (Gen. 2:17). We saw above that man—by his very nature, and by the very nature of his relationship with a sovereign creator—was fitted for a test in God's act of creation. Here in Genesis 2–3 we see God putting him to it.

Very importantly, this test was not open-ended. As the NT makes clear, if Adam had freely eaten of the Tree of Life the Holy Spirit would have sealed him forever in the Son of God, beyond all possibility of sin and death (John 14:16; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 1:13). Perhaps, in due season, God himself would have brought the test to a close by personally ushering Adam and Eve to the Tree of Life, and there inviting them to partake of it. In any case, it is certain that their probation would not have gone on indefinitely.

How do we know this? We know it primarily from the example of Christ, who, in our behalf, retraced the footsteps both of Adam and of Israel. When Jesus was tested/tempted in the wilderness of Judea, he—serving as the Last Adam—took and passed the test that the first Adam had failed in Eden. And this test was finite, lasting only 40 days (Matt. 4:1–11). Similarly, when Jesus, throughout his entire life, lived in full compliance with the Mosaic Law, he, the perfect Israelite, took and passed the test that all Israel had failed. And this test was also finite, in his case lasting only 33 years (Gal. 4:4–5). Thus, from the example of Christ we learn that neither Adam's test, nor Israel's, was

open-ended. Moreover, from other NT texts we learn that our own test is not open-ended. As we shall see, it belongs essentially to the test of life that it is finite: that it *can* be passed, that it *will* be passed or failed, and that it will be passed or failed *in this life*.²

This brings us to our third and final point: The test of life that was made possible through creation—and illustrated in the case of Adam and Eve—was also *instituted* in the Garden of Eden. In other words, the biblical narrative of the probation of our original parents was meant to teach us that this is the pattern and norm for God's dealings with all his human creatures: All are born into a covenant of works, all are on probation, all must take the test of life.

It is true, of course, that Adam's fall damaged the souls of all his children, darkening and distorting their every faculty; and in the next chapter we will see how profoundly true this is. Nevertheless, both Scripture and personal experience assure us that the fall of man in Adam did not obliterate the image of God in man. In particular, just as it did not obliterate his other faculties, so too it did not obliterate his freedom: his ability—and his responsibility—to choose and choose well. If it had, there would be no point in God's reaching out to sinful man after the fall, for sinful man would have been wholly incapable of responding to him.³ But because man's freedom and responsibility were not obliterated—and because God was of a mind to show mercy and grace—he continued to interact with sinful mankind, appealing to their residual freedom with a view to their redemption.

The forms of this interaction have been fascinatingly diverse. As we see from Genesis 4 onward, God came to man—and still comes to man—in many different ways: by theophany, Christophany, angelic visitations, dreams, visions, miracles, and God's own self-disclosure through nature, the voice of conscience, the incarnation of his Son, the words of Scripture, and the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Very importantly, in every such case the pattern laid down in Eden can be seen: *Whenever and however God reveals himself to man, he puts him to the test.* We may not have the biblical vocabulary to express this. We may not understand the word “probation,” or be able to discourse

on the covenant of works. But all of us know that life really is a test. For in one way or another, at one time or another, God comes to all, promises all, invites all, commands all, and warns all—all in hopes that his free creatures will use their God-given faculties to discover, obey, and enjoy the truth about him and a friendship with him. Here is how the Apostle Paul expressed it to the Athenians:

Moreover, from one man he made every nation of the human race, and caused them to reside across the entire face of the earth, having ordained both their predetermined times and the precise boundaries of the places where they would live. He did this so that they would search for God, in hopes that they would reach out for him and find him, though he isn't far from each one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your own poets have said: 'For we too are his offspring.' (Acts 17:26–28)

What is God's heart as he reaches out to the nations through the Church and the proclamation of the gospel? Paul has given us a window through which we can see it clearly. God desires all men to respond to the wonderful ways in which he has revealed himself to them. He desires that they would seek spiritual truth and find it. He especially desires that they would behold the truth of the gospel, believe it, and obey it, thereby receiving forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life. In short, he desires them to take and pass the test of life so that they can spend eternity with him as his beloved children. This great truth is trumpeted throughout Scripture and resounds in all human life and history: "The refining pot is for silver, and the furnace is for gold; but the LORD tests hearts" (Prov. 17:3).

Summary

We have seen that the Bible gives us two different streams of divine revelation concerning God's saving activity in the world, two different ways of looking at it, two different paradigms or perspectives. The first is the Sovereignty Perspective, which depicts God as the One who in eternity past decreed all things, including the salvation of a

chosen people, and who now is bringing those things to pass by his all-controlling providence. The second is the Test Perspective, which depicts God as the One who reaches out to his sinful but beloved creatures in many different ways, desiring that they use their freedom well to examine the claims of Christ, discover that those claims are true, place their trust in the Savior, receive his free gifts of forgiveness and eternal life, and thereby pass the test of life.

It seems clear enough, then, that Scripture really does give us these two paradigms. But the question remains: How shall we relate to them, especially in light of the fact that they seem mutually exclusive to our finite and fallen minds? We have already seen that there is a natural tendency in many of us (and probably in all of us) to gravitate to one or the other, to emphasize one or the other, and possibly even to deny important biblical truths associated with one or the other. For example, theologians who self-identify as Open Theists deny that God has decreed all things, that he foreknows all events, and that by his providence he is in ultimate control of free human choices, whether good or evil. On the other hand, some Calvinists deny that God has given man a free will; or that he loves those who are not elect; or that he sincerely desires all people to be saved; or that it is the positive duty of non-Christians to repent and trust in Christ for salvation; or that Christians should impress this duty upon non-Christians with gentleness and respect.

Good Bereans, familiar with the whole counsel of God, understand that none of these unbiblical paths take us to the solution of our problem. But is there a path that does?

J. I. Packer on the Antinomies of Scripture

To my mind, brother J. I. Packer has pointed the way. Here, at some length, are his thoughts on *antinomies*, and in particular on the biblical antinomy of God's sovereignty and man's freedom and responsibility. They are most helpful for bringing the Golden Strand into full view.

What is an antinomy? An antinomy exists when a pair of principles stands side by side, seemingly irreconcilable, yet both undeniable. There are cogent reasons for believing each of them. Each rests on clear and solid evidence. But it is a mystery to you how they can be squared with each other. You see that each must be true on its own, but you don't see how they can both be true together.

[As opposed to a paradox] an antinomy is neither dispensable nor comprehensible. It is not a figure of speech, but an observed relation between two statements of fact. It is not deliberately manufactured; it is forced upon us by the facts themselves. It is unavoidable and it is insoluble. We do not invent it, and we cannot explain it. Nor is there any way to get rid of it, save by falsifying the very facts that led us to it.

What should one do, then, with an antinomy? Please note the following:

1. Accept it for what it is and learn to live with it.
2. Refuse to regard the apparent inconsistency as real. Put down the semblance of contradiction to the deficiency of your own understanding. Think of the two principles as, not rival alternatives, but, in some way that at present you do not grasp, complementary to each other.
3. Be careful, therefore, neither to set them at loggerheads, nor to make deductions from either that would cut across the other. Such deductions would, for that very reason, certainly be unsound.
4. Use each within the limits of its own sphere of reference; that is, the area delimited by the evidence from which the principle has been drawn.
5. Note what connections exist between the two truths and their two frames of reference, and teach yourself to think of reality in a way that provides for their peaceful coexistence, remembering that reality itself has proved actually to contain them both.

[All] this is easily said, but the thing is not easily done, for our minds dislike antinomies. We like to tie up everything into neat intellectual parcels, with all appearance of mystery dispelled, and no loose ends hanging out. Hence we are tempted to rid our minds of antinomies by illegitimate means: to suppress, or jettison, one truth in the supposed interests of the other, and for the sake of a tidier theology. So it is in the present case. The temptation is to undercut and maim the one truth by the way in which we stress the other: to assert man's responsibility in a way that excludes God from being sovereign, or to affirm God's sovereignty in a way that destroys the responsibility of man. Both mistakes need to be guarded against.

We ought not in any case to be surprised when we find mysteries of this sort in God's Word that are incomprehensible to his creatures. A God whom we could understand exhaustively, and whose revelation of himself confronted us with no mysteries whatsoever, would be a God in man's image, and therefore an imaginary God, not the God of the Bible at all. For what the God of the Bible says is this: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways... As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Is. 55:8).⁴

Again, I find this approach to our subject extremely illuminating, helpful, and hopeful. With reference to our journey so far, let me sum up and apply Packer's main ideas.

We have come upon two biblical paradigms for God's redemptive dealings with mankind: the Sovereignty Perspective and the Test Perspective. They constitute an antinomy. Here God has given us "... a pair of principles that stand side by side, seemingly irreconcilable, yet both undeniable." How are we to live with them?

Negatively, there are certain things we *should not* do. We should not view them as rivals. We should not try to suppress or jettison one truth in the supposed interests of the other. We should not make

deductions from either one that would “cut across” the other. We should not yield to the tendency of our finite and sinful minds to dislike this antinomy, and so fight against it by “. . . trying to tie up everything into neat intellectual parcels, with all appearance of mystery dispelled and no loose ends hanging out.”

Positively, there are certain things we *should* do. We should accept the antinomy and learn to live with it. We should view the two poles of the antinomy as complementing one another, rather than opposing one another. And perhaps most importantly, *we should teach and train ourselves to think of reality in a way that provides for their peaceful coexistence, always remembering that reality itself has proved actually to contain them both.* For if we can do this, and if we choose to do it, would not Calvinists and Arminians find themselves seated together around the biblical table of the Lord, joyfully feasting with him?

In sum, we should honor God by gratefully receiving both streams of his divine revelation on the subject of salvation, and by exploring and walking in the practical implications of both. As we do this, we should also acknowledge the limitations and propensities of our finite and fallen minds. We should humbly bow before the wisdom, goodness, and inscrutability of the infinite God. As Spurgeon so well said, we should make inscrutable mysteries into footstools for faith to kneel upon.

Pitfalls and Perils, Balance and Blessing

Keeping brother Packer’s admonitions in mind, let us return for a moment to the Golden Coin. It has a vital lesson to teach us: With respect to the two biblical paradigms of salvation, *both sides of the coin are equally important.* Like love and marriage, you can’t have one without the other. Somehow in the great scheme of things they belong together, complement one another, and *balance* one another. As we’ve just seen, it will take some serious effort on our part to keep them in balance.

And yet the effort is well worthwhile, for by maintaining proper balance we will receive and enjoy the benefits of both perspectives.

God has important lessons to teach us in the Sovereignty Perspective, lessons that are vital for our spiritual formation and health. But God also has lessons to teach us in the Test Perspective, and these too are vital for our spiritual formation and health. The Golden Coin helps us to understand this. Unlike God, we cannot see both sides of the redemptive coin at once. We can, however, see the importance of acknowledging both sides and keeping them in good balance. What's more, we can see that this is the only path to full spiritual health, safety, and blessing.

Now let's begin to make this practical by focusing once again on the Doctrines of Grace. Christians who embrace these doctrines tell us—correctly, I think—that they are meant to supply God's people with essential spiritual truths and benefits. For example, they reveal to us a wise, powerful, and all-controlling God who, in every circumstance of life, is working for the good of his people (Rom. 8:28). They reveal that in eternity past he freely set his redeeming love upon them, and predestined them to be conformed to the image of his beloved Son. They also reveal that in the great corridor of universal history this same God actually redeemed them through the earthly work of Christ, infallibly called (or will call) them to saving faith in Christ, and faithfully preserved (or will preserve) them in Christ until the day of their death or the return of the Lord. Such a God, with such a purpose, plan, power, and commitment to his people must himself be an ever-flowing fountain of assurance, comfort, stability, gratitude, praise, and worship amidst the trials and temptations of life in the howling wilderness of this present evil age.

That is the upside of the Sovereignty Perspective. But great as its blessings may be, we dare not forget the importance of balance. For suppose now that a spiritual seeker, or a new Christian, focuses more or less exclusively on the Sovereignty Perspective, thereby neglecting the many other biblical texts giving him the Test Perspective. Henceforth, pitfalls and perils abound. For what if a sensitive or emotionally damaged seeker simply cannot believe that God loves him or would ever choose him? What if such a Christian thought for a little while

that God had chosen him, but now—because of his chronic struggles with the world, the flesh, and the devil—has concluded that he is not elect after all, but has surely fallen away (Matt. 13:21)? What if older Christians, mesmerized by the truth of divine sovereignty, become fatalistic, passive, disengaged, proud, contemptuous, or forgetful of God’s love, mercy, grace, and goodness to all people, including those who (for the moment) are his enemies (Matt. 5:43–48)? In short, what if the Doctrines of Grace, through an unhealthy emphasis upon the Doctrines of Grace, become doctrines of despair or destruction?⁵

Here is where the Golden Coin proves its great worth, for it immediately enables us to see the biblical antidote to all such perils and pitfalls. In the case of folks who have gazed too long at the Sovereignty Perspective, all that is necessary is to take a fresh look at the other side of the coin: the countless biblical texts that give us the Test Perspective. For as soon as they immerse themselves in these, they realize that as mysterious as God’s sovereignty is, *it cannot possibly cancel the validity of his own teachings, promises, exhortations, warnings, and encouragements, or the power and importance of our own free-will responses to them.* If it did, why would God say such things as often, as passionately, and as sincerely as he so evidently does?

It will serve us well to pause for a moment and hear him speak to us in some of these ways:

- The LORD God commanded the man, saying, “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.” (Genesis 2:16–17)
- And the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering he had no regard. So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell. Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? But if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it.” (Genesis 4:4–7)

IN SEARCH OF THE GOLDEN STRAND

- “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the LORD your God, by obeying his voice, and by holding close to him; for this is your life and the length of your days, so that you may live in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them.” (Deuteronomy 30:19–20)
- “If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.” (Joshua 24:15)
- Does not wisdom call out, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights overlooking the road, at the cross-roads she takes her stand. Beside the gates to the city, at the entrances she cries out: “To you, O men, I call out, and my cry is to the sons of men. Simple ones, learn to be shrewd; O fools, gain understanding. Listen, for I speak of noble things, and the opening of my lips will reveal right . . . Now therefore, my sons, listen to me, for blessed are those who keep my ways. Listen to instruction and be wise; do not ignore it. Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at the posts of my doorway. For whoever finds me finds life and obtains the favor of the LORD; but he who fails to find me [or, sins against me] harms himself; all who hate me love death.” (Proverbs 8:1–6, 32–36 BSB)
- “Come now, and let us reason together,” says the LORD, “Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool.” (Isaiah 1:18 BSB)
- “Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk

without money and without cost. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourself in abundance. Incline your ear and come to me. Listen, that you may live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, according to the faithful mercies shown to David.” (Isaiah 55:1–3)

- “You will seek me and find me when you search for me with all your heart.” (Jeremiah 29:13)
- “Keep on asking, and it will be given to you; keep on seeking, and you will find; keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Or what man among you, if his son asks him for some bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks him for a fish, will he give him a snake? If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matthew 7:7–11)
- “Come to me, all who are weary and loaded down, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my load is light.” (Matthew 11:28–30)
- So Jesus answered them and said, “My teaching is not mine, but belongs to him who sent me. If anyone desires to do his will, he will know whether the teaching comes from God, or whether I am speaking from myself.” (John 7:16–17)
- And with many other words [Peter] solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation!” (Acts 2:40)

- “See, I’ve been standing at the door, knocking! If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him; and I will dine with him, and he with me.” (Revelation 3:20)
- The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come. Let the one who so desires take the water of life without cost. (Revelation 22:17)

These powerful texts must be taken seriously. In every one of them we hear the voice of the God of Truth—of the God who cannot lie—giving altogether sincere and dependable promises to anyone who will honestly respond to them. Whatever else God’s absolute sovereignty over all things might mean, it cannot mean that his heartfelt personal overtures to us—or our freely chosen responses to them and to him—count for nothing.

Now, it is important to add here that we can easily imagine a similar scenario involving folks who place too much emphasis on the Test Perspective, and not enough on the Sovereignty Perspective. In the case of spiritual seekers, the perils and pitfalls are relatively few, since the God-given teachings, invitations, promises, exhortations, and warnings found in the Test Perspective are perfectly calculated to engage their freedom, stir up a diligent pursuit of the truth about God, and bring them to Christ.

But now suppose that a seeker has indeed come to Christ but remains ignorant or neglectful of the Sovereignty Perspective, or even opposes himself to it. Here again the pitfalls and perils abound. For suppose that he becomes proud, believing that he is smarter, or better, or more diligent than his non-Christian neighbor. Suppose that he becomes compulsive, believing that his neighbor can (and must) be won to the faith by the sheer force of his prayers, testimony, apologetic skill, and constant nagging. Suppose that he becomes angry when his neighbor starts to avoid him or asks that he stop talking to him about God. Suppose that he feels chronically guilty for having failed to convert his neighbor. Suppose that he fears specific people will go

to hell because of his failure to witness to them, or to witness enough, or to witness skillfully enough. Finally, suppose that for wise reasons the Lord temporarily withdraws from him the sense of his nearness, so that now he finds himself face to face with the appalling presence, power, and promptings of residual sin in his flesh. Suppose that he yields to some of these promptings and experiences moral failure. And suppose that in the midst of his dreadfully dark night of the soul, this poor brother finally concludes that he has lost his salvation once and for all. On all these suppositions, what is he to do?

The answer comes from topmost heights of the city, where the Sovereignty Perspective continually cries out: “Whoever has drunk too deeply from the well of the Test Perspective, let him turn in here!”

Spying the Golden Strand

As I bring this chapter to a close I want to keep the gold but change the metaphor.

Think for a moment about Panama and Costa Rica. If you inspect these Central American countries on Google Earth, you will see that they look like a green gecko asleep on a deep blue carpet. This sinuous little strip of land is bounded on one side by the Caribbean Sea, or, if you take the long view, the Atlantic Ocean. On the other side is the vast Pacific. Now, using this lovely green strand as our template, let us imagine a golden one.

On the eastern side of the Golden Strand there is an ocean of divine revelation that gives us the Sovereignty Perspective. Looking out upon it we behold all the biblical texts stating or implying that in the great theater of universal history we see nothing less than the providential outworking of God’s eternal purposes, plans, and decrees. In this Ocean we also behold a smaller sea of texts giving us the Doctrines of Grace. These highlight the sovereignty of God with respect to the salvation of sinners. Here we learn about unconditional election in Christ, about particular redemption through the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ, about an irresistible grace that effectually calls the elect to Christ, and about the divine preservation of the elect in Christ until

the day of their death or the return of the Lord. This ocean and this sea give us the Sovereignty Perspective. These are the waters in which our Calvinist brothers delight to swim. Here we have the Calvinistic side of the Golden Strand.

But that is only half the story. For on the western side of the Golden Strand there is another ocean, an ocean of divine revelation that gives us the Test Perspective. Looking out on it we learn that God created us in his own image and likeness, gave us the twin gifts of freedom and responsibility, and along with them the opportunity to freely love, please, and glorify him. We learn that in Eden it pleased God to place our father Adam on probation, to test him, to see if he would use his freedom well by responding to him in faith and obedience. And we learn that this test set a precedent and established a pattern according to which God, throughout all subsequent history, would continue to test the children of Adam, primarily through his self-revelation in nature, conscience, Christ, and Holy Scripture.

We also learn that within this vast ocean there is a smaller but very special sea of divine revelation pertaining to the Person and Work of Christ. Here we learn that in the last days—the days in which we ourselves are now privileged to live—it has pleased God to test the whole world through the gospel. To this end he sends out his people, the Church, to every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. Their mission is to proclaim the great revealed truths of creation, fall, and redemption in Christ. Their mission is to explain that forgiveness of sins and eternal life are gifts of God; that they are not received through works of righteousness that we have done, but through the all-sufficient work of God's incarnate Son, whose righteous life and atoning death secure these gifts for all who will put their faith in him. Their mission is to declare that the gospel is God's supreme test, and the one test towards which all other tests incline. And their mission is to urge all who hear the gospel to take this test: to consider the claims of Christ, to examine the many strands of God-given evidence that support those claims, and, upon discovering the truth of those claims, to repent of their sin and trust in the one and only Savior of the world: the Lord Jesus Christ.

This ocean and this special gospel sea give us the Test Perspective. These are the waters in which our Arminian brothers love to swim. Here we have the Arminian side of the Golden Strand.

And so, at long last, we have spied the Golden Strand, whole and entire. Nevertheless, our journey has only begun. For now, standing squarely upon the Golden Strand, we must look again at the Doctrines of Grace from this new vantage point. In other words, we must look closely at the Doctrines of Grace both from the Sovereignty Perspective and the Test Perspective. My goal in doing so will be to help Christians enjoy the manifold blessings of these five doctrines, while at the same time avoiding the perils and pitfalls to which they can give rise. Similarly, my goal in this discussion will also be to help Christians walk in the manifold blessings of the Test Perspective, while at the same time avoiding the perils and pitfalls to which it can give rise.

In the challenging journey ahead you will see that I have made it my special ambition to interact honestly and winsomely with the faith of my Arminian brothers. I want them to know that even if I cannot agree with all of their doctrinal formulations, I do indeed understand their concerns, take seriously their arguments, appreciate their emphases, and have incorporated into my own thinking many of the biblical truths that are dear to their hearts. Accordingly, my hope is that when we have finished our journey, all of us—whether Calvinist or Arminian—will find ourselves living, serving, worshiping, and rejoicing together well on the Golden Strand.

PART II

THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE:
A VIEW FROM THE
GOLDEN STRAND

CHAPTER 3

TOTAL DEPRAVITY

WELCOME TO PART II OF OUR JOURNEY TO THE GOLDEN Strand. Before heading out, I want to offer a few introductory words about the five lengthy chapters ahead.

My goal in these chapters is to take a scripturally balanced look at the Doctrines of Grace. Each chapter will be divided into four parts, though on occasion the order of discussion will vary.

We'll begin by taking a close look at the Big Idea. That is, we'll define the doctrine under discussion, interact with a few key Scriptures commonly used to support and illuminate it, and then address the main objections raised against it.

Next, we'll explore the Spiritual Benefits of the doctrine. The goal here is to consider *why* it pleased God to reveal this truth to us. How is it meant to affect our understanding, our affections, our behavior, our participation in the mission of the Church, and our worship?

Following this, we'll address what I call the Balancing Factors. Here the goal is to honor the insights and emphases of our Arminian brothers. In this section we'll look closely at how the Test Perspective enables us to hold the doctrine under discussion in a proper biblical balance, thereby ensuring that we enjoy all of its intended benefits.

Finally, we'll take a closer look at the Biblical Basis of the doctrine. My approach here is simply to cite a largish number of biblical texts that teach or support the doctrine in view. However, in this section I will also include, *in italics*, a number of other texts that address the

subject from the Test Perspective. This will further remind us to keep the doctrine in balance, and will again honor the insights and emphases of our Arminian brethren.

My hope is that by the end of this journey good Bereans of every persuasion will have humbly examined the Doctrines of Grace beneath the light of both the Sovereignty and Test Perspectives. My further hope is that when we have, we shall all be found living together well on the Golden Strand.

Let us begin our journey with a discussion of total depravity.

1. The Big Idea

The first doctrine of grace is total depravity. In some ways I wish it weren't, for by launching here in our thinking about salvation we focus immediately on man's sin rather than on God's goodness and his love for all his human creatures. The biblical order of things is: a good God, a good creation, a wise test, a bad decision, a bad fall into evil, suffering, and death, and a good redeemer stepping in to save. If we keep this order in mind as we think about the Doctrines of Grace we shall do well.

Nevertheless, for the Calvinist at least, there is reason enough to start the discussion with total depravity. Part of that reason is historical. Arminius and his followers made man's free will the centerpiece of their system. Yes, they confessed that fallen man's will is bound by sin. But they also taught that in the case of those who hear the gospel, God grants a "prevenient grace." That is, he first comes to the sinner, awakens him to his need of Christ, and thereby brings him to the point where he is now free to choose Christ. But in all such bringing, they said, God will never violate the sinner's free will. For the Arminian, man's "freed will" is sacrosanct. God will appeal to it, but will never force or manipulate it. In the end the sinner's eternal destiny is in his own hands. This is the first and most fundamental point of Arminianism, the premise and axiom of Arminian soteriology.

Here, then, is one reason why total depravity had to be the first doctrine of grace, the first point of Calvinism. For in their reading of

Scripture the Calvinists concluded that sinful man's will—just like the rest of his faculties—is so thoroughly “depraved” (i.e., dominated by sin) that it will *never* choose Christ apart from a continual gracious work of the Spirit of God. Thus, for the Calvinist, totally depraved man is free from sin only when the Spirit of God is in total control. It is only in being a slave to Christ that sinful man finds himself free at last.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. To see more clearly the crux of this debate we first must think as deeply as we can about the expression *total depravity*. What exactly does it mean? By way of response, we'll begin by carefully defining *depravity*, and then go on to examine the various senses in which it is said to be *total*.

Depravity

The Latin root for the word *depraved* means “completely crooked.” In a way, this makes the expression *total depravity* redundant. A totally depraved person is someone who is *totally completely crooked*. People who believe that man is “basically good” will profit from considering this basic definition.

How exactly did mankind become totally depraved? The biblical answer is: God made man upright, but when Adam disobeyed in Eden, God's Spirit withdrew from him, sin entered the world, and he became totally and completely crooked (Eccl. 7:29). And because Adam's sin was imputed (credited) to his offspring, so too has his sinful nature been imparted to them (Rom 5:12-21). Thus, all have been sold under sin (Rom. 7:14). All are conceived in sin (Ps. 51:5). All, by nature, are sinners (Eph. 2:15). From birth, by nature, and apart from the gracious operations of God's Spirit, all are totally and completely crooked.

We can look at this crookedness in two ways. Viewed negatively, depravity means that man is no longer what he was meant to be and what he should be. In particular, it means that God is not the living center of his personality, filling and controlling all of his faculties. As Isaiah might describe the situation, “The whole head is sick, the whole heart faint” (Is. 1:5). Man's understanding (Eph. 4:18), affections (John 5:42), conscience (1 Cor. 8:7; 1 Tim. 4:2), and will (John 3:20)

are all diseased, damaged, and broken. Viewed “positively,” depravity means that man is now controlled by dark and alien enemies introduced at the fall: the world, the flesh, and the devil. With reference to the flesh—the enemy within—fallen man is dominated by radical self-centeredness, pride, various forms of lust, and an innate hostility towards God. As we shall see later, many biblical texts graphically depict the profound and variegated depravity of all human beings.

Total Depravity

What exactly do we mean when we say that man’s depravity is *total*? This is a crucial question since at first glance it hardly seems accurate to describe all mankind as totally depraved. Yes, our world has its share of moral monsters: vicious dictators, mass murderers, sexual predators, etc. But in our day-to-day experience we often meet with conscientious, generous, and self-sacrificing neighbors. Can we really say that they/we *all* are totally depraved?

Scripture responds to this question by teaching us that (unregenerate) man’s depravity is total in three different senses.

First, it is *all-pervasive*. That is, every part of us—our total being—is radically distorted and (to one degree or another) controlled by sin. This includes our body as well as our soul. And with reference to the soul, it includes our every faculty. Giving us a feel for just how pervasive our depravity is, the Apostle Paul writes, “For at one time we ourselves were also foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another” (Titus 3:3). Many similar texts could be cited, showing how sin infects and dominates every faculty of the natural, unregenerate man (Rom. 1:28ff; 1 Cor. 2:14).

Secondly, depravity is *intrinsic* to the nature of fallen man, whereas the good that we see in sinners is *extrinsic*: It is an undeserved gift given by the gracious God. In other words, *in principle* fallen man really is totally depraved; he really is as bad as he could possibly be. If in fact he is not, it is because God, in his goodness and grace, is secretly operating in his soul, restraining the outbreak of

innate evil, and depositing whatever kinds and degrees of goodness we may find therein.

But what if God were to withdraw his Spirit altogether? What would unregenerate man look like then? Well, as a matter of fact this happened in the days of Noah. As it is written, “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5). In our day something similar occurred under communism in Russia and China, and under fascism during World War II. And Scripture warns us that at the end of the present evil age it will happen one final time:

For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, empty braggarts, contemptuous, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, lacking natural affection, irrec-
oncilable, slanderers, devoid of self-control, fierce, hostile to
what is good, traitors, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers
of pleasure rather than lovers of God, maintaining a form
of piety but denying its power. (2 Timothy 3:2–7)

But most impressive on this score are the words of our Lord himself, who, in addressing the subject of defilement, did not look to the past or the future, but rather to the true source of every historical manifestation of total depravity: the (unregenerate) human heart.

And he said to them, “Are you then also without understanding? Don’t you realize that whatever enters a man from the outside cannot make him unclean, since it doesn’t enter his heart, but first goes into his stomach and afterwards into the latrine?” (In saying this, Jesus was declaring all foods clean.) Then he went on to say, “It is what comes out of a man that makes him unclean. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, sexual immoralities, thefts, murders, adulteries, covetings, malicious deeds, deceit, unbridled lust, an evil eye, abusive speech, pride, and foolishness. All these evils come from within and make the man unclean.” (Mark 7:18–20)

This is not a flattering picture of human nature. It is, however, an accurate picture of man's intrinsic depravity. And the Apostle Paul agrees with it. Writing to the Roman Christians, he laments, "I know that within me, that is within my flesh [i.e., within my intrinsic, unregenerate nature], there dwells no good thing" (Rom. 7:18). All who strive for purity of heart know from painful personal experience how true this is (Matt. 5:8).

Common Grace

Since this notion of intrinsic human depravity is so scandalous to the natural man, we do well to think for a moment about what theologians refer to as "common grace." This may be defined as the unmerited favor that God bestows on *all* his sinful human creatures simply because he is good and kind and pleased to bless them (and thereby test them). Such blessings may include outward physical benefits such as good health, good looks, a large family, bountiful crops, a successful business, etc. More importantly, they may also include spiritual benefits such as intelligence, creativity, a good sense of humor, a delight in the arts, kindness, generosity, diligence, courage, self-sacrifice, and more. All such gifts come from above and are manifestations of God's common grace (James 1:17).

The Scriptures are full of this revelation. The Psalmist writes, "The LORD is good to all, and his mercies are over all his works" (Ps. 145:9).

Urging his disciples to show indiscriminate love and kindness, the Lord Jesus declared,

"But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be seen as sons of your Father in heaven; for he causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." (Matthew 5:44–45)

Similarly, when reasoning with the citizens of Iconium, Paul said,

"In generations past he let all the nations walk in their own ways; yet he never left himself without a witness, doing you

TOTAL DEPRAVITY

good by giving you rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, and by satisfying you with food and filling your hearts with gladness.” (Acts 14:16–17)

So then: Even though mankind is intrinsically depraved, he is rarely as bad as he can possibly be. Why? Because of the common grace of God at work in all human beings. If we will thank him for it, we will enjoy more of it. If not, he will withdraw it so that we can see afresh how intrinsically depraved we really are. And how dangerous as well. As it is written:

Now while he was in Jerusalem during the Feast of the Passover, many believed in his name when they beheld the miraculous signs he was performing. But as for Jesus, he would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all men, and because he had no need that anyone should tell him about man, for he himself knew what was in man. (John 2:23–25)

This brings us to our third and final point, namely that human depravity is *enslaving*. Again, our focus here is on the unregenerate man; on man in his sin. The idea here is that apart from the operations of God’s grace, man’s sin is in *total* control.

The Scriptures on this subject are both numerous and compelling. Let us hear first from the Lord himself:

Then Jesus went on to say to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” They answered him, “We are Abraham’s seed and have never been enslaved to anyone! How then can you say, ‘You will become free?’” Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone engaged in sin is a slave of sin; and a slave does not remain in the household forever, but a son remains forever. If then the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:31–36)

Later on, the Apostle Paul reminds Christians of this same truth:

What then? Shall we go on sinning because we're not under law, but under grace? God forbid! Don't you realize that when you constantly present yourselves as slaves to someone for obedience, you are the slaves of the one you obey: whether of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you once were slaves of sin, you obeyed from the heart that form of teaching to which you were entrusted; and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. (I am speaking here in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh.) For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now you must present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification. (Romans 6:15–19)

Here is fallen man's total slavery to sin, a slavery that automatically places him in further subjection, both to the fallen world-system and its fallen ruler, the devil. Accordingly, we find the Apostle John declaring, "We know that we are from God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). But John's thought here is simply an echo of what his Master had taught him earlier: Unless the omnipotent rescuer of souls graciously comes and plunders the strong man's goods, all men are the unwitting property and slaves of the powerful enemy of their souls (Matt. 12:29).

Spiritual Inability

Passages like these underlie a closely related doctrine that is crucial to the Calvinistic understanding of man in sin: *spiritual inability*. In a way the idea here is quite simple: Apart from God's grace, man's understanding is so darkened, his conscience so hardened, and his affections so centered upon himself instead of his creator and would-be redeemer, that he *cannot* come to Christ for salvation. Yes, sinful man is *aware* of God (Rom. 1:18f), and this awareness is central to the test of life. But apart from God's grace there is nothing in him that is *alive* towards God: nothing in him that knows God as he ought to be

known, or fears him as he ought to be feared, or loves and desires him as he ought to be loved and desired. Apart from the gift of grace there is nothing in sinful man that inclines him to go God's way rather than his own way. Therefore, unless he is *enabled* to do so, he is *unable* to do so.

Many biblical texts are designed to teach and illustrate the spiritual inability of the unregenerate man. This is why Ezekiel likens God's pre-conversion elect to a valley full of dead men's bones: The "very dry" bones bespeak very dead souls (Ezek. 37). It is why unregenerate man may be likened to Jesus' friend Lazarus, who, at the gracious word of the Lord of life, came forth from the dead (John 11:1–44). It is why our Lord said that unless a man is born again he cannot see or enter the Kingdom of God (John 3:3–5). It is why the Apostle Paul said that prior to the effusion of God's saving grace, all Christians were "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). And it is why he said that the mind of the unregenerate person "... does not subject itself to God's law [or gospel], and is not even able to do so" (Rom. 8:7–8). Such texts explain why total depravity and spiritual inability are understood as doctrines of grace. They teach us that by nature we are spiritually destitute. They show us that we stand in desperate need of God's saving grace. And they orient us towards the only One who can give us that grace. As the Lord Jesus said, "With man it is impossible; but with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:23–26).

An Island of Absolute Autonomy?

Again, thoughtful Arminians will agree with all or most of the above. They will confess that apart from God's "prevenient grace" no sinner can or will come to Christ. But then they go on to say that when at last a sinner is under the influence of prevenient grace, his will becomes absolutely free, autonomous, and sacrosanct, so much so that God himself will not violate or influence it. The sinner is now wholly and totally free to choose Christ or not.

Here the Calvinist feels compelled to disagree. Why? Because he believes that his Arminian brother has created a metaphysical fiction: an island of absolute human autonomy that somehow falls outside of

the plans, purposes, and providence of the absolutely sovereign God. Indeed, Arminians have created an island of autonomy that can *overthrow* the plans and purposes of the absolutely sovereign God.

The Scriptures themselves give rise to the Calvinist's concerns, and this on two scores.

First, it is written that the sovereign God is in ultimate control of all the decisions of all his free creatures, whether of men or angels. As we saw earlier, God's providence is "meticulous," extending to every event in the universe. Thus, man is indeed free, but—as R. C. Sproul liked to say—God is most free.¹ Man's freedom is real, but controlled by God. God's freedom is real but controlled by no one. How his control works, we do not understand. The Scriptures tell us that his hand is involved, yet in such a way that man remains free and responsible, while God remains spotlessly holy (Ezek. 38:4; Acts 4:28). It is baffling to the human mind.

"But," says the Calvinist, "this much is clear: Man's freedom cannot cancel God's sovereignty. Has God said that he *will* bring his people from the east, and gather them from the west (Is. 43:5–7)? Has Christ said that he *will* build his Church (Matt. 16:18)? Has he also said that his sheep *will* hear his voice, and that they *will* become one flock with one shepherd (John 10:16)? If so, then surely there is no wisdom, understanding, plan, or island of absolute human autonomy that can stand against the sovereign LORD" (Prov. 21:30).

Secondly, it is written that man's freedom is also controlled by his own nature. As Jesus said, the mouth speaks from that which fills the heart (Matt. 12:34). The same is true of the will: It *chooses* from that which fills the heart. In other words, a man's choices are always determined by what he loves, and what he loves is always determined by who and what he is: by what we call his nature or character. Thus, apart from the influences of God's grace, the unregenerate man is free only to love and choose sin, for by nature and character he is a slave to the sin he loves. Similarly, apart from the (detested) influences of residual sin in his members, the regenerate man is free only to love and serve the Lord, for because of his new nature and character he is

now a slave to the Lord he loves. As it is written, “But thanks be to God that though you once were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed; and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness” (Rom. 6:17).

We learn, then, from Scripture that at no time is a man’s will ever an island of absolute autonomy. And this includes that holy and happy time when the Spirit of God enables a sinner to come to Christ. As our Lord himself said, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him . . . Apart from me, you can do nothing” (John 6:44, 15:5).

2. The Spiritual Benefits

What is true of every biblical doctrine is true of the doctrine of total depravity: It is both edifying and encouraging. Here are some of the reasons why.

First, it is a great comfort to know that something really is *wrong* with us; that something is there that shouldn’t be there; and that God has named it and told us how it got there. Such knowledge, which belongs essentially to the biblical worldview, is a comfort because it immediately persuades us that the omnipotent God who has named and explained what’s wrong is certainly able—and may be willing—to make it right.

On this score, other worldviews do not fare well. For example, if you are a serious evolutionary atheist you assume that what folks traditionally call “evil impulses” and “evil deeds” are part and parcel of our genetic inheritance from our animal ancestors. You therefore deduce that it is folly to attach value judgments to such things: to assert that this attitude is “wrong” or that action is “right.” No, they simply are what they are. Accordingly, the best we can hope for going forward is to let the scientists manipulate our brains, and the psychologists modify our behaviors, thereby tweaking human evolution as best we can, thereby making things as prosperous and pleasant as we

can, thereby endowing our meaningless and troubled human existence with a modicum of comfort until the bitter end.

If, however, you are a biblical theist—wonderful to tell—all sorts of hopeful prospects suddenly come into view. Yes, I now see that I am deeply depraved: infected with the sin of my original parents, and much inclined to further the disaster by choosing to yield to my sin. That's the bad news. But there is good news as well. For now I also see that my depravity is actually a judgment of God on Adam's sin, and on my own as well. But if my depravity is a judgment from the hand of a wise, good, and merciful God, perhaps this same God would be willing to heal me of my depravity. Perhaps I can be cured once and for all of this dreadful terminal disease, and restored once and for all to perfect spiritual and physical health. This is how the doctrine of total depravity hides within its dark bosom a bright and winsome ray of hope.

Secondly, the doctrine of total depravity helps us take our sinfulness seriously. Even in Christian circles—not to mention atheistic and pantheistic circles—there is a tendency to downplay and trivialize the presence, power, and penalty of sin. We speak soothingly of our brokenness, mistakes, blind spots, dark sides, and pesky inner demons, rather than urgently and plaintively about our consuming pride, lust, rebellion, and a deep-seated hostility to our thrice-holy Creator, Ruler, and Judge (Is. 6:1–5; Rev. 4:8). But it is actually a great blessing to see our sin and take it seriously, for when God grants us the vision, we immediately learn to flee to the only One who can heal it: the One who took it upon himself, and then died a hellacious death to rid us of it. A true look at our sinful selves is an absolute precondition for a saving look at the holy God and his holy Christ (Luke 5:8; John 16:8–11; Acts 2:37, 16:30).

Finally, the doctrine of total depravity actually gives us an intoxicating glimpse of all that man was meant to be, and of all that he can be, if and when he turns to God in Christ for spiritual rebirth: for complete spiritual re-creation. Yes, the biblical revelation of man's total depravity, rightly understood, teaches us that man, at the very core of

his being, is hostile—indeed, hateful—towards God. But appalling as the thought is, it too is laden with hope. Listen to these words of Christ to the hostile Pharisees, and hear the hope in them:

“I do not receive honor from men; but I know you, that you do not have the love of God within you. I have come in my Father’s name, and you are not welcoming me; if another comes in his own name, him you will welcome. How can you believe when you receive glory from one another, yet fail to seek the glory that comes from the only God?” (John 5:41–44)

Here the Great Physician diagnoses the deadly disease that afflicts all mankind: Instead of love for God as the driving force of human existence, there is now a perverse love for ourselves, together with an all-consuming desire to exalt ourselves instead of our God. Our “completely crooked” bent is to glorify the creature instead of the creator (Rom. 1:25). But again, observe the note of hope hidden in Christ’s words. For what if God were to give us a new heart, such that henceforth he might progressively deliver us from our radical self-centeredness. What if he began enabling us to love him who *is* love, just as we were created to do, and just as we ought to do? What if, through the work of the Spirit, we began to experience the Son’s love for the Father, and the Father’s love for the Son, dwelling at the core of our being and slowly infiltrating our every faculty? What if this amazing trinitarian love became the hidden rule of our affections and the secret driver of our choices? Yes, sinners that we are, all of this may seem barely imaginable. Yet such is the hope that God offers to every totally depraved person who will turn to his Son, and who will allow Christ to teach him how to walk through the world as he did: loving God, glorifying God, and striving to make it possible for others to do the same.

3. The Balancing Factors

History proves that an unbalanced view of sinful man’s total depravity can give rise to dangerous misconceptions that will

confuse and discourage both seekers and saints. God gives us the Test Perspective to help us avoid them. Let us consider several of these misconceptions now.

First, total depravity does not mean that God does not love sinful man. Yes, Scripture affirms that man in Adam is under sin, wrath, condemnation, and the peril of eternal punishment (John 3:36; Rom. 5:12–20). There is no overstating the plight of the unregenerate man. But as we have seen in our discussion of common grace, God does not look down on sinners in wrath alone, but also in love and kindness. In some Calvinist circles there is a tendency to limit the love of God to his elect. Not only does Scripture refute this idea, it actually mandates that Christians themselves show love and kindness to all men, for the simple, all-important reason that God himself does the same:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be seen as sons of your Father in heaven; for he causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (Matt. 5:43–45, cf. 1 Cor. 9:22; Phil. 4:5; Titus 3:2)

I will have more to say about this crucial text later on.

Secondly, total depravity and spiritual inability do not mean that sinful man is not free. Yes, the Sovereignty Perspective teaches us that God’s freedom is absolute, whereas man’s is contingent and controlled. But in a mystery, the Test Perspective affirms that man’s freedom is nevertheless real and of great consequence, both for time and eternity. We discussed this earlier. The fall of man in Adam did not obliterate the image of God in his sinful children. Like all the rest of their faculties, their freedom is damaged, but not destroyed. Indeed, so real is their residual freedom that the God of providence continually appeals to it through his self-revelation in nature, conscience, Christ, and Scripture. Moreover, *from within the Test Perspective* we see that our Arminian brothers are indeed correct: Man’s freedom is sacrosanct. God’s Spirit will strive with us at great length, sometimes

by means of “severe mercies” through which he palpably beseeches us to turn back to him. Yet at no time, short of the moment of death, do we experience him violating our will (Gen. 6:3; 1 Cor. 14:32; Gal. 5:23). The Apostle Paul wrote to Philemon as follows: “But I was unwilling to do anything without your knowledge or consent, so that your kindness might not come as a result of compulsion, but rather of your own free will.” (Philem. 1:14). In a real sense, Paul’s way is God’s way in the world.^{2, 3}

These two caveats bring us to our third: Total depravity and spiritual inability do not cancel sinful man’s genuine opportunity, freedom, and responsibility to take and pass the gospel test. Such a misconception can only arise when we make the mistake of thinking that man’s depravity turns him into a mere animal, so thoroughly controlled by evil instincts that he cannot understand the terms of the gospel or freely respond to it. Yes, it is true that by continually spurning whatever spiritual light God is pleased to give him, a man may so harden his own heart that God hands him over to a debased mind, with the result that his conscience is seared past feeling. Such a man does indeed become like an unreasoning animal (Ex. 8:15–32; Eph. 4:19; 1 Tim. 4:2; Jude 1:10). This, however, only confirms the genuineness of man’s freedom, the importance of using it wisely, and the dreadful consequences of using it foolishly.

These three balancing factors undergird the message of the New Testament and also the truth of Test Perspective. The message is this: We free human beings are living in a unique day, under a unique set of circumstances, and with a unique spiritual opportunity. As long as we are still drawing breath our spiritual natures are not set in concrete. Rather, both saints and sinners alike are on a pilgrimage through a spiritual No Man’s Land. The sinner is wrestling with God because God is graciously wrestling with him, desiring that he come to Christ and live under the dictates of a new nature. Meanwhile, the saint is wrestling with the world, the flesh, and the devil because all three are wickedly wrestling against him, desiring that he desert Christ and return to life under the dictates of his old nature. Thus, the gospel era

is always a day for choosing. Calvinists and Arminians can and should agree: As long as Today is still called Today, we must use our free wills to choose well (Heb. 3:13).

John 3 and the Gospel Test

In our journey thus far we have looked at a number of texts portraying sinful man as a free creature on probation, living before a God who loves him and who desires him to take and pass the test of life. As I bring this section to a close I want to look briefly at what is likely Scripture's single most important text for communicating these core truths. Listen, then, to the Lord's words to an honest spiritual seeker by the name of Nicodemus:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his uniquely begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him would not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world, through him, might be saved. The one who believes in him is not condemned; but the one who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the uniquely begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation: The light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who practices evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the light, so that everyone can see that his deeds have been done in God.” (John 3:16–21)

Here the Lord Jesus is announcing that God his Father is about to set a new and definitive covenant before the whole world, a covenant that will put all who hear about it to a new and definitive test. Hitherto he has tested the Gentiles by the light of nature and conscience. Hitherto he has further tested the Jews by the light of his Law. Now, however, he is testing all men and all nations by the light

of the gospel: the New Covenant. And he will continue to do so until the end of the age.

As in Eden of old, the terms of the New Covenant test are clear. God (the divine party) has so loved the world (the human party) that he has given it an all-sufficient Savior: his uniquely begotten Son, through whose righteous life and atoning death all may be saved (the provision). In love, he has issued an implicit command: Whoever hears about Christ—whoever sees the Light of the World—must believe in him and come to him (the proviso). In love he offers the gift of eternal life to all who will believe and obey (the promise); but in love he also warns the unbelieving and disobedient against perishing under eternal punishment (the penalty). It is, then, the universal publication of the terms of the New Covenant that introduces the gospel test to the world. And this in turn engages sinful man's freedom, requiring him to choose, and motivating him to choose well.

Our Lord's words to Nicodemus bring the reality and importance of this freedom into sharp relief. Clearly, Christ is not thinking of sinful men as mere animals with no ability to understand the terms of the test, or to make a free and responsible choice about coming to the light. For why is it that a gospel-rejecting sinner stands condemned? It is because the light (i.e., Christ and the gospel) has come into the world, news of it has reached him, he has seen it for himself (i.e., he understands it, at least in a measure), and yet he hates it and stubbornly refuses to come to it because he loves his sin more than the light. No, Jesus is definitely not talking about an animal, but about a free, morally responsible human being, created in the image and likeness of God, who now finds himself taking the gospel test. *He is speaking to all mankind from within the Test Perspective.* He is showing us that the Test Perspective is real, vital, and of eternal consequence. He is showing us that the Sovereignty Perspective and the truth of man's total depravity and spiritual inability do not rule out the Test Perspective or minimize its importance. As difficult as it may be for us to understand this, Christ is showing us that we must nevertheless embrace the Test Perspective with utmost seriousness.

Now it is true that in our text we also see something of the Sovereignty Perspective. For what is the difference between those who (presently) stand condemned and those who come to the light? In the end the difference is traceable to what they love and what they therefore practice. Those who stand condemned love darkness and therefore practice a lie; those who come to the light love the light and therefore practice truth. The deeds of the former are done in sin (and Satan), whereas the deeds of the latter are done in God. From within the Sovereignty Perspective we can readily see the hand of the sovereign God in this situation: In the case of those who come, he has graciously poured into their hearts a love of truth, goodness, and God. But in the case of those who stand condemned, he has not (yet) done so.

If, however, we revert to the Test Perspective, we can see the nature of man's loving in a different light. For Jesus said, "If anyone loves me he will keep my word" (John 14:23). This tells us that in the eyes of Christ love is not simply an affection. It is also (and is primarily) obedience. A sinner with whom God is striving may see and feel many things; however, in the end his love for God, truth, and righteousness is measured by what he freely chooses to do. The Sovereignty Perspective focuses our attention on God who graciously grants a love (i.e., a desire, an affection) for the light. The Test Perspective focuses our attention on man, who is free to act on whatever light God has been pleased to give him. Both perspectives are true and important. Both must be kept in balance. We must train ourselves to view sinful man and total depravity from the Golden Strand.

By way of conclusion I want to speak directly to the heart of trembling seekers. Have you heard or read about sinful man's total depravity? Have you been told that apart from God's grace you cannot come to Christ? Do you despair of crossing the gulf between doubt and saving faith? Do you fear that the sovereign God will not reach down his hand and help you make the crossing?

Well, I have good news. There is truth in what you have been told, but not all the truth. For you also have been told that you are a free creature, and that the good God is putting your freedom to the

test. Yes, your sin has muddled your understanding, weakened your conscience, and distorted your affections. And yes, unless and until you have trusted in Christ you stand condemned and under wrath. But none of this cancels God's love for you, or his desire to see you come to his Son, or his promise that if you do come you will receive the gift of eternal life. Your sin does not destroy your ability to understand the basic claims of the gospel, or to undertake a search to find out if they are true, or to call upon God in prayer to help you make that search; nor does it absolve you of your responsibility to do so.

Beloved friend, all of us together—Christian and non-Christian alike—stand before a good, wise, loving, and sovereign God who deeply desires that we take and pass the test of life. So please join me in setting your affection on the truth about God and the gospel, and in choosing to seek for it with all your heart. If you do, the sovereign God himself has promised you that all will be well. As it is written: “And you will seek me and you will find me, when you search for me with all your heart” (Jer. 29:13).

4. The Biblical Basis

Here, in regular print, is a fulsome list of biblical texts related to the theme of total depravity. They deal with the fall of man, original sin (i.e., the sin we inherit from Adam at the moment of conception), the flesh (i.e., the source of sinful thoughts and impulses in fallen man), the natural man (i.e., the unregenerate man), the unregenerate human heart, and sinful man's spiritual deadness and inability. These texts (some of which speak to us typologically) properly belong to the Sovereignty Perspective because they show that man is hopelessly trapped in sin, and that God alone, by his sovereign grace, can deliver him from his dreadful condition. Among them, however, are a number of other texts belonging to the Test Perspective. These appear *in italics*. They show us that despite the unregenerate man's total depravity, and despite his being under condemnation and wrath, the good God is nevertheless eager to relate to him, speak to him, and strive with him as a free and responsible creature, all with a view to calling him to

repentance and faith. They show that sinful man is not a brute beast, but that he is aware of God, and also of his responsibility to seek after him. They show that, in one sense, sinful man is indeed able to come to God, if only he will. The juxtaposition of these two streams of biblical revelation will help us keep the doctrine of total depravity in proper balance.

- “But from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.” (Genesis 2:17)
- *And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.”* (Genesis 4:4–7)
- *Then the LORD said, “My Spirit will not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless [or, therefore] his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.”* (Genesis 6:3)
- *The Israelites—all the men and women whose heart moved them to bring material for all the work which the Lord had commanded through Moses to be done—brought a freewill offering to the Lord.* (Exodus 35:29)
- When Elisha reached the house, there was the boy, lying dead on his bed. So he went in, closed the door behind the two of them, and prayed to the LORD. Then Elisha got on the bed and lay on the boy, mouth to mouth, eye to eye, and hand to hand. As he stretched himself out over him, the boy’s body became warm. Elisha turned away and paced back and forth across the room. Then he got on the bed and stretched himself out over the boy again, and the boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes. Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, “Call the Shunammite woman.” So he called her and she came. Then

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Elisha said, “Pick up your son.” She came in, fell at his feet, and bowed to the ground. Then she picked up her son and went out. (2 Kings 4:32–37 BSB)

- Now the sons of the prophets said to Elisha, “Please take note that the place where we meet with you is too small for us. Please let us go to the Jordan, where each of us can get a log so we can build ourselves a place to live there.” “Go,” said Elisha. Then one of them said, “Please come with your servants.” “I will come,” he replied. So Elisha went with them, and when they came to the Jordan, they began to cut down some trees. As one of them was cutting down a tree, the iron axe head fell into the water. “Oh, my master,” he cried out, “it was borrowed!” “Where did it fall?” asked the man of God. And when he showed him the place, the man of God cut a stick, threw it there, and made the iron float. “Lift it out,” he said; and the man reached out his hand and took it. (2 Kings 6:1–7 BSB)
- Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. (Psalm 51:5)
- O God . . . direct your steps to the perpetual ruins: The enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary! Your foes roared in the midst of your meeting place; they set up their own signs for signs. They were like those who swing axes in a forest of trees; and all its carved wood they broke down with hatchets and hammers. They set your sanctuary on fire; they profaned the dwelling place of your name, bringing it down to the ground. They said to themselves, “We will utterly subdue them.” They burned all the meeting places of God in the land. (Psalm 74:3–8 ESV)
- Consider the work of God, for who is able to straighten what he has bent? (Ecclesiastes 7:13)
- Where will you be stricken again, as you continue in your rebellion? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart is faint. From

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the sole of the foot even to the head, there is nothing sound in it, only bruises, welts and raw wounds, not pressed out or bandaged, nor softened with oil. (Isaiah 1:5–6)

- *Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the LORD, and he will have compassion on him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. (Isaiah 55:6–7)*
- Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to doing evil. (Jeremiah 13:23 ESV)
- The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9)
- *“Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, each according to his conduct,” declares the Lord God. “Repent and turn away from all your transgressions, so that iniquity does not become a stumbling block to you. Cast away from you all your transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies,” declares the Lord God. “Therefore, repent and live.” (Ezekiel 18:30–32)*
- He said to me, “Son of man, can these [dead] bones live?” And I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” . . . So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, sinews were on them, and flesh grew and skin covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, ‘Thus says the Lord God, “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, so that they may come to life.”’” So I prophesied as he commanded me; and the breath came into them, and they

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came to life and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.
(Ezekiel 37:3–10)

- “Nor should you swear by your head, for you cannot make a single hair white or black.” (Matthew 5:36)
- “If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him?” (Matthew 7:11)
- “Either make the tree good, so its fruit is good, or make the tree bad, so its fruit is bad; for a tree is known by its fruit. You offspring of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For the mouth speaks from that which fills the heart.” (Matthew 12:33–34)
- “And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” Now when his disciples heard this, they were utterly amazed; and they said, “Who then can be saved?” So looking at them, Jesus said, “With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:24–26)
- And he said to them, “Are you then also without understanding? Don’t you realize that whatever enters a man from the outside cannot make him unclean, since it doesn’t enter his heart, but first goes into his stomach and afterwards passes into the latrine?” (In saying this, Jesus was declaring all foods clean.) Then he went on to say, “It is what comes out of a man that makes him unclean. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, sexual immoralities, thefts, murders, adulteries, covetings, malicious deeds, deceit, unbridled lust, an evil eye, abusive speech, pride, and foolishness. All these evils come from within and make the man unclean.” (Mark 7:18–23)
- But Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone.” (Mark 10:18 NASB)

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- At that time Jesus greatly rejoiced in the Holy Spirit, saying, “Father, Lord of heaven and earth, I honor you because you have concealed these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for to work in this way was pleasing in your sight. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, nor does anyone know who the Father is except the Son, and those to whom the Son is willing to reveal him.” (Luke 10:21–22)
- *“And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.” (John 3:19)*
- “A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven.” (John 3:27)
- “But I know you, that you do not have the love of God within you.” (John 5:42)
- “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.” (John 6:44)
- They answered him, “We are Abraham’s seed and have never yet been enslaved to anyone. How then can you say, ‘You will become free’?” Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone engaged in sin is a slave of sin; and a slave does not remain in the household forever, but a son remains forever. If then the Son should set you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:33–36)
- Jesus said to them, “If God were your father, you would love me, for I went forth from God, and now I am here. For I have not even come on my own initiative; rather, God is the one who sent me. Why is it that you don’t understand what I say? It is because you cannot hear my word. You are from your father the devil, so you desire to carry out your father’s wishes.” (John 8:42–44)

TOTAL DEPRAVITY

- *Jesus said to them, "If you really were blind, you would have no sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."* (John 9:41)
- "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5 NASB)
- *But a certain man named Ananias, along with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; and with his wife's full knowledge he kept back some of the money for himself and then brought the rest and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit by keeping back part of the money from the sale of the land for yourself? While the land remained unsold, did it not belong to you? And after it was sold, was not the money yours to do with as you wished? Why then have you conceived this evil act in your heart? You have not lied to men, but to God." Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came on everyone who heard of it. Then the younger men got up, wrapped his body, carried him out, and buried him.* (Acts 5:1–6)
- *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them . . . and though they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.* (Romans 1:18–19, 32 NASB)
- As it is written: "There is no one who is righteous, no, not one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks after God. All of them have turned aside; together they have become useless; there is no one who does good, no, not one." (Romans 3:10–12)

IN SEARCH OF THE GOLDEN STRAND

- For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. (Romans 5:6)
- For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. (Romans 6:20)
- For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) there dwells no good thing; for the desire for good is present within me, but the doing of it is not. (Romans 7:18)
- Because the mind set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so. So then: Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Romans 8:7–8)
- *For Moses writes about the righteousness that comes through the Law, saying: “The man who practices these things will live because of them.” But the righteousness that comes through faith speaks like this: “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (that is, to bring down Christ from above) or, ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ (that is, to bring up Christ from the dead).” But what does it say? It says, “The word is near you, even in your mouth and in your heart,”—that is, the word about faith that we proclaim, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes, resulting in righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord is lord of all, overflowing in riches to all who call on him. For, “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Romans 10:5–13)*
- However, the natural man does not welcome the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; he cannot understand them, since they must be spiritually discerned. (1 Corinthians 2:14)

TOTAL DEPRAVITY

- And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the pattern of this present world, according to the ruler of the domain of the air, the domain of the spirit now at work in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all formerly conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just like the rest. (Ephesians 2:1–3)
- And you who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh he has brought to life together with him [i.e. Christ], having forgiven you all your trespasses . . . (Colossians 2:13)
- *Now the coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the activity of Satan: with all kinds of miracles, signs, and lying wonders, and with every deception of wickedness for those who are perishing, because they did not welcome [or, receive] the love of the truth so as to be saved. For this reason God will send to them a deluding influence so that they will believe the lie, so that all may be condemned who refused to believe the truth, but instead took pleasure in unrighteousness. (2 Thessalonians 2:9–12)*
- And the Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome; rather, he must be kind to all, able to teach, and patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who stand in opposition, in hopes that God will grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will. (2 Timothy 2:24–26)
- Remind our people to submit to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be eager for every kind of good work, to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable and gentle, showing perfect courtesy to all men. For at one time we ourselves were also foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. (Titus 3:1–3)

IN SEARCH OF THE GOLDEN STRAND

- We know that we are from God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. (1 John 5:19)
- *But this I have against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and leads my bond-servants astray, teaching them to engage in sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she is unwilling to repent of her sexual immorality. Behold, I will throw her into a sickbed; and I will throw those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works; and I will destroy her children with death itself. (Revelation 2:20–23)*
- *Then the fourth angel poured out his bowl onto the sun, and it was granted to the sun to scorch men with fire. So men were scorched with intense heat; and they railed against the name of God, who had authority over all these plagues; but they refused to repent and give him glory. Then the fifth angel poured out his bowl onto the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was covered with darkness. And men gnawed their tongues because of the pain; and because of their pains and their sores they railed against the God of heaven; but they did not repent of their (evil) deeds. (Revelation 16:8–11)*

CHAPTER 4

UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION

1. The Big Idea

Total depravity sets the stage for redeeming grace. Broadly, *redemption* involves two great actions of God: *rescue* and *restoration*. Fallen man is unable to rescue himself from the dreadful host of spiritual and physical enemies that entered the world and took him captive at the fall. Likewise, he is unable to restore himself to the divine purpose and blessings that God intended for him in the Garden of Eden. Unconditional election is the first of four merciful and gracious acts by which God steps in to accomplish these very things.

Election

Election is not difficult to understand, though it can indeed be difficult to receive, and also to reconcile with the Test Perspective. The following verses from Paul's letter to the Ephesians enable us to define it well:

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, ⁴ just as he chose us in him before the founding of the world, so that we would be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to himself, doing so in accordance with the good pleasure of his will, ⁶ and for the praise

of the glory of his grace, which he freely bestowed upon us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood: the forgiveness of sins, granted in accordance with the riches of his grace, ⁸ which he lavished upon us ⁹ in all wisdom and understanding when he made known to us the mystery of his will . . . ¹³ And when you heard and believed the message of the truth (the good news of your salvation), you too were sealed in him with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the down payment on our inheritance, given with a view to the *full* redemption of the *purchased* possession, for the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:3–9, 13–14)

In these rich verses there is matter for whole careers in theology, but with respect to the idea of election the basic message is plain for all to see. Before the world was created, God the Father chose a particular group of people (“us”) for eternal rescue and restoration (v. 4). His choice was not made on the basis of anything foreseen in man, but rather “according to the good pleasure of his own will” (v. 5). It was not made under external compulsion of any kind, but in pure freedom (v.6). It was also made in love (v. 4), a love that is gloriously displayed in the manifold gifts he purposed to bestow upon his elect in salvation history: the forgiveness of their sins (v. 7), their spiritual adoption into the family of God (v. 5), their being sealed (i.e., secured) in Christ by the indwelling Holy Spirit (v. 13), their being holy and blameless before him (v. 4), their attaining to the fullness of their redemption at the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead (v. 14), and their being—for time and eternity—“to the praise of his glory” (v. 14) and “the praise of the glory of his grace” (v. 6).

Very importantly, this amazing text actually speaks of the four remaining doctrines of grace. In election the Father purposes the redemption of his people; by his righteous life and atoning death the Beloved Son accomplishes it (vv. 3, 6–7); and through the twin gifts of saving wisdom and faith the Holy Spirit applies it, thereby sealing God’s elect in Christ and securing their redemption for time and eternity (vv. 7–8, 13). Thus, in a text that spotlights the distinctive work

of each person of the Holy Trinity, we find the apostle inextricably linking unconditional election with particular redemption, effectual calling, and final perseverance.

Reprobation

In speaking of election it is unavoidable that we also speak of its obverse: reprobation. This theological term means that by choosing to save only some, God effectively chose not to save others. This too is easy to understand, but especially difficult to receive. It is, however, the teaching of Scripture, so we shall have to wrestle with it. For example, the Apostle Peter writes:

Coming to him as to a living stone—completely rejected by men, yet chosen and precious in the sight of God—you yourselves, as living stones, are also being built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, and to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For this reason, Scripture contains these words: “Behold, in Zion I will lay a stone, a chosen and precious cornerstone; and he who believes in him will never be put to shame.” So then: For you who believe, this stone is precious; but for those who disbelieve, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone,” and “a stone that causes stumbling, and a rock that brings offense.” They stumble by being disobedient to the word, as also they were destined to do. But you are a chosen family, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light—who formerly were not a people, but now are the people of God; who formerly had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained it once and for all. (1 Peter 2:4–10; see also Hosea 2:23)

Why is Christ precious to the saints? Because God has chosen them and destined them to believe in him, so that they may become a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, dwelling in his marvelous light. Others, however, he has not chosen, but instead destined them

to remain in the darkness of unbelief and disobedience. Thus, Peter clearly gives us both election and reprobation.

However, the single most comprehensive text dealing with election and reprobation is found in Paul's letter to the Romans, where he discusses the problem of widespread Jewish unbelief in the gospel (Rom. 9–11). In the passage quoted below the emphasis falls upon the divine sovereignty; in the passage that immediately follows, the emphasis will fall upon man's free will and responsibility (Rom. 10:1f). Thus, the Sovereignty Perspective and the Test Perspective are both in play in this large and challenging bloc of Scripture. If we hope to understand election and reprobation in a balanced manner, we must never forget this important fact. Here, then, are Paul's words:

Nevertheless, it is not as if the word of God has fallen to the ground, for they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel, nor are they all children *simply* because they are the seed of Abraham; rather, "It is through Isaac that your seed will be named." In other words, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God; rather, it is the children of the promise who are counted as the seed. For this is a word of promise: "At that time I will come, and Sarah will have a son." And not only so, but there is Rebekah as well, who conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac. Yet before they were born or had done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose in election might stand (which is not based on works, but rather on him who calls), it was said to her, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." (Romans 9:6–13)

Does widespread Jewish unbelief mean that God's promises to Abraham have failed? Not at all. For God did not promise Abraham a *physical* seed as numerous as the stars in the sky, but a *spiritual*: an enormous family of Jews and Gentiles, graciously brought to faith in Christ through God's purpose in election (Rom. 4:1–23; Rev. 7:9). Even in OT times, and among the physical seed of Abraham, we see this principle in operation. God loved Jacob in that he came to him and

made him an Israelite indeed: a man of vibrant faith who would inherit all the promises made to Abraham (Gen. 32:24-32; John 1:47). But God “hated” Esau in that he did not come to him and do these things, but left him in his immorality and godlessness, just as he left many of the Jews of Paul’s day (Heb. 12:16). Note from our text that God’s decision to save Jacob was not based on works performed or foreseen. Rather, it was based on the good pleasure of the One who chose before the founding of the world, and who then, at the appointed time, called (Rom. 9:11). In short, it was based on God’s sovereign grace.

This text challenges us to think carefully about the nature of election and reprobation, and about the similarities and differences between them. To my mind the whole counsel of God on this subject yields something close to the following picture: Before the founding of the world God decided (decreed) to redeem a chosen people through the Person and Work of his Son, Jesus Christ. Logically, a decision to redeem entails a divine foreknowledge of the fall. Thus, it appears that in an exercise of his foreknowledge the divine potter first looked out over the total mass of sinful, guilty, condemned, but dearly loved human clay that would fill the world after the fall (Rom. 9:21). Then—for reasons that we will discuss in a moment—he freely and lovingly set a specifically redemptive love upon some of them by choosing to send Christ to redeem them, after which he would also send the Holy Spirit to call them to repentance and saving faith in their redeemer. This is election. In reprobation, however, he looked out over the same mass of human clay, and—again for reasons that we will discuss in a moment—chose not to choose the rest of humanity, but instead to leave them in their sins and exposed to his just judgment. Election, then, is active, whereas reprobation is passive.¹ In election, God lovingly decides to save. In reprobation, he wisely decides not to save.

This view of divine election helps us better understand the sense in which God “hated” Esau before the founding of the world. Insofar as Jacob and Esau would be his own human creations, he would indeed love Jacob and Esau, while at the same time being angry with them for their sins. But in that he decided to redeem Jacob, Jacob would

be *redemptively* loved, whereas in that he decided not to redeem Esau, Esau would be *redemptively* “hated.” In other words, *relative to redemption* Esau would be loved less. Thus, God would indeed love and graciously show (temporal) kindness to Esau, as he does to all his human creations. But he would not love him and graciously show him kindness in the infinitely richer redemptive way that he would Jacob. Our Lord himself supplies a warrant for thinking of God’s pre-creation and pre-fall “hatred” in this manner. As he told his followers, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters—yes, and even his own life—he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). In so speaking, is Christ inculcating an active hatred of one’s parents? By no means (Mark 7:9–13). But is he inculcating so great a loyalty to Christ that, when push comes to shove, the decision to follow Christ instead of one’s parents can look like hatred of one’s parents? By all means (Luke 9:57ff).

This approach to God’s decree of reprobation is important, since it preserves a proper understanding of the heart and character of God. The Bible assures us that God is love (1 John 4:8, 16). Love belongs essentially and eternally to the divine nature. Hatred, however, in the sense of an angry opposition to rebellious free creatures, does not belong essentially to God’s nature, but is occasioned and aroused by the manifestation of willful disobedience in his holy presence (Rom. 1:18–2:11). Thus, while election was indeed an act of divine love, reprobation was not an act of divine hatred: not in the way that God’s (final) judgments throughout history are indeed acts of divine anger rooted in hatred of actual human sin.

Speaking personally, I do not think that any human being, at least in our present spiritual state, can fully understand what God felt when he decided to pass over some of his beloved human creatures for salvation. Certainly, at one level, it must have pleased him to do so, since every decision of the infinitely holy God must be perfect, and therefore perfectly pleasing in his sight (Is. 46:10, 48:14, 53:10). Yet one cannot help but wonder if, at another level, this particular

decision involved something akin to breaking his heart (Ezek. 18:32, 33:11; Matt. 23:37; Rom. 9:1; Phil. 3:18; Rev. 5:3–5). Perhaps one day we shall understand.²

Unconditional Election

When we say that election was unconditional we mean that it was not based “... on the man who wills, or on the man who runs, but on God who shows mercy” (Rom. 9:6). We mean that it was based solely upon “the good pleasure of [God’s] will” (Eph. 1:5). We mean that it was an expression of pure grace, of unmerited favor “freely bestowed upon us in the Beloved” (Eph. 1:6). In particular, we mean that it was not based on God’s “simple foreknowledge” of what a sinner would do when presented with his truth, especially the truth of the gospel. This view, espoused by Arminians, is beset with a number of serious problems that we do well to consider.

First, there is not a single Bible text that teaches it. Yes, some have argued that Romans 8:29 does so: “Those whom he foreknew, he predestined to become conformed to the image of his Son.” However, this text actually teaches the direct opposite. For on the one hand, it says nothing at all about God foreknowing what certain people would or would not do. On the other hand, it does say that God knew certain people ahead of time *as those whom he would conform to the image of his Son, having made them beloved sons and daughters through the redemption that is in Christ*. In other words, he knew them as those with whom he would be pleased to enter into an intimate personal relationship, somewhat as Adam “knew” his wife (Gen. 4:1), or as God “knew” Israel alone among all the nations of the earth (Amos 3:2), or as the Lord Jesus “knows” his own sheep (John 10:27). As Peter told us, God knew them beforehand as those whom he would make into a chosen family, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people for his own possession (1 Pet. 1:1–2, 2:4–10). No, election is not conditioned upon anything found in man; but, as a great many texts positively affirm, it is indeed conditioned on God’s redeeming love, mercy, grace, and “mere good pleasure” (Eph. 1:5–6).

Secondly, Scripture itself assures us that when God, in eternity past, looked out over the great mass of fallen humanity, he neither saw, nor could see, a single sinner who would ever choose him, for all were intrinsically depraved, with no inclination whatsoever to turn his way. As it is written: “There is none who seeks after God” (Rom. 3:11). If, then, he did in fact foresee some who would seek and find him, it could only be because he had purposed to give them the grace to do so. And this is unconditional election.

This brings us to our third and final point: The Arminian doctrine of simple “foreknowledge,” which posits that God foreknew the absolutely free and unconditioned choices of men, is contrary both to Scripture and reason.

It is contrary to Scripture because, as we saw in our discussion of total depravity, the free decisions of men are *always* conditioned by the nature of the men who make them, whether good or evil (Matt. 12:33–34). Moreover, in our discussion of divine sovereignty we also saw that man’s free decisions are *always* conditioned by God’s purpose, plan, and providence. When our Arminian brothers say that God’s foreknowledge is “simple,” they mean that it is *not* based on God’s decrees. Scripture, however, teaches that it is indeed based on his decrees: on all that he himself has predestined to occur (Ps. 33:10–11; Prov. 19:21; Acts 4:27–28; Rom. 11:36; Eph. 1:11). Thus, men’s free choices are conditioned both by their own nature and also by the purpose, plans, and decrees of God.

The doctrine of simple foreknowledge is also contrary to reason and logic. It is a true oxymoron, a perfect self-contradiction. For by definition, an absolutely free choice—a choice with no antecedent cause whatsoever—is altogether spontaneous and random, and therefore can never be foreknown. Recognizing this truth, so-called open theists have had to abandon the traditional Arminian concept of simple foreknowledge, and have decided instead to travel down the still more unscriptural path of denying God’s perfect foreknowledge of all things.³

We conclude, then, that Scripture and reason unite in affirming that election is not conditioned on anything in man, but is based solely upon the mercy, grace, and good pleasure of the sovereign God.

Why Unconditional Election

But our discussion cannot end here. For once we understand that God did indeed elect certain people to eternal life, it is impossible to avoid asking *why* he did so. Why would the good, loving, and wise creator of all human beings decide to choose only some for salvation while leaving the rest in their sins? Truly, many wise men have sought to answer that troubling question. Having read some of their best thoughts, I now think it unlikely that we will ever have the complete answer this side of heaven. Nevertheless, the Scriptures are not silent on the subject. Let us therefore look briefly at two biblically declared reasons why God decided to elect only some for salvation.

Of special importance is a passage once again found in Romans 9. Here Paul is addressing those who may be inclined to challenge the justice of God's decision to elect a particular people for salvation. That would be just about everybody, probably including, at one time, Paul himself. But God has taught him on this subject, and Paul gives us the divine wisdom here. He writes:

You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who has ever withstood his will?" But on the contrary, who are you, O man, to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?" Hasn't the potter a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? What if God, desiring to display his wrath and make his power known, endured with great patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And what if he did so in order to make known the riches of his glory on vessels of mercy that he had prepared beforehand for glory, including us, whom he also called, not only from among the Jews, but also from among the Gentiles. (Romans 9:19–24)

If we are looking for the divine rationale for election, the phrases in this text that positively leap off the page are: *desiring to display* and *in order to make known*. God chose to choose because, for one reason, he desired to display his glory. That is, he desired to set before the wondering eyes of his people—indeed, before the eyes of all people—the fullest possible revelation of his divine attributes. In the text itself we learn that he desired to display his sovereignty, his wrath, his power, and his mercy. But again, Paul also states that he desired to display his *glory*, which is not a single divine attribute, but rather the totality of his attributes in their infinite weightiness, holiness, and beauty. It appears, then, that God meant the unconditional election of sinners to contribute to the fullest possible display of all his divine attributes: of the fullness of his own divine nature and glory.

This brings us to our second text, in which we now learn (one of the main reasons) *why* he chose to display his glory through election. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes:

In love he predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to himself, doing so in accordance with the good pleasure of his will, and for the praise of the glory of his grace, which he freely bestowed upon us in the Beloved. . . . In him we also have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined to it in accordance with the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his own will, so that we who were the first to set our hope on Christ would be for the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:5–6, 11–12)

Here again two purpose-filled phrases jump out at us: *for the praise of the glory of his grace*, and *for the praise of his glory*. The first is quite specific, the second more general; but both have to do with *praise*. That is, they both have to do with the saints' eternal worship of God. Thus, on the one hand we may say that God decided to choose a particular people so that through a display of his saving grace that reached even unto them, his elect would be filled with gratitude, joy, and wonder to such degree that they would overflow in praise and

thanksgiving to God for all eternity. But on the other hand, we may also say that God decided to choose a particular people because he desired to display to his elect the totality of the divine perfections that constitute his glory, so that once again they would overflow in grateful praise, this time for the incalculable privilege of seeing and knowing him as he truly is, and that to all eternity.

I believe these texts are of extreme importance for the spiritual formation, health, and happiness of God's people. It may be that they do not fully resolve the intellectual problems connected with divine election. It may be that they are not meant to. But one thing is clear: They are meant to ignite and sustain the worship of God's people for time and eternity. They are meant to illumine our minds and fill our hearts, thereby equipping us for the rigors of our difficult and dangerous journey through the wilderness of this present evil age. Therefore, let us not put God to the test. Let us not demand that he explain all things to us before we gratefully and gladly receive what he has told us about election. Let us have faith in his wisdom and goodness, let us worship him with gratitude and joy, and let us grow and thrive in Christ.

2. The Balancing Factors

In a moment we will look at the spiritual benefits of the doctrine of unconditional election. But before doing so, it is important to consider some of the balancing factors.

I have stated that the doctrine of unconditional election can, and often does, precipitate a crisis of faith both in seekers and believers; and that this doctrine is relatively easy to understand, yet often hard to accept. But *why* is it hard to accept? I answer carefully, and with the help of the Apostle Paul: It is hard to accept, not because there is any flaw in God or his ways, but because we are finite and fallen creatures, whose understanding is incomplete and darkened by sin (Eph. 4:18), and whose flesh is hostile to God (Rom. 8:7). Also, the parallel revelation of the Test Perspective presents us with an antinomy; and as brother Packer warned, our minds do not like antinomies.

As a result of these things, when we encounter unconditional election, pitfalls suddenly appear before us. We may be tempted to flee into some form of theological error (e.g., Arminianism, Open Theism, Universalism, Annihilationism, etc.). We may be tempted to think of God as unjust, unloving, or cruel. We may be tempted to think of the great drama of salvation history as a mere puppet show in which the divine playwright, producer, and director dangles human beings like marionettes from invisible strings. Comfortingly, Scripture itself recognizes that we will have difficulty understanding these high and holy truths (1 Cor. 13:8–13; 2 Cor. 2:14–16; 2 Pet. 3:16). However, it is also emphatic that dark thoughts about God say nothing about him, but a great deal about our own finitude, frailty, and rebellion. To quote the Apostle Paul on this matter: “Let God be found true, and every man a liar. As it is written: ‘That you may triumph when you speak, and may prevail when you are judged’” (Rom. 3:4).

We do well, then, throughout our entire wrestling match with unconditional election, to heed the words of the Teacher, who said, “Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they are doing wrong” (Eccl. 5:1 BSB). In other words, before rushing to a foolish judgment on this or any other challenging revelation, let us humbly, prayerfully, and patiently consult the whole counsel of God on the subject so that we may arrive at the fullest possible conception of God and his truth. Again, I cannot affirm that on this side of heaven we will ever fully resolve the mysteries associated with election. But I do affirm that if we will listen to the balancing texts of Scripture we can go far towards making our peace with the God who has decided to choose an eternal family for his own.

Let us therefore briefly consider some important scriptural teachings that properly balance the idea of unconditional election, and that honor the instincts and emphases of our Arminian brothers.

God's Universal Love

First, unconditional election does not cancel the universal love of God. We have already encountered this truth in our discussion of common grace. Despite his displeasure and anger towards unrepentant sinners, God has a genuine love for all his human creatures, a love that displays itself in acts of kindness more abundant than the stars in the sky and the sands on the seashore. On this score, let us listen again to the words of our Lord from the Sermon on the Mount:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be seen as sons of your Father in heaven; for he causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you deserve? Don’t even the tax collectors do the same? And if you only greet your brothers, what more are you doing than anyone else? Don’t even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore, you must be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:43–48)

Speaking personally, I cannot think of another text that more clearly unveils God’s universal love for all people—good or evil, saved or unsaved, grateful or ungrateful. Moreover, this is no idle love, but love in action; a love that gives sunshine, rain, life, breath, and all things to all men (Acts 14:17, 17:25; Rom. 2:4). How misguided, then, to think that unconditional election cancels God’s universal love for mankind.

God's Universal Justice

Secondly, unconditional election does not cancel the justice of God. In other words, if it seems to us that election is unfair or unjust, then the flaw is in our thinking, not in God’s holiness, righteousness, or justice. A balanced reading of the Scriptures should persuade us of this truth. When Abraham interceded before the Lord for the citizens

of Sodom, he appealed to God's justice, crying out, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" And the judge did do right, punishing only those who had egregiously sinned, while at the same time granting salvation to righteous Lot and his family (Gen. 18; 2 Pet. 2:8). At the end of the age, in the final Judgment, he will surely do the same.

Again, Moses, announcing ahead of time God's forthcoming judgments and mercies towards Israel, sang:

"For I proclaim the name of the LORD. Ascribe greatness to our God! The Rock—his work is perfect, for all his ways are just. He is a God of faithfulness, and without injustice; righteous and upright is he." (Deuteronomy 32:3–4)

Has not the Spirit here proclaimed that all of God's ways are just? And is not unconditional election one of his ways?

Or again, we have the stern words of the Apostle Paul, who will not suffer anyone to charge the divine potter with injustice in his dealings with the sinful lump of clay that is fallen mankind:

What shall we say then? Is there injustice with God? God forbid! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." Consequently, it does not depend on the man who wills, or on the man who runs, but on God who shows mercy. For the Scripture says to the Pharaoh, "For this very reason I raised you up, so that I might display my power in you, and that my name should be proclaimed in all the earth." So then: He has mercy on whom he wills to have mercy, and whom he wills to harden, he hardens. (Romans 9:14–18)

The central thought here is evident: In God's dealings with sinful man there is *never* any injustice. Certainly it is a just thing to punish Pharaoh for his repeated and willful disobedience. And certainly it is also just to show compassion to sinful Israel, for there is no injustice in showing mercy and compassion. Paul would have us apply these truths to the progress of the gospel in the world. All people deserve wrath. Some will endure wrath. But because of the justice wrought

upon Christ in their behalf, others will receive mercy and grace (Rom. 3:21–26). In their case, mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13); but in all cases, justice is done. It is easy to imagine that because of his goodness and love, God did indeed desire, at one level of his being, to show mercy and grace to Pharaoh. But the very fact that he did not, assures us that he was not obligated to do so. And since he was not obligated to do so, his decision not to do so, though unexpected and baffling to us humans, was not unjust, but holy and righteous and good.

Finally, we have the words of the glorified Church of Christ, standing safely on the other side of the Red Sea of God's Last Judgment, and contemplating the eternal destruction of unrepentant sinners in the Day of the Lord. According to the Apostle John, they will sing:

“Great and wondrous are your works, O Lord God, the mighty ruler over all! Righteous and true are your ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name, since you alone are holy? For all the nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous judgments have been revealed.” (Revelation 15:3–4)

I confess freely that for the moment I cannot fathom such exultation in the face of such dreadful retribution. But I dare to trust that one day I will, and that with all the rest of the saints, I too will loudly cry, “All your ways are righteous, true, and just!”

God's Universal Desire to Save

Thirdly, unconditional election does not cancel God's desire for all to be saved. While mysterious and puzzling to us, this is the clear teaching of Scripture, and is also a great comfort to the Christian heart. We hear this desire expressed in the memorable words of Isaiah:

“Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk, without money and without cost . . . Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.” (Isaiah 55:1, 45:22)

We also hear it in these words of Christ as he wept over the unrepentant capital of the ancient Israelite nation:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, she who kills the prophets and stones the men who are sent to her! How often I yearned to gather your children together like a hen that gathers her chicks beneath her wings; but you were unwilling.”
(Matthew 23:37)

Likewise, we hear it in the words of the Apostle Paul as he anguishes over the multitudes of gospel-hardened Jews:

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience also bearing witness with me in the Holy Spirit—when I say that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed—cut off from Christ—for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh, the people of Israel . . . Truly, brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God is for their salvation.
(Romans 9:1–2, 10:1)

Finally, we hear it in the Spirit-filled words of the universal Church, which, giving voice to the heart of God, urgently and repeatedly calls all people to repentance, faith, and salvation:

The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come. Let the one who so wishes take the water of life without cost.
(Revelation 22:17)

I find this text especially revealing. All Christians desire all people to be saved. But where does that desire come from? Surely not from our sinful flesh! Surely we are not more loving than God! No, the truth is more nearly the opposite: We are infinitely less loving than God, who loves all his human creatures with a love we can barely glimpse and never fathom.

Someone will ask, “Why, then, if God loves all and desires all to be saved, does he not decree that all will be saved?” It is a reasonable

and often painful question, a question that forces us to grapple with the staggeringly complex emotional and volitional life of the infinite God. But before making our best attempt, we must pause to consider: Who among us is equal to the task? Dare we project our pitifully limited inner life onto the infinitely wise and holy Creator and Ruler of the universe? If we cannot add a single cubit to our stature, or make one hair of our head black or white, are we able to comprehend, let alone judge, the One who gives wisdom to the wise, who does all things well, and whom no man can convict of sin (Dan. 2:21; Matt. 5:36, 6:27–28; Mark 7:37; John 8:46)? Who among us has known the mind of the Lord, or functioned as his counselor (Rom. 11:34–35)? To whom can we compare the LORD? Who is the equal of the Holy One of Israel (Is. 40:25)? Yes, it is good for finite and fallible human creatures to grapple with unconditional election; but it is never good for their grappling to become a pretext for calling God to an account. At the end of that road lies only dust and ashes (Job 42:1–6).

Here, then, is the bottom line: All we can now know about the divine rationale for unconditional election is what God has been pleased to reveal to us. And what he has revealed suggests that while at one level of his being he desired all to be saved, at another he desired something else, for which reason he decided to save some rather than all. We have already touched on the “something else.” As we saw earlier, it appears that throughout universal history, and especially at its consummation, God desires that there should be the fullest possible display of his glory, whether in wrath, justice, and judgment on the one hand, or in mercy, grace, and salvation on the other. Furthermore, it also appears that he intends this display to secure for his people the richest possible contemplation of his glory, resulting in the richest possible experience of worship and adoration, both now and to all eternity.⁴

Again, I confess that I find these things barely comprehensible. They are too high for me; I cannot attain to them (Ps. 139:6). But I do see in them one vital and spiritually comforting truth: God can indeed exercise his right to unconditionally elect some people to salvation, while at the same time loving all people and desiring them to be

saved. It is a truth more to be trusted than understood. But since it is true and trustworthy, we must let it take firm hold of our hearts and minds. When we do, we will walk in peace in the shadowlands of this present world.

God's Universal Offer of Salvation

Finally, unconditional election does not cancel God's *bona fide* offer of salvation to all. This point brings us back onto the *terra firma* of the Test Perspective, placing us squarely before the omnipresent divine Person who desires to interact with all human persons, beckoning them to come to him through Christ, thereby testing their love of truth, God, and righteousness. Looking at things from this side of the Golden Strand, we see that God loves all (John 3:16), gave Christ to all (John 3:16), and sends out his Church to proclaim the gospel to all (Matt. 28:18f). We see that through her preaching he offers Christ to all, makes promises to all, invites all, reasons with all, strives with all, and welcomes all who freely respond (Matt. 7:7–9, 11:28f; Acts 2:17f, 7:51, 10:35). Moreover, in the case of those who resist the gospel, he goes several steps further, commanding all to repent, and warning all of the consequences of their failure to do so (Acts 13:40–41, 17:30, 26:10). And in the case of those who resist his overtures to the end, he declares that they all have judged themselves unworthy of eternal life (John 3:19–21; Acts 13:46).

Such texts are clearly meant to comfort trembling seekers and hesitant believers. For apart from what God has revealed about the future in Scripture, and apart from what is now settled irrevocably in the past, none of us can know what he has decreed. The future stands wide open before us. It is all possibility, all waiting for our own conscientious choices to turn it into actuality. Into this openness the God of truth speaks, sincerely offering eternal life to everyone, saying, “Let all who are simple come to my house! Come, eat my food and drink the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple ways, and you will live” (Prov. 9:4–6). To use a tried and true illustration, it is as if a man were standing before a city gate. Above the gate there is a sign:

“Whosoever will, let him come!” So he freely goes in. But once he has done so, he turns around and notices more writing on the back of the sign: “Chosen before the founding of the world.” This illustration is biblical. There is nothing to stop a single soul from coming to God except his own unwillingness to do so. God has promised that all who sincerely ask, seek, and knock will have all the light they need to see the truth and come to Christ for eternal life (Matt. 7:7–9). And when they do, God will receive all the glory.

Three Further Oases for the Troubled Mind

When we have thoroughly studied unconditional election and still find ourselves mystified or troubled by it, we are wise to recall that Scripture itself offers us three further Cities of Refuge—three well-furnished oases—wherein our weary minds may find rest and refreshment.

The first is our present spiritual ignorance. It is the comforting fact that—at least for the moment—we see spiritual things “through a glass darkly.” Moses tells us, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, so that we may perform all the words of this law” (Deut. 29:29 NKJV). Similarly, the Apostle Paul reminds us that even the wisest believer is only in his spiritual infancy:

If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know . . . As for prophecies, they will pass away . . . as for knowledge, it too will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. (1 Corinthians 8:2; 13:8–12 ESV)

Let the person who wrestles with unconditional election take comfort in the fact that one day up ahead he will attain spiritual manhood, see face to face, and fully know even as he is fully known. For a brief moment we must reside here in the shadowlands. Let us therefore be patient, humble, and trusting, realizing that further and fuller light is soon to come.

The second oasis is God's inscrutability. Yes, a day will come when we will fully know all that God is pleased for us to know. But will the finite ever be able to comprehend the infinite? Will we ever fully understand God's being, his ways, and all the intricacies of his creation? God himself declares, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Is. 55:9). Similarly, the Apostle Paul, falling to his knees beneath a great cloud of unknowing, cries, "O, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past tracing out" (Rom. 11:33)! Could it be that the secret harmony between God's sovereignty and man's freedom and responsibility will, like our creator himself, remain eternally inscrutable?

But the third and final oasis is surely the most important of all: the character of God. On this score I again think of our brother Job, who never charged God foolishly, but did indeed raise a great fuss over the dreadful mystery of evil, suffering, and death accosting us under the heaven of a good and sovereign God. Finally, the time arrived for God to descend from heaven and show himself. But observe: When he did, he never explained himself to Job. He never theologized or philosophized. Rather, he simply opened to Job the immensity of his divine being and glory, and then asked him a series of questions designed to remind him of his own finitude and sinfulness. And what was Job's reaction to this stupendous unveiling?

Then Job replied to the LORD: "I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. You asked, 'Who is this that obscures counsel without knowledge?'

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Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.’ My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”
(Job 42:1–6 NIV)

Let all who wrestle with the mystery of election take a lesson from Job. Let us humbly repent of our sinful tendency to put God in the dock. Let us instead do what Job and David learned to do. Like a weaned child, let us rest our aching heads and trembling hearts upon the bosom of the glory of God, as best we can see it; and upon his infinite wisdom, goodness, and love, as best we have come to know them (Ps. 131:2). And let us also rest in faith, waiting expectantly for that happy day when he will cause ALL his goodness to pass before us (Ex. 33:19). Truly, we will be glad we did.

3. The Spiritual Benefits

Some years back I drew up and distributed to our church a list entitled *16 Reasons Why the Doctrine of Election is Vital for the Health of the Christian Church*. I did so in the conviction that our wise heavenly Father knew what he was doing when he revealed this challenging doctrine to his people. Yes, he understood it would cause us some troubles. But clearly he also judged that the benefits would outweigh the risks. Here, then, in an expanded version, is that list. I would encourage you to read the Scriptures cited in support of each point.

The doctrine of unconditional election is vital for the health of individual Christians and the Lord’s Church because:

- It supplies us with the single most dramatic manifestation of the sovereignty of God, thereby introducing us to who and what God truly is, and who and what we truly are in relation to him (Is. 43:1–13, 46:8–11; John 17:1ff, esp. vv. 1–2, 6, 24; Eph. 1:1–14).

- Especially at the beginning of our Christian walk, it awakens in us a healthy fear of the Lord, moving us to make our calling and election sure by carefully studying the marks of a born-again Christian, and by continually obeying God's commands to his people (Acts 17:11; Rom. 11:20; 2 Pet. 1:1–8; 1 John 1–5).
- It forces us to grapple with the character of God, and to assure ourselves through meditation upon the Scriptures, prayer, and personal spiritual experience, that he is indeed good, loving, kind, and just (Ex. 33:17ff; John 16:13; Rom. 9:14–26; 1 Cor. 2:6–14; 2 Tim. 2:7; 2 Pet. 3:16).
- It forces us to see our freedom and moral responsibility in a new, biblical light, and (despite our inability to harmonize them perfectly with God's sovereignty) to affirm them, live them out, and keep them in proper balance with the sovereignty of God. In short, it forces us to find and walk on the Golden Strand (Deut. 29:29; Matt. 7:24–28; 12:48–50; John 14:15, 21, 15:10, 16; 2 Pet. 1:1–8; Rev. 17:14).
- It humbles our intellect, confronting us with the limits of human understanding, and providing us with a special opportunity to exercise implicit trust in the wisdom, love, goodness, and justice of God (Job 42:1–6; Ps. 131; Rom. 11:33–34; 1 Cor. 13:9, 12).
- Together with the doctrine of total depravity, it profoundly abases our natural pride and self-centeredness, and opens up within our hearts a fountain of compassion for all people; for now we see that all are cut out of the same Adamic cloth, all are equally depraved, all are equally under condemnation, and all are equally in need of God's sovereign grace (Matt. 18:21f; Mark 5:19; 1 Cor. 9:22; 2 Cor. 5:11ff; Eph. 2:1ff; Titus 3:1–7; Rev. 22:17).
- It opens a window onto the special love of God for his elect children, a love that he set upon them in Christ before the

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founding of the world (Is. 43:4; Rom. 8:37; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 1:4–5, 2:4; Heb. 12:6).

- It awakens in God's children an ever-deepening sense of gratitude, from which flow an ever-increasing love for all three Persons of the Trinity, an appreciation of their distinctive roles in our redemption, and a spirit of joyful praise and earnest worship before all three (Rom. 6:17, 7:25; 1 Cor. 15:57; 2 Cor. 9:15; Eph. 1:3f, 5:18–21, 6:24; Col. 1:12, 3:17; 1 Thess. 5:18; Heb. 13:15; 1 John 4:19).
- It enriches the worship of the Church Militant (i.e., God's people who are still on earth) by conforming it to the worship of the Church Triumphant (i.e., God's people now in heaven), seeing that all who dwell above are continually celebrating the sovereignty of God in salvation (Rev. 5:9ff, 7:1ff, 19:1–6).
- It provides a basis for, and a strengthening of, the remaining three doctrines of grace: definite atonement, irresistible grace, and final perseverance. For having chosen a people for his own possession, God will first send his Son to effectually redeem them, and then his Spirit to effectually call and preserve them (John 17:1ff; Rom. 8:28–30; Eph. 1:3f; 1 Pet. 1:1–2).
- It supplies a solid base for the assurance of our salvation, especially in those seasons when God, in his Fatherly love and wisdom, is pleased to withdraw from us a lively sense of his presence, acquaint us afresh with our innate depravity, and train us again for an implicit dependency upon the grace of God in Christ for all things (Ps. 73; John 15:1–6; Col. 2:1–23; Heb. 12:1–12; Rev. 3:19).
- By making God and his grace prior to all, it awakens and sustains in us a keen sense of our dependence upon God, thus engendering a God-centered spirituality rather than a man-centered spirituality (John 15:1f; Rom. 8:1ff; 1 Cor. 1:26ff; Gal. 5:16–18).

- It empowers evangelism and world missions, instilling in us a confidence that our labors in scattering the seed of the gospel will not be in vain, but will prove effective for the gathering in of God's elect (Is. 11:11–13, 40:10–11, 43:6, 55:11; Mark 4:26–29; Acts 18:9–11; Rom. 8:29; Rev. 6:1–2).
- It helps make sense of a world full of indifferent or hostile unbelievers. Also, it steels the Church for inevitable persecution, and prepares her for the rigors of the Last Battle, set to occur immediately prior to the Lord's return (Matt. 24:9; Luke 12:32; John 15:18f; 1 Cor. 1:18ff; 1 John 5:19; Rev. 11:7–10, 13:6–10, 16:12–16, 19:17–21, 20:7–10).
- It tests our love of the totality of God's revealed truth, of his "whole counsel." Will we show ourselves good Bereans, searching the Scriptures daily to see if this challenging and controversial thing is really so (Prov. 23:23; Matt. 7:7–9; John 4:23, 17:17; Acts 17:11; 1 Cor. 2:10–16; Eph. 4:15, 6:14; 2 Tim. 2:15, 4:3–5; 1 Pet. 1:10f; 3 John 1:4)?
- In Christian leaders it tests their ability to see the benefits of this doctrine, their courage in proclaiming it (for the natural man and the fleshly Christian do not receive it well), and their pastoral love and skill in doing so in a way that edifies the flock rather than confuses or frightens it (Ps. 81:16; John 21:15–19; Acts 20:26–27, 32; 1 Cor. 2:14; 1 Tim. 4:16; 2 Tim. 2:15).

4. The Biblical Basis

Here, in regular print, is a fulsome list of biblical texts dealing with unconditional election and reprobation, texts that emphasize God's choosing. Among them, *in italics*, are a number of balancing texts that reveal the importance of man's choosing, and also the Church's responsibility to proclaim the gospel to all, so that all will have the choice that God calls them to make. May the Lord help us to take both streams of revelation to heart. With respect to unconditional

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election, may he help us stand squarely, skillfully, and confidently on the Golden Strand.

- “For you are a holy people to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set his love on you or choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples. But because the LORD loves you, and because he desired to keep the oath that he swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.” (Deuteronomy 7:6–8 NKJV)
- *I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live. (Deuteronomy 30:19)*
- *“If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served, which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” (Joshua 24:15)*
- *Who is the man who fears the LORD? He will instruct him in the way he should choose. His soul will abide in prosperity, and his descendants will inherit the land. (Psalm 25:12–13)*
- Even from birth the wicked go astray; from the womb they are wayward, spreading lies. Their venom is like the venom of a snake, like that of a cobra that has stopped its ears, that will not heed the tune of the charmer, however skillful the enchanter may be. (Psalm 58:3–5 NIV)
- How blessed is the one whom you choose and bring near to you, to dwell in your courts. We will be satisfied with the goodness of your house, your holy temple. (Psalm 65:4)

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- Remember me, O LORD, when you show favor to your people; come to my aid when you save them, that I may enjoy the prosperity of your chosen ones, that I may share in the joy of your nation and join your inheritance in giving praise. (Psalm 106:4–5 NIV)
- *Wisdom has built her house. She has hewn out her seven pillars. She has slaughtered her meat, she has mixed her wine, she has also furnished her table. She has sent out her maidens; she cries out from the highest places of the city, “Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!” As for him who lacks understanding, she says to him, “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Forsake foolishness and live, and go in the way of understanding.”* (Proverbs 9:1–6 NKJV)
- The LORD has made everything for its [or, his] own purpose, even the wicked for the day of evil [i.e., calamity]. (Proverbs 16:4)
- *Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, “The LORD will surely separate me from his people.” Nor let the eunuch say, “Behold, I am a dry tree.” For thus says the LORD, “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, and choose what pleases me, and hold fast my covenant, to them I will give in my house and within my walls a memorial, and a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off.”* (Isaiah 56:3–4)
- The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one; he was appalled that there was no one to intervene. So his own arm achieved salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him. (Isaiah 59:15–16 NIV)
- *“As they have chosen their own ways, and as their soul delights in their abominations, so I will choose their punishments, and will bring on them what they dread. Because I called, but no one*

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answered; I spoke, but they did not listen. And they did evil in my sight, and chose that in which I did not delight.” (Isaiah 66:3–4)

- Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to oppose him. And the LORD said to Satan, “The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?” Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and was standing before the Angel. (Zechariah 3:1–3)
- At that time Jesus spoke up in response: “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for to work in this way was pleasing in your sight. All things have been handed over to me by my Father. And no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and those to whom the Son is willing to reveal him. *Come to me, all you who are weary and loaded down, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my load is light.*” (Matthew 11:25–30)
- “*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased. Listen to him!*” (Matthew 17:5)
- And unless those days had been cut short, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake, they will be cut short. Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Messiah!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe him. For false messiahs and false prophets will arise; and they will display great signs and wonders, so great that even the elect would be led astray, if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time. (Matthew 24:22–24)
- *Then he said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who has believed and been baptized*

will be saved; but he who has not believed will be condemned.”
(Mark 16:15)

- And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? (Luke 18:7 NIV)
- “All whom the Father gives me will come to me; and he who comes to me I will never drive out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that of all he has given me I should lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I myself will raise him up on the last day.” . . . Then he went on to say, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it has been granted to him by my Father.” (John 6:37–40, 65)
- “You did not choose me; on the contrary, I chose you and appointed you so that you would go forth and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he would give it to you.” (John 15:16)
- Jesus spoke these words; and then, lifting up his eyes to heaven, he said: “Father, the hour has come: Glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, just as you have given him authority over all flesh so that to all whom you have given him he may give eternal life . . . I have revealed your name to the men you gave me out of the world. They were yours, you gave them to me, and they have kept your word . . . I pray for them. I do not pray for the world, but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours . . . Father, concerning what you have given me: I desire that they too be with me where I am, so that they may behold my glory, glory that you have given me because you loved me before the founding of the world.” (John 17:1–2, 6, 9, 24)

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- *So opening his mouth, Peter declared: “Truly I now see that God is no respecter of persons, but that in every nation the one who fears him and does what is right is welcomed by him!” (Acts 10:34)*
- Now when the Gentiles heard that, they began to rejoice, and also to celebrate the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. (Acts 13:48)
- And we know that God is working all things together for good for those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. Moreover, those whom he predestined, he also called; and those whom he called, he also justified; and those whom he justified, he also glorified. (Romans 8:28–30)
- Nevertheless, it is not as if the word of God has fallen to the ground, for they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel, nor are they all children simply because they are the seed of Abraham. Rather, “It is through Isaac that your seed will be named.” In other words, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God; rather, it is the children of the promise who are counted as the seed. For this is a word of promise: “At that time I will come, and Sarah will have a son.” And not only so, but there is Rebekah as well, who conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac. Yet before they were born or had done anything good or bad, so that God’s purpose in election might stand (which is not based on works, but on him who calls), it was said to her, “The older will serve the younger.” Just as it is written: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” What, then, shall we say? Is there injustice with God? God forbid! For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.” Consequently, it does not depend on the man who wills, or on the man who runs, but on God who shows mercy. For the

Scripture says to the Pharaoh, “For this very reason I raised you up, that I might display my power in you, and that my name should be proclaimed in all the earth.” So then: He has mercy on whom he desires to have mercy, and he hardens whom he desires to harden. You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who has ever withstood his will?” But on the contrary, who are you, O man, to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, “Why have you made me like this?” Hasn’t the potter a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? What if God, desiring to display his wrath and make his power known, endured with great patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And what if he did so in order to make known the riches of his glory on vessels of mercy that he had prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he also called, not only from among the Jews, but also from among the Gentiles? (Romans 9:6–24)

- *For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord is lord of all, overflowing in riches to all who call on him. For, “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Romans 10:12–13)*
- In the same way, then, there is at this present time a remnant according to God’s gracious choice. (Romans 11:5)
- For you see your calling, brothers, that not many are wise according to the flesh, not many are powerful, and not many are of noble birth. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things that are strong; and God has chosen the lowly things of the world, and the things that are despised, and the things that have no standing at all, to nullify the things that do, so that no flesh will boast in his presence. Yes, he is the reason you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification

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and redemption—so that as it is written, “He who boasts, let him boast in the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 1:26–31)

- He chose us in him before the founding of the world, so that we would be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to himself, doing so in accordance with the good pleasure of his will. (Ephesians 1:4–5)
- In him we also have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined to it in accordance with the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his own will, so that we who were the first to set our hope on Christ would be for the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:11–12)
- For God has not destined us for wrath, but for the obtaining of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thessalonians 5:9)
- But we should always thank God for you—brothers dearly loved by the Lord—for from the beginning he chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. (2 Thessalonians 2:13)
- . . . who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was granted to us in Christ Jesus before time began. (2 Timothy 1:9 NKJV)
- Listen, my beloved brothers: Has not God chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith, and to be heirs of the kingdom he promised to those who love him? (James 2:5)
- Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who live as foreigners and pilgrims dispersed throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, and by the Spirit’s work of sanctification called to obedience and the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: May grace and peace be multiplied to you. (1 Peter 1:1–2)

IN SEARCH OF THE GOLDEN STRAND

- So then: For you who believe, this stone is precious; but for those who disbelieve, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone,” and “a stone that causes stumbling, and a rock that brings offense.” They stumble by being disobedient to the word, as also they were destined to do. But you are a chosen family, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light—who formerly were not a people, but now are the people of God; who formerly had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained it once and for all. (1 Peter 2:7–9)
- For certain men have crept in unnoticed, men who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness, and who deny our only Sovereign and Lord, Jesus Christ. (Jude 1:4)
- *Look, I’ve been standing at the door, knocking! If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him; and I will dine with him, and he with me. (Revelation 3:20)*
- The beast that you saw once was, and now is not, but soon will arise out of the abyss, only to go to destruction. And those who dwell on the earth—those whose names have not been written in the Scroll of Life from the founding of the world—will stand in awe when they see the beast that once was, and now is not, but soon will be present. (Revelation 17:8)
- *Now the Spirit and the Bride say, “Come!” So let the one who hears say, “Come!” And let the one who is thirsty come. Let the one who so desires take the water of life without cost! (Revelation 22:17)*

CHAPTER 5

LIMITED ATONEMENT

1. The Big Idea

Total depravity is the darkened sky against which the four lightning flashes of divine grace shine forth. The first is unconditional election: God's gracious choice, before the founding of the world, of a people whom he purposed to redeem and make his own. The second is our theme in the present chapter: limited atonement, also referred to as definite atonement and particular redemption. Though planned in eternity, this grace is granted and effectuated in the fullness of time. Here God's incarnate Son, standing in for the elect as their substitute, actually accomplishes their redemption by paying the penalty for their sins, which is physical and spiritual death. However, in doing this he actually accomplishes something more: He purchases for them the two remaining graces—irresistible grace (or effectual calling) and perseverance (or preservation) in the faith—thus ensuring that in due season God's elect will indeed inherit the fullness of eternal life.

Undeniably, there is a significant gulf between the Arminian and the Calvinist views of the atonement. For the Arminian, the *sole* purpose of the atonement was that Christ should suffer (the penalty) for all the sins of all people of all time, thereby making salvation possible for all, on the condition that they will exercise their restored free will to choose Christ.¹ This view is usually called unlimited or universal atonement. For the Calvinist, however, the *primary* (though by no

means sole) purpose of the atonement was that Christ should pay the penalty for all the sins of all God's elect, thereby purchasing for them every necessary spiritual grace by which these dead slaves to sin would be brought to life and back to God: graces such as regeneration, repentance, faith, sanctification, preservation, glorification, and eternal life with God in the world to come. In sum, the Arminian view is that the sole aim of the atonement was to make redemption *possible for all*, all depending on the exercise of man's free will; the Calvinist view is that the primary aim of the atonement was to make redemption *actual for some*, all depending on the exercise of God's sovereign grace.

In the pages ahead I will defend the Calvinist view of the atonement, but in a way that honors the concerns of my Arminian brethren, whose insights on this subject are vital for a balanced understanding of the work of Christ. In so doing, I hope to show that the gulf between the two views is not as great as we may think. Let us begin by exploring the Calvinist view in light of three great facts: the explicit teaching of Scripture, the logic of God's plan of redemption, and the testimony of real world experience.

The Teaching of Scripture

As you read the texts cited in the last section of this chapter you will see how fulsomely they teach that the primary purpose of Christ's death was indeed to effectively and infallibly redeem God's elect. For example, it is written that he (Christ) entered the world to save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21); that he gave his life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28); that he laid down his life for the sheep (John 10:11), for his friends (John 15:13), for his Church (Acts 20:28), for his Bride (Eph. 5:25), and for "us"—"us" being explicitly defined as God's elect (Rom. 5:8–11; 8:31–39). Such texts—which are numerous, explicit, clear, and forceful—create a strong presumption that the primary purpose of Christ's death was to pay for the sins of a particular people: God's elect.

Among these texts there is one that is of special importance, since it dramatically reveals the close connection between Christ's atoning

work and the other doctrines of grace. Listen, then, to the Apostle Paul, as he plants the saints in the solid ground of Christian assurance, victory, and joy:

³¹ What then shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, how shall he not also, together with him, freely give us all things? ³³ Who can bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; ³⁴ who then can condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—or rather, who was raised, who also is at the right hand of God, and who also makes intercession for us. ³⁵ What then can separate us from the love of Christ: Can tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ (Just as it is written, “For your sake we are put to death all day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter.”) ³⁷ Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is found in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:31–39)

Paul begins by stating that God is for “us.” Who is “us”? Verse 33 supplies the answer: It is God's elect. And what do we learn about God's elect in this passage? First, that he chose them: They are his elect, his chosen ones. Here is unconditional election. Secondly, we learn in verse 32 that God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up as an atoning sacrifice in behalf of his elect. This is particular redemption. Thirdly, we learn that the elect are indeed *very* secure, since, on the grounds of the atonement, God has justified them once and for all (v. 33); and since, on those same grounds, Christ is eternally interceding in their behalf (v. 34). He is their Advocate, pleading the merits and the efficacy of his shed blood whenever the accuser of the brethren tries to charge them with sin before God (1 John 2:1; Rev. 12:10–12). However, Paul knows that they could not possibly enjoy this security

had God not effectively called them to repentance and faith in Christ (Rom. 8:29). Here, then, is irresistible grace (effectual calling), which is evidenced by the fact that the elect are spiritually united with God and Christ in love (vv. 35, 39). Here too is the perseverance and preservation of the saints, since, on the grounds of Christ's infallible work in life and death, no created thing or event can ever separate them from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus their Lord (vv. 38–39). And who is sufficient for all these wonderful things?

Wonderful as they are, however, our Arminian brothers demur from the Calvinist understanding of the atonement. Instead, they direct our attention to a number of NT passages that seem to convey a different idea: that speak of Christ as giving his life as a ransom for all (1 Tim. 2:6), or of his taking away the sin of the world (John 1:29), or as being a propitiation for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2). In a moment we will examine such texts, for they shed important light on other purposes of the atonement. But first we must consider our next point: the logic of God's plan of salvation.

The Logic of Redemption

The crucial idea here is that by its very nature the atonement *actually* redeems those for whom it was made, rather than simply making redemption possible for those who choose to exercise faith in Christ. Why does the atonement *actually* redeem? Answer: Because at the heart of God's redemptive work in behalf of his people there lies the stupendous spiritual reality of *imputation*. Let us consider this crucial subject in some depth.

Beneath the light of NT revelation we now can see that throughout all history God has dealt with his human children through one of two persons: the first Adam or the Last, who is Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:45). In Eden the first Adam stood as the head or representative of the entire family of man. As such, his performance in the test of life would work good or ill for the whole human race. Why? Because God had purposed to *impute* (or credit) his performance to his offspring. Therefore, on condition of Adam's obedience, God, in

due season, would impart eternal life to him and his children. On the other hand, in the event of Adam's disobedience, God would impute his guilt to his children, and therefore, in a measure, withdraw himself from them, lay a curse upon the natural world, and expose the universe, life, and man to evil, suffering, death, condemnation, wrath, and final judgment. As we know all too well, Adam did indeed sin, with the result that both man and nature suddenly stood in need of *redemption*: that is, of *rescue* from all the deadly enemies introduced into the world by man's sin, and *restoration* to all the blessings of eternal life that were offered to him in Eden.

This total redemption is precisely what Jesus Christ accomplished for God's people (and their world) through his righteous life, atoning death, and victorious resurrection. And he accomplished it because of *imputation*. The story here begins with the incarnation, with God sending his Son into the world to become the Last Adam: the eternal, life-giving head and representative of a renewed humanity. But for that to be possible, he must first live a perfectly righteous life, fulfilling all righteousness by passing every God-given test, and by obeying every God-given command. Having done so, it would then be possible for God to impute (or credit) his perfect righteousness to all who believe in him, thereby securing for them the eternal life originally promised to Adam and his family in the Garden of Eden (Matt. 3:15).

But there is more. For the holy God could not possibly impute Christ's righteousness to a people who were guilty of sin, and who therefore were living under wrath and condemnation. Accordingly, he had first to impute their sins to Christ; and Christ—standing in for them as their substitute, head, and representative—had then to satisfy the requirements of divine justice by paying the penalty for those sins through his sacrificial death. Once having done so—once having laid a sure foundation for his people's salvation—God would then be at liberty to come to them (through the gospel preaching of the Church), grant them new birth, bring them to repentance and faith, forgive their sins, credit them with Christ's righteousness, rescue them from every evil consequence of their sin, and impart to them all the blessings of

eternal life. In short, *divine redemption is based on double imputation*. As it is written: “(God) made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor. 5:21; Rom. 5:12ff).

These are indeed lofty ideas, and sometimes difficult to grasp. Accordingly, God has graciously given us a number of historical and prophetic pictures designed to help us understand the mystery of imputation and bring it home powerfully to our hearts.

For example, shortly after the fall of Adam and Eve God himself killed an animal so that he might clothe the guilty pair (Gen. 3:21). Here—for those with eyes trained by the NT—we have a prophetic picture of imputation, atonement, and redemption. For God killed the animal (was it a lamb?), knowing that in days ahead he would fulfill the symbolism of this act by sending his Son into the world as the Last Adam and the Lamb of God. By his Spirit, and through the secret workings of his providence, he would grant his Christ to live a perfectly righteous life, bring him to the Cross, impute to him the sins of his people (including those of Adam and Eve), and put him to death in their behalf (Is. 53:10–11). Having thus clothed the Lamb of God with his people’s sins, he would henceforth be free to clothe all who trust in Christ with his (Christ’s) perfect righteousness (which includes the merits of his atoning sacrifice), so that they might receive mercy, grace, forgiveness, right standing with God, and the gift of eternal life. Little did Adam and Eve know that by humbly allowing God to clothe them with the skin of the animal he himself had slain, they were actually receiving the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the (elect) world and clothes it with the righteousness of God (John 1:12, 29; Rom. 1:17).

Again, under the Mosaic Law the priests would regularly lay their hands on the sin offering, after which the animal was killed and its blood presented as an atonement for human sins (Lev. 4:14). Likewise, on the Day of Atonement the high priest would lay his hands on the scapegoat, confess the sins of the nation over it, and send it off into the wilderness to die (Lev. 16:20–22). Both ceremonies prophetically

picture the imputation of sins to Jesus Christ, who, through his death, became the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the (elect) world (John 1:29).

Or again, consider the prophecy of Isaiah, who likens God's soon-coming Servant to a lamb that goes willingly to the slaughter. The following verses tell us why:

Surely he took on our infirmities and carried our sorrows; yet we considered him stricken by God, struck down and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray, each one has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:4–6 BSB)

Arguably, this amazing chapter, which God has used to bring multitudes to faith in Christ, gives us Scripture's single clearest description of atonement through the divine imputation of human sin to a holy substitute, followed by a sacrificial death which redeems a particular people by paying the penalty for their sin.

And then there is the vision of the prophet Zechariah, who, to his great consternation, sees Joshua, the high priest, clothed in filthy garments. But there is great good news: The Angel of the LORD is standing by! Moreover, the Angel tells certain others who are also standing there to remove Joshua's filthy garments and replace them with festal robes. Zechariah then declares that Joshua has been forgiven of his iniquity. However, he does not state what the NT later reveals: Joshua is a picture of the Church—God's holy priesthood. The Angel of the LORD is the Son of God, later to become God's one true High Priest. The festal robes are the righteousness of Christ, draped over the shoulders of the Church. But how can Christ's holy robe be laid upon a guilty and polluted people? It is because the sins of those people had previously been laid upon the High Priest and punished. Thus, and

thus alone, can the saints be cleansed, robed, and ever after walk in white (Zech. 3:1–7; 1 Pet. 2:5; Rev. 3:4, 4:4).

Finally, we have our Lord's shocking words to brother Nicodemus: "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so too the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:15). How can it be that the spotless Lamb of God would represent himself as a serpent? The answer, in a word, is *imputation*. Soon God will impute the sins of his elect to the Son of Man. Therefore, *in God's sight*, for a brief but dreadful moment, the Son of Man will become what they are: a people filled with the venom of the serpent of old; a people whose natural inclinations, thoughts, words, and deeds are poisoned with evil; a people guilty of sin and worthy of death. Because Christ will bear their sin, he must die. But thanks be to God, because his death will make an effective atonement for their sin, they will soon be able to look in faith to the risen Christ and live (Num. 21:4–9; John 3:9–15; Rom. 4:25).

These and other NT texts tell us that Christ's death was indeed *penal* and *substitutionary*. They teach us that on Mt. Calvary God imputed the sins of his people to his incarnate Son, after which he punished him with death for those sins. Such texts bring us to the very heart of the gospel and the Church's message to the world: "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God" (1 Pet. 3:18; Rom. 5:8; 1 Cor. 15:3; 2 Cor. 5:14; 1 Thess. 5:10).

John Owen on the Atonement

Having seen from Scripture that imputation lies at the heart of the atonement, we are now ready to think logically about the extent of its saving efficacy. Back in the 17th century the Puritan John Owen tersely and powerfully taught us how to do so. In words slightly modified for the benefit of today's Christian, he wrote:

The Father justly directed his wrath against—and the Son underwent the punishment for—either:

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1. All the sins of all men (the Arminian view)
2. All the sins of some men (the Calvinist view)
3. Some of the sins of all men.

In which case it may be said that:

1. If the third is true, all men have some sins to answer for, and so none are saved.
2. If the second is true, then Christ, in their place, suffered for all the sins of all the elect in the whole world, and this is the truth.
3. If the first is the case, why are not all men free from the punishment due unto their sins?

Our Arminian neighbor will reply, 'Because of unbelief.'

But I ask: Is this unbelief a sin, or is it not?

If it is, then Christ suffered the punishment due unto it, or he did not.

If he did, why must that hinder them more than their other sins for which he died?

If he did not, he did not die for all their sins.

Again, this powerful argument, which has struck multitudes of Calvinists as irrefutable, is predicated on the assumption of the divine imputation of sin. If God actually imputed sins to Christ, then Christ actually paid the penalty for those sins. If he actually paid the penalty for those sins, then those who committed them will actually be forgiven and saved. But if that is so, then it must be the case that God imputed only the sins of his elect to Christ. For since Owen has shown that the Arminian view cannot possibly be true, the only other option is Universalism: the idea that Christ, having died for all, actually saves all. But both Scripture and experience teach us that this is not so; that Christ has always had, and always will have, a chosen flock that he has made his own (Luke 12:32). As it is written:

For you see your calling, brothers, that not many are wise according to the flesh, not many are powerful, and not many are of noble birth. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things that are strong; and God has chosen the lowly things of the world, and the things that are despised, and the things that have no standing at all, to nullify the things that do, so that no flesh will boast in his presence. Yes, he is the reason you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—so that as it is written, “He who boasts, let him boast in the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 1:26–31)

We conclude, then, that both Scripture and logic compel us to confess that God’s primary purpose in the atonement accomplished by his Son was to pay for the sins of his elect, so that righteousness could be imputed to them, so that they might become the redeemed children of God.

The Testimony of Real World Experience

This brings us to our third evidence for the truth of particular redemption: real world experience. Once we understand from Scripture the nature and primary purpose of the atonement, we see immediately that real world experience confirms this view. Just as God has chosen some and not others, and just as Christ has died for the sins of some and not others, so some believe and others do not. The mystery of faith and unbelief now becomes clear. Now we can understand the littleness of Christ’s flock (which nevertheless will indeed constitute a great multitude: Rev. 7:9). Now we can finally dismiss the scandalous notion that those who believe are somehow smarter or better or more diligent than those who don’t. Now we can see that faith is a gift that Christ purchased for his people on the day he atoned for their sins. As Peter wrote: “He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the

sake of you who, *through him*, are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God” (1 Pet. 1:20–22, NASB). And now we can learn to thank, love, and forever give him glory because he did.

Rightly Understanding the Universality Texts

We are ready now to examine biblical texts commonly held by Arminians to teach a universal atonement; that is, to teach that Christ died to pay the penalty for all the sins of all people of all times and places, thereby making salvation possible for all who hear of him and choose to come to him in faith. I will call them *the universality texts*. Before considering them in detail, a few preliminary remarks are in order.

First, when good Bereans come across these texts they will realize that it is impossible to interpret them in isolation from the rest of the NT. Yes, on the face of things some of them do indeed appear to teach the Arminian view. However, to interpret them in the Arminian manner is immediately to bring them into conflict with the other texts that teach a definite atonement. Therefore, because God is a God who cannot lie or contradict himself, biblical interpreters will have to search for ways to harmonize the particularity texts with the universality texts. When they do, they will find that the ways abound.

Secondly, in approaching these texts good Bereans will keep in mind that starting from the Day of Pentecost the good news about Christ and his Kingdom was no longer confined to ethnic Israel. Rather, in accordance with God’s own purpose and plan (Gen. 22:18), it overflowed the borders of Israel and went out into “all the world” (Mark 16:15), to “all nations” (Matt. 24:14, 28:19; Rom. 16:26), and to “all men everywhere” (John 13:35; Acts 17:30). Once Christ was lifted up on the Cross—and once his divine person and redemptive work were vindicated by the resurrection—God was finally free to draw his elect of all nations to his Son and to himself through the further lifting up of Christ in preaching (John 12:32; 1 Cor. 1:21). Accordingly, good Bereans will pause to consider whether universality

texts that *seem* to say Christ died for all men without *exception*, might actually mean that he died for all men without ethnic, social, or gender *distinction* (Gal. 3:28). More on this a moment.

Our third and final point is especially important. In interpreting the universality texts, good Bereans will pay close attention to the characteristics of these texts that have spoken to the hearts of their Arminian brothers. And this means keeping the Test Perspective in view. Broadly, they will remember that God is pleased to test all mankind through his self-revelation in nature, conscience, Christ, and the gospel. More narrowly, they will recall that one of his great purposes in sending his Son was that the whole world—all men without distinction, *and all men without exception*—should learn of the Savior’s all-sufficient sacrifice for sins, take the test of life, pass it, and thus be saved. It is, then, through the universal preaching of the gospel in these last days that the words spoken through Isaiah are finally fulfilled: “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is no other” (Is. 45:22).

The All-Sufficient Sacrifice of Christ

I have just spoken of Christ’s sacrifice as “all-sufficient,” and have suggested that it is this all-sufficiency that makes it possible for God and the Church to bring the gospel to all people without exception, and to invite, urge, and even command them to come to Christ for salvation. Let us take a moment to explore this subject, since it is vital for a proper understanding of the universality texts, for empowering the saints to preach the gospel to all, and for encouraging non-Christians to respond to it.

Calvinists say that on the cross God imputed the sins of his elect to Christ and then punished him instead of them. But now suppose that God had imputed the sins of all men without exception to Christ. Would Christ have had to suffer any more than he did? I find this unthinkable. The sinfulness of the sins of God’s elect cannot be quantified. Rather, since God is infinitely holy, and since the sins of his elect are infinitely culpable, only an infinitely holy and righteous Savior

could ever pay for them. But surely a sacrifice that is sufficient to pay for a bloc of infinitely culpable sins is also sufficient to pay for all the sins of all mankind without exception.

Again, this intrinsic all-sufficiency appears to be the spiritual ground and warrant for the Church to preach Christ and the Cross to all men indiscriminately. Yes, because the atonement is definite, Christians can be fully confident that the Holy Spirit will use their preaching to bring in God's elect. But because the atonement is all-sufficient, they can also be fully confident that through their message the Holy Spirit will put everyone who hears it to the gospel test.

Earlier we saw that Jesus' words to Nicodemus confirm this very thing: When sinners reject Christ and the gospel, they stand condemned because they have knowingly chosen darkness over light (John 3:9–21). Interestingly, we find the same truth in the Lord's further words to his disciples:

“And I did not tell you these things from the beginning because I was with you. But now I am going away to him who sent me; and none of you has asked me, ‘Where are you going?’ But because I have said these things to you sorrow has filled your heart. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: It is for your own good that I am leaving; for if I don't leave, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go my way, I will send him to you. And when he has come, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I am going to my Father and you see me no more; and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged.” (John 16:4–11)

With the benefit of NT hindsight, we can see that here the Lord is teaching his apostles (and us) about the work of the Spirit in human hearts as the Church proclaims, interprets, and spotlights the practical implications of his death, resurrection, and ascension. For our present purposes the crucial phrase here is: “He will convict the world.” To

whom does the Lord refer when he speaks of *the world*? The answer, I believe, is twofold.

From within the Sovereignty Perspective we can see that he is referring to all elect persons who are presently in the world (i.e., in sin and unbelief), but whom the Spirit will draw out of the world by illuminating the message of the gospel, thereby convicting them concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment. In their case this will be *full* conviction, the kind of conviction that results in saving faith. Moreover, it is through just this kind of conviction that God will create *a whole new world* in Christ, from which the current ruler of this world (Satan) will be forever cast out (John 12:31; 2 Cor. 5:19; Rev. 12:7–12).

But there is more. For when we consider the same text beneath the light of the Test Perspective we also see that through the preaching of the Cross the Holy Spirit will convict all people without exception, in the sense that he will invite and urge all who hear the gospel to pursue the truth about the connection between Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension on the one hand, and sin, righteousness, and judgment on the other. In other words, through the Church's preaching *all people* will be put to the test. And when they are, it is certain that *some people* will indeed pursue the truth until they fully see it, embrace it, and pass the gospel test unto eternal life (John 3:16–21). It is in this confidence that the Church brings the gospel to every creature.

But again: How exactly is it that the Holy Spirit can convict all without exception? Surely it is because the work of Christ in his life, death, and resurrection *is sufficient to redeem all without exception*.

Along these lines let us also note that just as it is fitting for God to *offer* Christ to all, so too it is fitting for him to *command* all to come to him. Why? Because on the one hand, man's bondage to sin does not nullify the fact that he is a morally responsible creature with an intrinsic obligation to obey his creator. As we saw earlier, human beings are not mere animals, but instead are cast in the image and likeness of their maker, aware of their responsibility to seek and obey him, and free to do so if only they will (Rom. 1:18f). On the other hand,

God has set forth the Lord Jesus Christ as the one and only Mediator between himself and sinful man, and has identified him as the proper object of all human faith and obedience (Rom. 3:21–26; 1 Tim. 2:5). In particular, God has appointed Christ as the divine-human Prophet (Teacher), Priest (Savior), and King (Ruler) of the whole world (Acts 2:36). Accordingly, all men without exception are under obligation to receive his prophetic teaching, *appropriate the benefits of his priestly sacrifice*, and obey his royal commands. Here, then, is why the Church, in the same manner as the apostles, can not only *offer* Christ to all people, but also lovingly remind them that God is commanding all people everywhere to repent and turn to his Son in faith, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life (John 3:36; Acts 17:30; 2 Thess. 1:8).

With these thoughts in mind we are ready at last to look at the universality texts themselves. I have divided them into three categories. Since others have examined them at greater length, my remarks will be brief.²

Category #1: All, Us All, We All, All Men

In the first category we have atonement texts that contain the words *all*, *us all*, *we all*, and *all men* (Is. 53:6; Rom. 5:18; 2 Cor. 5:14–15; 1 Tim. 2:1–7, 4:10; Titus 2:11; 1 Pet. 3:18). Obviously such words and phrases strike a note of universality. Nevertheless, on closer inspection it turns out that they all teach, or are fully compatible with, the idea of a definite atonement.

1. Isaiah 53

This chapter contains Isaiah's extended prophecy about the priestly work of the Messiah, the Suffering Servant of the LORD. Verse 6 reads, "All we like sheep have gone astray; each of us has turned to his own way. But the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." That is, the Father has imputed to the Servant, and punished, the sins of "all we" and "us all." Do these phrases refer to all men without exception? No, for later in the same prophecy Isaiah asks, "But who considered

that he was cut off from the land of the living for the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due?" (v. 8). The sacrifice of the Suffering Servant was made in behalf of Isaiah's people, who are God's people, whether Jew or Gentile (1 Pet. 2:24). This is definite atonement. Also, speaking through Isaiah, God goes on to say, "By his knowledge, the righteous One, my Servant, will justify the many, as he will bear their iniquities" (v. 11). The Suffering Servant bore the iniquities of "the many," but not of all. Echoing this passage, Jesus said, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45). This too is definite atonement.

2. Romans 5:18

This text reads, "So then: Just as one transgression resulted in condemnation for all men, so too did one act of righteousness result in justification and life for all men." Though at first glance this verse might seem to support the Arminian view, it actually refutes it. Why? Because Paul says nothing about Christ's "one act of righteousness" (i.e., his atoning death) simply making justification *available*. On the contrary, his premise is that just as the one evil act of Adam made condemnation and death *inevitable* for all who are born in Adam, so too the one righteous act of Christ will make justification *inevitable* for all whom God calls to Christ. Accordingly, this text either entails universalism or assumes a definite atonement. That the latter is Paul's premise is clear from Romans 8:29:

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. Moreover, those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Who are the "all men" who will experience "justification and life"? Here we have the apostle's answer: They are those whom God foreknew (i.e., chose), predestined, called, justified, and glorified. Adam's

one evil act unavoidably brought all of his physical descendants under condemnation; Christ's one righteous act will infallibly bring all of his spiritual descendants—all of God's elect—out from under condemnation and into righteousness and eternal life. Our text strongly favors particular redemption.

3. 2 Corinthians 5:14–15

For the love of Christ compels us, having reached this conclusion: If one died for all, then all died. And he died for all so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and rose again in their behalf.

The message here is quite close to that of Romans 5:18. Who are the “all” for whom Christ died? They are the ones who, in God's sight, were put to death with him when he died on the Cross. As a result of that death, in due season, and through the preaching of the gospel, they all will surely rise again with him to newness of life. But since all without exception do not rise to newness of life, Christ did not die for all without exception, but for his elect. This is confirmed in verse 21 of the same chapter, where Paul says that at the Cross God made Christ, who knew no sin, to be sin *on our behalf*, so that *we* might become the righteousness of God in him. That is, at the Cross God imputed “our” sins to Christ, so that in due season he could impute Christ's righteousness to “us.” As other important Pauline texts make explicit, the apostle understands “our,” “us,” and “we” to be God's elect (Rom. 8:31–39; 1 Thess. 5:9–10). Note carefully, however, that this conviction does not stop Paul from preaching Christ and his atoning work to all men without exception, just as he does here to a mix of Corinthian believers and unbelievers (2 Cor. 5:11–20). The sacrifice of Christ is sufficient for all without exception. Therefore Paul, together with God, desires all without exception to hear of it and believe it.

4. 1 Timothy 2:1–7

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and the giving of thanks be made on behalf of all men—and in particular on behalf of kings and all who hold high office, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all reverence and dignity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, the testimony to be borne in its own appointed times; and to this end I myself was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, and not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in matters of faith and spiritual truth.

Here is a Golden Strand text if ever there was one, since here there is matter for both the Calvinist and Arminian to enjoy. Read from within the Sovereignty Perspective, we see afresh that God desires all men without distinction to be saved: whether kings, men in high office, Jew, Gentile, male, female, rich, poor, etc. (Gal. 3:28). Moreover, his desire will indeed be satisfied, for he has given Christ as a ransom and a Mediator for all these kinds of people. And because the ransom has now been paid, it is certain that the captives will be set free. Fully confident that this is so, the apostle is eager to herald the good news of the gospel, through which the great liberation will infallibly come to pass.

But this text may also be read from within the Test Perspective. In other words, here we can also find Paul saying what the New Testament says elsewhere: (1) that God desires all men without exception to be saved; (2) that in the person of Jesus Christ he has given to the whole world its one and only Savior and Mediator; (3) that Christ's atoning death is a ransom sufficient for the salvation of all; (4) that God desires the testimony about Christ to be given to all men without exception; (5) that all Christians should pray for all men as the Spirit leads; and (6) that all Christians (like Paul) should share the gospel with all men

as opportunity arises and the Spirit leads (John 3:16; Acts 1:7–8, 4:12, 17:22–31; Rom. 10:1; 2 Cor. 5:11–21; 2 Pet. 3:9).

Down through the centuries Calvinists and Arminians have made this text a great battleground. May God grant us no longer to quarrel over it, but to meet and walk upon it together as if upon a golden strand.

5. 1 Timothy 4:10

Our text reads, “For to this end [i.e., the spread of godliness and eternal life] we both toil and struggle, having placed our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe.” Here Paul certainly has the atonement in mind (see 1 Tim. 2:1–8); but it is not the unlimited atonement of our Arminian brothers. Rather, his theme is the universality of God’s purpose in the gospel. He is saying that now, because of the work of Christ, the living God is not only the Savior of elect Jews, but also of elect Gentiles (Rom. 3:29, 9:24; 1 John 2:2). In God’s purpose and plan he is *already* their Savior; but he is *especially* their Savior when they hear of Christ and believe (1 Tim. 2:4, 4:10). Therefore he sends his heralds to all without exception, proclaiming an all-sufficient sacrifice for sins, thereby putting all to the gospel test, thereby bringing in his elect from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation (Rom. 10:14–15, 1 Tim. 2:5–7; Rev. 7:9). Paul is not presupposing an unlimited atonement, but a definite, yet all-sufficient, atonement.

6. Titus 2:11–14

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires, and to live sensibly, righteously, and devoutly in the present *evil* age, eagerly watching for our blessed hope: the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us in order to redeem us from every lawless act, and to purify for himself a people for his own possession, zealous for good works.

In the paragraphs preceding this text Paul has given practical instructions to older men, older women, younger men, slaves, and Titus himself. Then he concludes with the above. Accordingly, the context strongly favors the idea that the “all men” to whom Paul refers are all kinds of people—young, old, men, women, slave, free—without distinction. His big idea is that the purpose of God in sending Christ, and the purpose of Christ in giving himself up, was to redeem the elect, with the practical result that they will live pure, sensible, devout, and fruitful lives, even as they wait eagerly for their Lord’s return. Note also how Paul sounds the note of election when he identifies Christ’s mission as the gathering of “a people for his own possession” (v. 14). This phrase is closely linked with divine election both in the OT and the NT (Deut. 4:20, 7:6, 14:2; 1 Pet. 2:9–10). And again, we know from Romans 8:31ff and 1 Thessalonians 5:9–10 that in Paul’s mind the “us” for whom Christ died is God’s elect. Thus, the Sovereignty Perspective seems clearly to dominate this text.

Nevertheless, it is also possible to view it through the Test Perspective. In that case Paul would be saying that one of God’s purposes in sending Christ into the world was to call and commission the Church to speak to all people without exception. Accordingly, her message is that God desires all people everywhere to live in a godly and hopeful manner, and that he has made this possible by their coming to the Savior, whose atoning sacrifice is sufficient to redeem them from every lawless act and to purify them as a people for his own possession. Interestingly, this appears to have been the mindset of the great apostle when he reasoned with governor Felix about righteousness, judgment, self-control, and faith in Christ (Acts 24:24–27). Thus, our text is amenable to both perspectives and to different but related interpretations. Such is exegetical life on the Golden Strand!

Category #2: Us, We, Our

A second category of texts referencing the atonement features the plural personal pronouns *us*, *we*, and *our*. In some cases there is a measure of ambiguity, seemingly opening a door for the idea of an

unlimited atonement. However, in most (if not all) cases, the context strongly favors particular redemption.

1. Romans 5:8

This text reads, “Yet God displays his own love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Here a definite atonement is clearly in view. Who are the “us” for whom Christ died? The context answers explicitly: those who have been justified (v. 9), those who are now reconciled to God (v. 10), those are assuredly saved from the wrath to come (vv. 9–10), and those who now exult in God through Christ (v. 11). In short, “us” refers to believers. Moreover, in the next bloc of verses it becomes clear that “us” refers to those for whom the last Adam died (vv. 15–21). And as we just saw in our discussion of Romans 5:18, these are God’s elect (cf. Rom. 8:33). So again, in this text Paul seems clearly to have in mind a definite atonement. Nevertheless, in his words we can hear God speaking to all without exception: “Even when the entire world was sunken in sin, I sent my Son to die, so that all might hear of him, believe, and live. This demonstrates my love for you. So come to him, and through him receive my love.”

2. Romans 8:31–39

Earlier we discussed this text at length. Here Paul teaches that God gave up Christ to an atoning death for “us all” (v. 32). Then he identifies “us” as God’s elect (v. 33). Once again we find him teaching definite atonement.

3. 1 Corinthians 15:3

1 Corinthians 15 is the classic NT chapter dealing with the resurrection of the body. In verse 3 of that chapter Paul writes, “For I passed on to you first of all what I myself also received, namely, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.” For whose sins did Christ die? For “our” sins—that is, for those of the brethren (vv. 1, 58). That the apostle has the brethren in mind is further confirmed in

verse 22, where he writes, “For as in Adam all die, so too in Christ all will be made alive.” Here Paul introduces the idea of union with Christ, a theme he will later develop in 2 Corinthians 5:16ff and Romans 6:5–11. In God’s sight those for whom Christ died, died with Christ; and those for whom Christ rose from the dead, have risen—or will rise—with him: whether to newness of life through the new birth (Rom. 6:4), or, as here, to the fullness of eternal life through the bodily resurrection of the righteous. The atonement—and also the resurrection that vindicates its efficacy—secures union with Christ, both in death (to sin) and in life (with God). But since both Scripture and experience teach that all are not united with Christ, we must conclude that the primary (though not the exclusive) purpose of the atonement was to secure the full redemption of God’s elect.

Category #3: The World, the Whole World

Our third and final category of universality texts associates the atonement of Christ with the *world*. We have already discussed the single most important text in this category, John 3:16. Here we consider five more.

1. John 1:29

When John the Baptizer saw Jesus coming towards him, he cried out, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” These words recall two OT institutions: the Passover and the Day of Atonement. In the original Passover the father of each Jewish family killed a lamb, after which he applied its blood to the doorposts and lintels of his home (Ex. 12:1ff). This secured the salvation of the first-born sons, but only those of God’s OT elect, not of the Egyptians. John’s words also recall a central ritual of the Day of Atonement, in which the sins of God’s OT elect were laid upon a scapegoat, after which the animal bore them away, out of God’s sight, into the wilderness (Lev. 16:20–22). In both cases, the idea of a definite atonement is present. Thus, John the Baptizer was saying that Christ, by means

of his atoning sacrifice, would infallibly take away the sins—and the sin—of the new world that God is creating, a world populated by elect people from every tribe, tongue, family, and nation, for whom Christ died without distinction. To say otherwise is to entangle us in universalism, a doctrine that is ruled out by many other passages of Scripture (Matt. 7:13–14, 25:46; 2 Thess. 1:3–10; Rev. 20:10).

2. John 4:42

Because of the testimony of a certain Samaritan woman who had spoken with Jesus at the local well, many people in her city welcomed Christ and his message of salvation. John writes of them, “And they were saying to the woman, ‘No longer do we believe because of what you said, for now we have heard him ourselves and know that this man truly is the Savior of the world’” (John 4:42). These people spoke truly, and in two senses. As the context makes clear, Christ will in fact be the Savior of all men without distinction: not only of elect Jews, but also of elect Samaritans, and of elect people from every tribe, tongue, family, and nation. This is the Sovereignty Perspective. But in accordance with the Test Perspective, we can also hear them truly saying that Jesus Christ is the one and only all-sufficient Savior of the world, given by God to all men without exception through the preaching of the gospel, so that all might take and pass the gospel test.

3. John 12:27–33

It is Jesus’ final Passover. Certain Greeks have approached Philip, asking for an audience with their Master. Philip and Andrew report this to him. Then the Lord says:

“Now my soul is troubled. So should I say, ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this very reason I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, saying, “I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again.” So when the crowd that was standing nearby heard this, they said it had thundered; but others said, “An angel has spoken to him!” But Jesus responded and said, “This

voice did not come for my sake, but for yours. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And as for me, if I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all to myself.” (Now Jesus said this in order to signify the kind of death he was about to die.)

The death of Christ is imminent. He is about to be lifted up from the earth. As John tells us, he is about to die on the Cross. When he is nailed to the Cross and lifted up on it, God the Father will impute the sins of his elect to Christ. In other words, he will impute the sins of “this world”—the world of elect sinners (past, present, and future) presently under the dominion of Satan—to his Son. And in the suffering and death of his Son, God will judge and condemn “this world.” The result will be that Christ is further lifted up through the preaching of the gospel. And then, through that very instrumentality, God will infallibly draw all of his elect to his Son, and the ruler of this world will be cast out of their lives once and for all. At the end of the age, when all of God’s elect have finally come to faith, Christ will return, raise the dead, transform the living, judge all men and angels, and create new heavens and a new earth, the eternal home of the redeemed. In that day “this world,” which was judged on the Cross, will become the altogether glorious new world for which Christ died. This rich and important text powerfully supports particular redemption.

4. 2 Corinthians 5:16–21

We discussed this text earlier, but must do so again in light of its declaration that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. It reads:

¹⁶ Therefore from now on we regard no one according to the flesh. Even if we have known Christ according to the flesh, now we do so no more. ¹⁷ Therefore, if any man is in Christ there is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come to be! ¹⁸ And all things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ namely,

that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them; and he has entrusted the message of reconciliation to us.²⁰ Thus, we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God himself were pleading through us. On behalf of Christ we implore you: Be reconciled to God.²¹ For he made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.

Paul has received—and is busy exercising—a ministry of reconciliation. His job is to declare to all alike that God, at the Cross, was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them (vv. 19, 21). What does he mean by *the world*? Is it all men without exception the world over, or is it all men the world over without distinction?

The text itself supplies the answer. Verse 18 tells us that the object of God's program of reconciliation is *us*. Here Paul is thinking primarily of himself and the other apostolic heralds, but also of *us Christians*, all who have been (or will be) reconciled to God, and all who will serve as ambassadors of Christ, each in his own way (Rom. 5:10; Eph. 1:11–14; Col. 1:22; Rev. 11:3–14, 22:17). Verse 21 further identifies *us*, and therefore also *the world* that God was reconciling at the Cross. It consists of those whose sins were actually imputed to Christ, so that Christ's righteousness will actually be imputed to them (v.19). Finally, we have verse 17, in which he further identifies "us" and "the world" as those who are (or will become) new creations in Christ.

Taking all this into account, we find Paul saying here that at the Cross God was launching—and laying the foundation for—a program of universal reconciliation, such that all of his elect, all over the world, will in due time be reconciled to him and become new spiritual creatures in Christ. In other words, God's purpose in the Cross was to secure the redemption, reconciliation, and creation of a whole new world in Christ. We therefore conclude that *the world* in verse 19 does not refer to all men without exception the world over. Nor could it,

since this would entangle us in universalism. Rather, Paul's focus was on God's elect the world over.

But before passing on let us note once again that God's program of reconciliation—decreed before the founding of the world—includes not only the creation of a new spiritual world in Christ, but also the *commissioning* of that world. For no sooner has God reconciled the citizens of his new spiritual world, than he sends them back out into the old sinful world, wherein, through the preaching of the gospel, they will make an all-sufficient Christ available to all men everywhere without exception, so that they too may take and pass the gospel test. And if we who are now ambassadors of Christ are having trouble thinking of what to say, let us simply use the words of the apostle to invite beloved neighbors to cross the great divide and discover that they too are one of "us":

We are ambassadors for Christ, as if God himself were pleading through us. On behalf of Christ we implore you: Be reconciled to God. For he made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.

5. 1 John 2:1–3

In his letter to the churches of Asia the Apostle John writes:

My little children, I am writing you these things so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And he himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours alone, but also for those of the whole world.

John is writing largely to Gentile Christians. Heretics have infiltrated their churches, claiming that they have no sin, though in fact they are walking in sin (1 John 1:8, 10). John writes to keep God's elect on track: They themselves still have sin, and will therefore commit sin. But the good news is that, seated above, they have an Advocate with the Father: Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the saints' great High Priest, ever living to make intercession for them based on the merits

of his atoning sacrifice, which, in their case, propitiated (or appeased) the wrath of God (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25). For this reason, God the Father no longer counts their sins against them, but declares them to be righteous in his sight, clothed with the righteousness of Christ himself (2 Cor. 5:19, 21; Gal. 3:27). Therefore, they must constantly strive to align their living with their standing. If and when they sin, they must confess and forsake their sins, trusting that they already stand forgiven based on the atoning work and present intercession of their Advocate in heaven, Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:1–2, 6:1–23, 8:1–39; 1 John 1:5–2:1–2).

In thus orienting them towards the Person and Work of Christ, John now says, “And he himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours alone, but also for those of the whole world.” He means that Christ’s sacrifice paid the penalty not only for the sins of us Jewish believers, but also for those of elect Gentiles the world over. That this is John’s thought is clear from the Lord’s own words in John 10:11 and 16:

“I am the Good Shepherd; the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep . . . I have other sheep which are not of this fold. I must bring them as well, and they will hear my voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd.”

Echoing this thought, we also have John 11:51–52. Caiaphas, the Jewish chief priest, has told his colleagues in the Sanhedrin that it is expedient for Jesus to die in order to save the Jewish nation from Roman retribution. Commenting on this, the apostle writes:

Now this he did not say on his own; rather, since he was high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for that nation alone, but also that he would gather together into one all the children of God who are scattered abroad.

It is likely that Jesus’ death did in fact temporarily save the Jewish nation from physical destruction at the hands of Rome, since his ministry had roused the people to a Messianic fervor that threatened the rule of their foreign overlords (Luke 19:28–39). But is that the main

thrust of Caiaphas' unconscious prophecy? Probably not, since John's commentary is most naturally understood as saying that Jesus would die *to the same end* for two different nations. He would die to secure the redemption of "the nation" of elect Jews living in Palestine, and would also do the same for "the nation" of elect Jews and Gentiles scattered throughout the world.³ In 1 John 2:1–3 the apostle appears to be saying the same thing: Jesus Christ is an atoning sacrifice, not only for the sins of elect Jewish believers, but also for those of elect Gentiles the world over.

Conclusion

In this section we have seen that biblical teaching about the (primary) nature and purpose of the atonement, plus sound logic, plus real world experience, all bring us to the same conclusion: By his death on the Cross, Christ actually paid the penalty for the sins of his people, thereby actually securing their redemption. Therefore, in due season, through the gospel preaching of the Church, the Holy Spirit will actually apply that redemption to God's elect, with the result that all of Christ's children will actually be "gathered into one." We have seen that the "universality texts" commonly cited by Arminians in defense of an unlimited atonement either teach, or are fully compatible with, the idea of a definite atonement. However, we have also seen that our Arminian brethren have a point. A crucial part of God's purpose in sending Christ to live, die, and rise again was to make the good news of the gospel—centered around the world's one and only Savior—available to all without exception, so that all may take the test of life. Moreover, we have seen that a number of NT texts, including some of the universality texts, teach this very thing. Accordingly, the Bible gives us a balanced view of our Lord's atoning work, making it possible for Calvinist and Arminian to walk together on this especially rough patch of the Golden Strand.

2. The Balancing Factors

In the last section I tried to show that in teaching us about the atonement the Bible itself contributes both to the Sovereignty Perspective and the Test Perspective, and that it gives us a theologically balanced revelation on this challenging subject. In the present section I attempt some further balancing, this time of a more practical nature. Here I have two audiences in view. I want first to speak to seekers of spiritual truth and experience: people who are presently taking the gospel test. Then I want to speak to saints: believers who are eager to preach the gospel to everyone without exception, but who may be wondering how they can do so accurately and honestly if the primary purpose of Christ's atonement was to pay the penalty for the sins of God's elect.

Further Words to Seekers

If you are an active seeker of spiritual truth, and if you have been seriously investigating Christianity, you may be aware of the Sovereignty Perspective. In particular, you may be aware of the various biblical texts telling us that on the Cross Christ paid for the sins of God's elect. Perhaps this knowledge troubles you. Perhaps it has even induced a kind of spiritual paralysis, such that now you are unable to move forward in your search due to gnawing doubts and fears as to whether or not God has chosen you, and whether or not Christ has died for you. What next? What can you do to break free?

My guess is that somewhere down deep you already know the answer. It is the testimony of your own soul, the testimony of Scripture, and the only door open to you for the resolution of your doubts and fears. *You must shift your attention away from the Sovereignty Perspective and focus it on the Test Perspective.*

As soon you do, you will again sense the Spirit of God speaking to your heart, encouraging you to press on in your search. As we saw earlier, he speaks to this effect in a great many biblical texts. But surely he does so with special clarity, power, love, and longing in that most

famous of all evangelistic texts, John 3:16. Let us consider it once again, this time focusing our attention on the purpose and nature of Christ's sacrifice.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his uniquely begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him would not perish but have eternal life."

These are the words of the Son of God himself, through whom the Father is speaking to all people without distinction and without exception (John 12:49). That means he is speaking to you. And what exactly is he saying?

First, he is telling you that he loves you, for surely you are part of the world. You must never let any kind, quantity, or duration of personal sin convince you otherwise. Though your troubles may indeed have increased in proportion to your sin, they do not diminish God's love for you in the least, or his desire to see you saved. As long as Today is called Today—as long as you are still alive upon this earth—it is possible to know the forgiveness and love of God (Heb. 3:13).⁴

Secondly, he tells you that he has given you his uniquely begotten Son. In other words, he has set before you—both in history and in your own "case sensitive" encounter(s) with the gospel—the divine Son of God, who, in accordance with the Father's eternal plan, came into the world as a true human being, achieved a perfect righteousness that he is eager to credit to your account, died a sacrificial death that is altogether sufficient to cover your sins, and rose again from the dead to prove to you that these stupendous spiritual realities are trustworthy and true.

Thirdly, you hear him telling you that in order to benefit from this gift all he requires is that you believe in his Son. Scripture tells us that such believing (or faith) has two basic components: one that God must supply, and another that you must supply. For it is God alone who, through the Holy Spirit, can enable you to believe, in the sense of seeing clearly that the Bible and the gospel are true; in the sense of seeing clearly that you need a Savior, and that Jesus Christ is the Savior whom God has given you. On the other hand, it is you alone

who can believe, in the sense of responding to what you have seen by freely placing your trust in Christ (and Christ alone) for the forgiveness of your sins and the gift of eternal life. Yes, belief in the first sense is beyond your control, and this can be unsettling. Nevertheless, God urges you to recall the words of Christ himself, who said that all who ask will receive, all who seek will find, and all who knock will behold the door opening wide before them (Matt. 7:7–11). In other words, God will grant the gifts of seeing and believing to all who are willing to seek his truth through persistent prayer and honest, open-hearted investigation of the Scriptures (Jer. 29:13; John 7:17).

Finally, you hear him issue both a warning and a promise: If you will believe in him, you will receive eternal life; if not, you will perish, in the sense of being separated from God forever under eternal punishment. Why does he offer this stupendous promise? Why does he issue this solemn warning? The answer is obvious: The stakes in the test of life are high, and God wants you to pass it with all his heart.

So then: Through the gospel, which is miraculously summed up in this one single verse, God is testing your love of God, truth, and righteousness. If you will sincerely take his test, he promises that you will pass it. And once you have passed it, you will find that Jesus Christ is indeed your own personal Savior, the One who died effectively for all your sins.

This is the message of Holy Scripture. These are the words of Christ himself. It is difficult to imagine our Arminian brothers asking for anything more.

Further Words to Saints

History proves that the doctrine of particular redemption can raise troubling questions in the hearts of Christians as well. How can God command his Church to offer Christ to all people without exception if in fact Christ did not die to pay the penalty for the sins of all people without exception? How can I sincerely offer Christ to my unsaved neighbor if I'm not sure that Christ actually died for his sins? How can I present the work of Christ to my neighbor in a

way that simultaneously gives him hope, and yet is also faithful to biblical teaching about the nature and purpose of the atonement? These are important questions. Let us take a moment to consider them more closely.

In wrestling with these questions the very first step is to plant ourselves afresh on the Golden Strand. In other words, we must purpose in our hearts to look at them both from the Sovereignty Perspective and the Test Perspective.

Viewing things from the Sovereignty Perspective we can see that (for wise reasons) it has pleased God to use the Church and the preaching of the Gospel as the instruments through which he applies the redemption accomplished by Christ. Christians are to carry the message of salvation to “the whole creation”—to all people without exception—so that through “the foolishness of preaching” the sovereign God himself might call, justify, sanctify, preserve, and finally glorify his elect children (Mark 16:15; 1 Cor. 1:21). The Sovereignty Perspective enables them to do so in the confidence that their labors will not be in vain.

But viewing things from the Test Perspective we can see something more: that it has pleased God to use the foolishness of preaching to test all people everywhere concerning their love of God, truth, and righteousness. This too is why he commands the Church to go: so that she will manifest God’s love for all, communicate his desire and provision for their salvation, confirm and defend the gospel, and so put them to the test of life.

It is, then, by standing squarely on the Golden Strand that the Church receives all the wisdom, commands, motivation, confidence, and equipment she needs to carry the gospel to every creature, thereby fulfilling God’s redemptive purpose and plan.

Suppose, then, that you are a balanced Christian walking comfortably in both the Sovereignty and Test Perspectives. As such, you have all you need to preach the gospel to your neighbor with confidence and skill. For on the one hand, you know that if your neighbor is among God’s elect it may please the Lord to use your gospel proclamation

to bring him to faith. The Sovereignty Perspective emboldens you to plant the seed of the gospel in your neighbor's heart, in hopes that the sovereign God will cause it to spring up into eternal life. On the other hand, you also know that whether or not your neighbor is among the elect, God loves him. You know that he wants him to hear about the Person and Work of Christ, and especially about his all-sufficient sacrifice for sins made on the Cross. You know that as you speak to him of Christ, God will put him to the gospel test. And you know that God would have you help him pass that test by radiating the love of Christ upon him, blessing him through acts of kindness, praying for him in the Spirit, and seizing all God-given opportunities to share gospel truths, cite gospel evidences, and reason with him from the Scriptures. In sum, because of the combined truths of the Sovereignty and Test Perspectives, you can bring the gospel to your neighbor with heartfelt sincerity, skill, and confidence, knowing that you are operating in the will of God.

But you may still be asking, "How can I, as a Calvinist, speak to my neighbor about the work of Christ on the Cross in a way that gives him hope and yet is also faithful to biblical teaching about a definite atonement?"

This is a praiseworthy question, since it manifests a heart that cares not only about the truth, but also about the wellbeing of your neighbor. It manifests a heart that has been touched by God's heart.

Happily, the question is easily answered: We can lovingly and faithfully speak about the atonement when we speak of it just as Christ and the apostles did. Yes, when they addressed spiritually awakened disciples on this subject, there was both need and occasion to explore the elements of the Sovereignty Perspective. This was the children's bread, and God desired to feed them with it. But out in public, in the thick of evangelistic ministry to non-Christians, Christ and the apostles largely took their stand on Test Perspective ground. In so doing their strategy was simple: They made it their mission to set an all-sufficient Savior squarely before the eyes of all without exception, after which they lovingly and earnestly invited them to come to him

in faith. I deeply appreciate the way in which J. I. Packer expressed this thought:

The fact is that the New Testament never calls on any man to repent on the ground that Christ died specifically and particularly for him. The basis on which the New Testament invites sinners to put faith in Christ is simply that they need him, that he offers himself to them, and that those who receive him are promised all the benefits that his death secured for his people. What is universal and all-inclusive in the New Testament is the invitation to faith, and the promise of salvation to all who believe . . . The gospel is not, "Believe that Christ died for everybody's sins, and therefore for yours," any more than it is, "Believe that Christ died only for certain people's sins, and so perhaps for yours." The gospel is, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for sins, and who now offers you himself as your Savior." This is the message that we are to take to the world. We have no business asking people to put faith in any view of the extent of the atonement; our job is to point them to the living Christ, and summon them to trust in him.⁵

Observe from Packer's words how in the matter of evangelism he is actually steering the Christian away from the Sovereignty Perspective and towards the Test Perspective. Am I a Calvinist who desires to share the message of the Cross with my neighbor? Not to fear. There is no need for me to get entangled in discussions about a limited atonement. My mission is simply to communicate, in love, the great truths of John 3:16 to my neighbor, thereby allowing God himself to put him to the gospel test. The Holy Spirit will help me find the right words. Following Packer, I might say, "Christ died for sins, and now offers himself to you as your Savior." I might say, "Christ died for the sins of all who will come to him for salvation, and he invites you to do so now." I might even say, "Christ died for the sins of his people, and he deeply desires for you to become one of them by placing your faith in him." The Lord will give each of us the right words. But it is only by standing on the Test Perspective that we will find the confidence to deliver them to one and all.

Summing up, by anchoring to the Sovereignty Perspective the Christian is emboldened to bring the gospel to all without exception, knowing that God will use this to bring in his elect. By anchoring to the Test Perspective he is further emboldened to bring the gospel to all without exception, knowing that God will use this to put all to the gospel test. Thus, by standing on the Golden Strand the Christian finds himself eager to obey the Great Commission, thoroughly equipped for the task, and confident that as he goes about his business he is fully fulfilling the will of his Lord.

3. The Spiritual Benefits

In this section I want to focus on several spiritual benefits that are unique to the idea of a definite atonement.

First, this doctrine unveils Jesus Christ as a true Savior, with the result that it creates and sustains the worship of him as such. By “true Savior” I mean a Savior who truly saves, a Savior who saves all by himself. Viewed in this light, the Arminian scheme does not portray Christ as a true Savior, but as a co-Savior: He saves his people by making their salvation available, after which they save themselves by freely choosing to come to him. Moreover, in this scheme it is his people who have the last word. Therefore, in the end it is his people who save themselves.

But this is not the teaching of Scripture. To give but one example, here is Isaiah, speaking of Christ’s Second Coming in order to judge and to save, consummately:

Who is this coming from Edom, from Bozrah, with his garments stained crimson? Who is this, robed in splendor, striding forward in the greatness of his strength? “It is I, proclaiming victory, mighty to save.” Why are your garments red, like those of one treading the winepress? “I have trodden the winepress alone; from the nations no one was with me. I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath; their blood spattered my garments, and I stained all my clothing. It was for me the

day of vengeance; the year for me to redeem had come. I looked, but there was no one to help; I was appalled that no one gave support; so my own arm achieved salvation for me, and my own wrath sustained me. I trampled the nations in my anger; in my wrath I made them drunk.” (Isaiah 63:1–6 NIV)

Here we have nothing less than the voice of the glorified Lord Jesus Christ himself. And what does he tell us? He tells us that he looked, but there was *no one* to help; that man was altogether sunken in sin and incapable of saving himself; that because of this, his (Christ’s) own arm achieved salvation, all by itself; that he alone is mighty to save; and that he alone is the conqueror who gives redemptive victory to the people of God. Years ago, pastor and theologian Arthur Pink decried the Arminian understanding of the atonement, calling it “insipid.” It was a stern rebuke, but according to Isaiah, a just one. For in the end the helpless savior of our Arminian brothers is no savior at all, whereas the Christ of Scripture is a true Savior, since he alone is mighty to save, and since he alone, on Calvary, did that very thing.

Secondly, the idea of a definite atonement makes the redeeming love of Christ deeply personal for the saints. For just as God the Father set his redeeming love upon a particular people by choosing to make them his eternal children, so too did God the Son set his redeeming love upon that same people, and, in obedience to the Father, enter the world to purchase them, call them, and make them his eternal Body and Bride, all without fail. These are not doctrinal incidentals. Rather, the biblical revelation of these two great manifestations of sovereign grace is carefully designed to bring home to the hearts of the saints the special familial love that the Father and the Son forever bear towards them.

The apostles lived and ministered with this understanding of Christ’s redeeming love. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul admonishes: “Therefore, as dearly loved children, follow God’s example and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 5:1–2). A little

later he writes, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for her, so that he might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word” (Eph. 5:25–26). And to the Galatians he again expresses the same understanding, but this time at a deeply personal level, saying, “I have been crucified with Christ: It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and who gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). Similarly, we have the words of the Apostle John: “This is how we have come to know what love is: He himself laid down his life for us” (1 John 3:16).

This thought of Christ’s special redeeming love for his people brings us to a third benefit of the doctrine of a definite atonement: namely, that the Spirit uses it to beget, sustain, and grow the saints’ worship of their Savior, and of the God who gave him to them. We see this connection in the mini-doxology with which the Apostle John opens the Revelation:

“To him who loves us, and who freed us from our sins by his blood, and who made us to be a kingdom, *and* priests to his God and Father: To him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.” (Revelation 1:5–6)

We do well to consider these words carefully. What is driving John’s worship of Christ? The answer is clear: It is his awareness of the love that drove Christ to his death, along with an accompanying awareness of what Christ actually accomplished for him on the Cross. Moreover, later in the Revelation we learn that it is precisely this same awareness that will drive the worship of all the saints to all eternity:

Then I saw a Lamb—as though it had been slain—standing between the elders and the throne with the four living creatures. And he had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. And he came up and took the scroll out of the right hand of the One seated on the throne. Now when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down

before the Lamb, each of them having a harp and golden bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they all were singing a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to unfasten its seals, for you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God a people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation; and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will reign upon the earth.” (Revelation 5:6–10)

The following chorus, sung all over the world by the Church Militant, well echoes the song that is sung in heaven:

Forever Grateful

Lord, you did not wait for me to draw near to you,
but you clothed yourself in frail humanity.
And you did not wait for me to cry out to you,
but you let me hear your voice calling me.
And I’m forever grateful to you.
And I’m forever grateful for the Cross.
And I’m forever grateful to you,
that you came to seek and save the lost.

Is the doctrine of an efficacious definitive atonement important? If it is important to God that his Son be loved, adored, and worshiped in Spirit and truth—and if it is a blessed, healing, and immeasurably fulfilling thing for the saints to do so—then most emphatically the answer is: Yes, and far more important than we on earth have yet to realize!

A fourth spiritual benefit of this doctrine is that it leads the saints to a richer understanding of justification, thereby building up confidence, endurance, and hope for their difficult journey to sanctification. Concerning justification, we recall that it is based on “double imputation.” That is, at the moment of saving faith, Christ’s perfect righteousness is imputed to a saint once and for all, in good part because the sins of the saint were previously imputed to Christ

and paid for once and for all. When the Holy Spirit enables a saint to behold the greatness of this simple twofold transaction, there is begotten in his heart an ever-increasing awareness that *all* his sins—past, present, and future—were forgiven him at the moment of saving faith; and that in that same moment he was declared to be righteous in God's sight, once and for all.

But that is only the beginning. For as he grows in this awareness, he realizes that he not only stands forgiven, holy, and righteous *in the sight of God*, but also that he is now standing *in his very presence*. As Zechariah put it, he is now a spiritual priest who, together with all the holy angels, enjoys free access to the heavenly courts (Zech. 3:1f). Or as the Apostle Paul put it, he is even now seated in the heavenly places in Christ (Eph. 2:6). Or as the writer to the Hebrews put it, he is even now living and serving in the Holiest Place of All (Heb. 10:19). Or as our Lord himself put it, he is even now living in the triune God, and the triune God in him (John 14:15–18, 17:21). Thus, definite atonement—based as it is on the divine imputation of all the sins of all the saints of all time—contributes mightily to the saints' understanding of their once-and-for-all justification; and a right understanding of justification awakens them to their new and permanent home in the heavenly places, and in the triune God who is present in all places (Ps. 139:7; Acts 17:28). Wise Solomon once wrote that the righteous are as bold as a lion (Prov. 28:1). The Calvinist understanding of atonement and justification enables us to see why.

This understanding is intensely practical, since it equips and strengthens the saints for their lifelong battle against indwelling sin, moral failure, and subjective guilt. The Arminian scheme, with its emphasis on the crucial role of man's free will, inclines a saint to view the atonement as a kind of heavenly treasury that makes day-to-day forgiveness of sins *available*, but which also makes it *receivable* only on condition of choosing to ask for it time and time again. Bitter experience proves that such an understanding tends to cut the nerve of spiritual confidence and joy, since the conscience-stricken saint finds himself repeatedly going back to the treasury, asking for forgiveness,

waiting to feel forgiven, and worrying about the many sins that may remain unforgiven because they remain forgotten and unconfessed.

The Calvinist scheme, however, enables a saint to see that his forgiveness was *purchased* by Christ once and for all, and was therefore *receivable* from Christ once and for all: that is, at the moment of his once-and-for-all justification by faith (John 5:24; Acts 13:38–39; Rom. 5:1; Heb. 10:7; 1 John 1:9). Such an understanding naturally fills a saint with great confidence. Yes, he has forgotten some of his sins, others he is not yet aware of, and still others he has not yet even committed. No matter: Christ paid for them all on the Cross and forgave them all at the moment of saving faith, so that none of them will ever again place him under wrath, condemnation, and the peril of hell. In Christ he can stand tall *now* in the very presence of his loving heavenly Father.

Will such a saint need to confess and repent of specific sins from time to time? Indeed he will, for such is life on the rough road to holiness. God himself has told him that for the rest of his days he will live with one foot in Romans 7 and the other in Romans 8. Like the Apostle Paul, he will continually wrestle with indwelling sin, and will bemoan the occasional moral failures it begets. However, he will do so in the joyful awareness that because of his justification there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ (Rom. 8:1). What's more, he will see that his fight for personal holiness is undertaken in the presence and strength of a God whose wrath is forever put away, who loves him, and who is in his corner, cheering him on. When, therefore, he confesses his sin, he does so with genuine sorrow, but also with strong confidence and joy. In particular, he does not *ask* Christ to dispense forgiveness afresh out of his treasury, but instead *appropriates* and *humbly thanks* him for the forgiveness that is already his through the gift of saving faith. He says, "Lord Jesus, I blew it again. I am truly sorry. I hate this kind of thing. It displeases you, troubles my conscience, pollutes my soul, spoils our fellowship, hurts other people, and can even drag your name through the mud. I agree with your Word: This is sin, and I confess it as such. Thank you for paying

for it on the Cross. Thank you for forgiving me for it when I trusted in you. And now—most heartily—I again ask you to help me turn away from it: to fight it off once and for all. Lord, I know I’m completely holy in your sight, and I know I’m a little bit holy in my own sight. But O how I want to be holier still, and so grow closer to the God I love. I know this is your purpose, I know this is your plan, and thanks be to God, I know that you *will* have your way. I love you Lord, and thank you with all my heart. Amen.”

Yes, the righteous are as bold as a lion, for they know that the Holy One of Israel, who has already forgiven them all their sins, is indeed on their side. And so they eagerly press on, perfecting holiness in the fear of God (Prov. 28:1; 2 Cor. 7:1; Phil. 3:12).

4. The Biblical Basis

Here again is a fulsome list of biblical texts, this time related to the atonement accomplished by Christ on the Cross, and also to the imputation of his righteousness that is made possible through that atonement. The texts in regular print teach or strongly imply that the primary purpose of Christ’s death was to make legal satisfaction for the sins of God’s elect. The texts *in italics* show how Christ and the apostles proclaimed the Good News of this atonement to all without exception. In regard to the latter, observe again that none of the speakers ever said to non-Christians “Christ paid the penalty for your sins.” This shows their awareness of the Sovereignty Perspective and the primary purpose of the atonement. On the other hand, they earnestly desired that all beneath the sound of their voice would become part of the “us” for whom Christ died (Acts 26:29). This shows their awareness of the Test Perspective, God’s love for all, his gift to the world of a Savior whose sacrificial death was sufficient for all, and his desire that all should take and pass the gospel test by turning to the Savior in faith.

- You shall take two onyx stones and engrave on them the names of the sons of Israel: six of their names on the one stone, and the names of the remaining six on the other stone, according

to their birth. As a jeweler engraves a signet, you shall engrave the two stones according to the names of the sons of Israel; you shall set them in filigree settings of gold. You shall put the two stones on the shoulder pieces of the ephod, as stones of memorial for the sons of Israel, and Aaron shall bear their names before the Lord on his two shoulders for a memorial. (Exodus 28:9–12)

- When the sin that they have committed becomes known, then the assembly shall offer a bull of the herd for a sin offering, and bring it before the tent of meeting. Then the elders of the congregation shall lay their hands on the head of the bull before the LORD, and the bull shall be slain before the LORD. (Leviticus 4:14–15)
- Then Aaron shall lay both of his hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities of the sons of Israel, and all their transgressions in regard to all their sins; and he shall lay them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who stands in readiness. (Leviticus 16:21)
- Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no stately form or majesty to attract us, no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. Like one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took on our infirmities and carried our sorrows; yet we considered him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray, each one has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and

afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter; and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who [among them] considered that he was cut off from the land of the living for the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due? He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and was with a rich man in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer. And when his soul is made a guilt offering, he will see his offspring, he will prolong his days, and the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in his hand. After the anguish of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied. By his knowledge my righteous Servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and because he was numbered among the transgressors. Yet he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors. (Isaiah 53 ASV, BSB)

- Then their offspring will be known among the nations, and their descendants in the midst of the peoples. All who see them will recognize them because they are the offspring whom the LORD has blessed. I will rejoice greatly in the LORD, my soul will exult in my God; for he has clothed me with garments of salvation, he has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness as a bridegroom bedecks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its sprouts and as a garden causes the things sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations. (Isaiah 61:9–11)
- “As I live,” declares the Lord GOD, “surely with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with wrath poured out,

I shall be king over you. I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you from the lands where you are scattered with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with wrath poured out; and I will bring you into the wilderness of the peoples, and there I will enter into judgment with you face to face. As I entered into judgment with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so I will enter into judgment with you,” declares the Lord GOD. “I will make you pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant; and I will purge from you the rebels and those who transgress against me; I will bring them out of the land where they sojourn, but they will not enter the land of Israel. Thus you will know that I am the LORD.” (Ezekiel 20:33–38)

- Then the angel showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the LORD, with Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the LORD said to Satan: “The LORD rebukes you, Satan! Indeed, the LORD, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebukes you! Is not this man a brand snatched from the fire?” Now Joshua was dressed in filthy garments as he stood before the Angel. So the Angel of the LORD said to those standing before him, “Take off his filthy clothes!” Then he said to Joshua, “See, I have removed your iniquity, and I will clothe you with splendid robes.” Then I said, “Let them put a clean turban on his head.” So a clean turban was placed on his head, and they clothed him while the Angel of the LORD stood by. (Zechariah 3:1–5)
- “She will give birth to a son, and you will name him JESUS, for he will save his people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:21)
- “. . . just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:28)
- *As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whoever believes will in him have eternal life. (John 3:14–15 NASB; cf. Numbers 21:4–9)*

LIMITED ATONEMENT

- *For God so loved the world that he gave his uniquely begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him would not perish, but have eternal life. (John 3:16)*
- “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (John 10:11)
- “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. Moreover, I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold; I must bring them as well. And they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock and one shepherd. For this reason my Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one can take it from me; rather, I am laying it down on my own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.” (John 10:14–18)
- “No one has greater love than this: that he would lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13)
- “And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they too may be sanctified in truth.” (John 17:19)
- *“So then: Let all the house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” Now when the people heard this, they were cut to the heart; and they said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men, brothers, what should we do?” So Peter said to them, “Repent, and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, your children, and all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to himself.” And with many other words he continued to testify and exhort them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation!” So those who*

received his word were baptized; and on that day about three thousand souls were added to their number. (Acts 2:36–41)

- *And now, brothers, I realize that you acted in ignorance, as did your rulers. But the things that God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets—that his Anointed One would suffer—he has fulfilled in this way. So then: Repent and turn back to God, so that your sins may be wiped away, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and so that God may send the Messiah appointed for you—Jesus himself—who must remain in heaven till the times of the restoration of all things, times of which God has spoken through the mouth of all his holy prophets of long ago. (Acts 3:17–21)*
- *Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, answered them, saying, “Rulers and elders of the people: If we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a helpless man, and concerning the means by which he was healed, then let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth—whom you crucified, and whom God raised from the dead—by him this man stands here before you in perfect health. This Jesus is the stone which you, the builders, rejected, and which now has become the chief cornerstone. Moreover, there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:8–12)*
- *So opening his mouth, Peter declared: “Truly I now see that God is no respecter of persons, but that in every nation the one who fears him and does what is right is welcomed by him! You know the message that God sent to the sons of Israel, proclaiming peace through Jesus Christ (but he is Lord of all). And you know the things that happened all throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism proclaimed by John: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses of everything he*

did, both in the Judean countryside and in Jerusalem—this Jesus whom they also put to death by hanging him on a tree. But on the third day God raised him up, and also granted that he might be seen, not by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had chosen beforehand—by us, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. Moreover, he commanded us to preach to the people, and to solemnly testify that he himself is the one whom God has ordained to be the judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness, declaring that everyone who believes in him will receive forgiveness of sins through his name.” (Acts 10:34–43)

- *“Men and brothers, sons of Abraham’s family, and those among you who fear God: The news of this salvation is now sent forth to us all! For those who live in Jerusalem, together with their leaders—recognizing neither him nor the words of the prophets that are read to them every Sabbath—fulfilled those words by condemning him. And though they found no grounds whatsoever for putting him to death, they urged Pilate to crucify him. Now once they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead; and for many days he appeared to those who had come with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, the very ones who now serve as his witnesses to our people. So then: We bring you good news about the promise made to our fathers, namely, that God has now fulfilled that promise for us, their children, by raising up Jesus—as indeed it is written in the second Psalm: ‘You are my Son; this very day I have begotten you!’ Now as for the fact that God raised him from the dead, never again to verge on corruption, he has spoken in this manner: ‘I will give all of you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.’ And for this reason he also says in another psalm, ‘You will not permit your Holy One to see corruption.’ For David, after serving the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, was buried with his fathers,*

and did indeed see corruption; but he whom God raised saw no corruption. Therefore, men and brothers, let it be known to you that through this man the forgiveness of sins is now proclaimed to you, and that through him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which the Law of Moses could not free you. See to it, then, that what was spoken by the prophets does not come upon you: 'Behold, you scoffers: Marvel and perish! For in your days I am performing a work: a work you would never believe even if someone were to tell you in full.'" (Acts 13:26–41)

- “Watch out for yourselves and for the whole flock, among whom the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, with a calling to shepherd the church of God that he purchased with his own blood.” (Acts 20:28)
- Yet God displays his own love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. And now that we have been justified by his blood, how much more will we be saved from wrath through him! For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. (Rom. 5:8–10)
- What then shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, how shall he not also, together with him, freely give us all things? Who can bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who then can condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—or rather, who was raised, who also is at the right hand of God, and who also makes intercession for us. (Romans 8:31–34)
- Knowing then the fear of the Lord, we persuade men. But we are well known to God; and I trust we also are well known in your consciences. For we are not commending ourselves to you again, but rather giving you an opportunity to boast on our behalf, so that you may have an answer for those who boast only in appearance, and not in heart. For if we were beside

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ourselves, it was for God; and if we now are sound in mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ compels us, having reached this conclusion: If one died for all, then all died. And he died for all so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and rose again in their behalf. Therefore from now on we regard no one according to the flesh. Even if we have known Christ according to the flesh, now we do so no more. Therefore, if any man is in Christ, there is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come to be! And all things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation: namely, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them; and he has entrusted the message of reconciliation to us. Thus, we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God himself were pleading through us. On behalf of Christ we implore you: Be reconciled to God. For he made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him. (2 Corinthians 5:11–21)

- Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the Church and gave himself for her, that he might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that he might present her to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. (Ephesians 5:25–27)
- And you—who formerly were alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds—he now has reconciled through the death of Christ’s physical body, in order to present you holy, blameless, and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded, steadfast, and never moved away from the hope of the good news you heard—news that has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and news of which I, Paul, have been made a minister. (Colossians 1:21–23)

IN SEARCH OF THE GOLDEN STRAND

- By faith Noah, when warned of things as yet unseen, was moved with godly fear and prepared an ark for the safety of his household. (Hebrews 11:7)
- For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, so that he could bring us to God. (1 Peter 3:18)
- And they began to sing a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to unfasten its seals, for you were slain, and with your blood you have purchased for God a people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation . . .” (Revelation 5:9)
- Then I looked, and behold: the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion; and with him were 144,000, all of them having his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads . . . These were purchased from among men as first fruits for God and the Lamb. (Revelation 14:1, 4)

CHAPTER 6

IRRESISTIBLE GRACE

1. The Big Idea

I want to open this chapter with a question for my Christian reader: What is the single greatest moment in your life so far? Well, if you're at all like me you'll have to say it was that special time when, for reasons you could not explain, you found yourself concerned about the question of God, persuaded of the uniqueness of Christ, and wrestling with the claims of the Bible; when, after intense reading, watching, listening, and discussing, you came to realize that those claims were true; when you therefore beheld, perhaps with shock and awe, the nature, depth, and eternal consequences of your sin; but when, as if from the foot of the Cross, you looked up and beheld God's loving, gracious, and all-sufficient provision for your sin; when, with a tumultuous mixture of fear, trembling, and hope, you cried out to the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation; and when, for the first time in your life, you felt his strong, reassuring arms wrapped around you in omnipotent love, and experienced the peace that passes understanding, and joy unspeakable and full of glory. Such a moment, from that moment on, must tower above all other moments. Like the Stone of Help and Remembrance that the prophet Samuel raised at Mizpah to commemorate Israel's victory over the Philistines, it will henceforth give you your bearings as you begin your long and difficult walk through the raging battlefield of this life (1 Sam. 7:12).

But now for a further question: What is the *second* greatest moment of your life so far? Here, I suspect, your answer will be different than mine. Nevertheless, for reasons that will soon become clear, I am eager to share mine with you. My second greatest moment—which came a few short years after the first—was also a moment of seeing. And what I saw was that the first and greatest moment—the moment of my coming to Christ for salvation and eternal life—was a moment that my heavenly Father had planned before the founding of the world. It was a moment that *had* to take place, a moment that was predestined to occur, and a moment that was paid for in full. More surely than the rising of the tides or the circuit of the sun, the Spirit of God would draw near to this crazed philosopher and mystic, and plant him once and for all in the loving arms of his Lord: Jesus Christ. Because of the God who chose, and because of the Christ who actually redeemed, the Spirit’s call to repentance, faith, and eternal life would be *irresistible*.

The Apostle Peter understood this great truth. Addressing the saints of God far and wide, he writes:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who live as sojourners, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, and by the Spirit’s work of sanctification called to obedience and the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: May grace and peace be multiplied to you. (1 Peter 1:1–2)

This short, profoundly trinitarian text is redolent with divine sovereignty. In eternity past, God the Father graciously *chose* a diverse and far-flung people for himself: Was there ever any doubt that they would come to him? In time and space—and well before most of those people ever knew his name or were even born—Jesus Christ graciously *redeemed* them through the shedding of his blood: Was there ever any question that his blood would prevail? Again in time and space, the sovereign Spirit graciously *sanctified* and *called* them. That is, through the proclamation of the gospel the Holy Spirit worked in their hearts

in such a way as to separate them *from* the world, the flesh, and the devil, and *to* God, Christ, the sprinkling of Christ's blood (i.e., the forgiveness of their sins), and to brand new lives of holy obedience, grace, and peace. Was there ever any doubt that the Spirit would safely deliver them into the arms of the Father and the Son? Not in Peter's mind! Those whom the Father had chosen and Christ had redeemed, the Spirit would surely call and sanctify. For Peter, the grace of the triune God, by which he definitively sanctifies his elect, is *irresistible*.

Irresistible Grace

Our Calvinist brethren have eyes in their heads. They definitely get it that sinful man can—and usually does—resist the Spirit of God. We see this in the world and we see it in the Scriptures. Have you ever tried to speak of Christ in a university classroom, or in a letter to the editor, or on a street corner of Los Angeles or New York City? The resistance is palpable, and could be deadly. It was no different in Bible times. God's Spirit strove with the men of Noah's day for 120 years, yet most of them resisted to the end and perished in the flood. Far from yielding to the Holy Spirit, many scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day blasphemed (or nearly blasphemed) him, ascribing Christ's miracles to the devil (Matt. 12:22–31). Stephen—filled with the Spirit's power, wisdom, and love—accused his Jewish kinsmen of stubbornly resisting the Spirit's call to gospel obedience; and he himself was resisted to the point of martyrdom (Acts 7:51–53). Even God's elect, if only for a season, can resist the Holy Spirit. Think of Saul, the proud and hostile Pharisee who persistently “kicked against the goads” until the sovereign Christ turned him into a holy apostle and prophet (Acts 26:14).

In view of all these things, why do Calvinists persist in using the expression *irresistible grace* to describe the Spirit's call to salvation in Christ? Part of the reason is historical: When their Arminian brothers insisted that elect sinners are free to resist the Spirit's call to salvation, Calvinists felt compelled to reply, “No, such a thing can never be. For what God the Father chose, and what the redeemer purchased, the

Holy Spirit will surely gather in. His call is, and must be, irresistible; it is a species of divine grace that no elect sinner can *finally* resist.”

Perhaps, then, in order to avoid confusion and controversy, it would be better for us to speak of *infallible grace* or *efficacious grace*. Still, I think the older term is quite serviceable, if only we take care to define it well. Yes, the grace of God that calls elect sinners to salvation can temporarily be resisted. But no, it cannot be resisted to the end, for God will have his family, Christ will have his Bride, and the sovereign Spirit will have his eternal habitation. As we are about to see, the Holy Trinity has scheduled a heart transplant for the people of God. Try as they may, none of them can stay the surgeon’s hand. And once the operation is complete, none of them will ever stop thanking him for it.

OT Texts Bespeaking Irresistible Grace

There are many biblical texts that teach or imply irresistible grace. These all belong to the stream of divine revelation that we have called the Sovereignty Perspective. Here you will find little or nothing about sinful man’s considering, seeking, or choosing. Here the will of man is more or less eclipsed, so that what shines forth like the sun in its strength is the sovereignty of an omnipotent redeemer intent on gathering in his own.

Thus, through the prophet Isaiah the LORD declares how he alone will save eschatological “Jacob” and “Israel”: that is, Christ’s Church—the true spiritual family and nation of God—actually comprised of elect Jews and Gentiles:

Now this is what the LORD says—he who created you, O Jacob, and he who formed you, O Israel: “Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and will gather you from the west. I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’ and to the south, ‘Do not hold them back!’” (Isaiah 43:1,5–7 BSB)

Though he employs slightly different imagery, God says much the same thing through the prophet Hosea:

Therefore, behold, I will allure her; I will bring her into the wilderness and speak kindly to her. Then I will give her her vineyards from there, and the valley of Achor as a door of hope. And she will sing there as in the days of her youth, as in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt. It will come about in that day, declares the LORD, that you will call me Ishi [i.e., my husband] and will no longer call me Baali [i.e., my master]; for I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, so that they will be mentioned by their names no more.” (Hosea 2:14–17)

Here we have the voice of Christ himself speaking to his eschatological Bride, the Church. And what does he say? He *will* allure her; he *will* bring her; she *will* sing for joy; she *will* call him her husband; he *will* remove the names of the Baals from her mouth. It is more certain than the rising of the sun. And this is irresistible grace.

Finally, we have these famous words delivered through the prophet Ezekiel:

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you will keep my judgments and do them.” (Ezekiel 36:26–27 NKJV; cf. Jeremiah 31:31–34)

Here is yet another great OT promise to the effect that God himself, by his Spirit, will infallibly perform a spiritual heart transplant on his latter day Israel (Gal. 6:16). They cannot and will not resist it to the end. Nor, in that day, will they want to.

NT Texts Bespeaking Irresistible Grace

The NT witness on this score is, if possible, even more compelling. Of special importance are several passages in John’s gospel that speak of God *drawing* his elect to Christ. The first appears in the Lord’s Bread of Life Discourse, in which he addresses a great crowd of people whom he has just miraculously fed in the Galilean wilderness (John 6). As a result, they are seeking to make him the earthly king and provider of

their traditional Messianic dreams. But they have failed to understand his person, work, mission, and teaching. Therefore, in the hearing of all, he declares:

“I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never hunger, and he who believes in me will never thirst. But as I told you: You have indeed seen me, yet you don’t believe. All whom the Father gives me will come to me; and he who comes to me I will never drive out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that of all he has given me I should lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I myself will raise him up on the last day.”

So the Jews began whispering against him because he said, “I am the bread that came down out of heaven.” And they were saying, “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down out of heaven’?” In reply, Jesus said to them, “Stop whispering among yourselves. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they all shall be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.” (John 6:35–45)

It is clear that these words are spoken primarily, if not exclusively, for the benefit of Jesus’ true disciples. They are spoken to people like Peter, who will never leave him; for like Peter, they have nowhere else to go. They realize that Jesus is the Holy One of God, and that he alone has the words of eternal life (John 6:60–71). The Lord wants all such persons to understand why some believe in him, and others do not. Those who believe are God’s elect, the people whom the Father has given to his Son (John 6:37, 17:2, 9). When they are still in their sin they do not recognize who Jesus is or why he has come. But in due season the Father will draw them to Christ. In due season he will secretly and inwardly teach them all they need to know. As a

result, they will be willing to come to Christ, which Christ himself here equates with believing in him for salvation (John 6:35). Having thus partaken of the Bread of Life, and having thus drunk of his blood (i.e., having appropriated the merits of his sacrificial death), they will never hunger or thirst again (John 6:53–59). They will know, once and for all, that they have come home to the one true living God. Here, then—in graphic language meant to harden the impenitent, quicken the elect, and bring the gospel test to all—is one of Scripture’s most powerful declarations of the irresistible grace by which God the Father, through the Holy Spirit, effectually calls elect sinners to the Savior.

It is important to understand that the “drawing” of which the Lord speaks is not simply the “wooing” of the Arminians, by which the Spirit supposedly prepares the hearts of sinners and then seeks to persuade them to use their newly liberated will to choose Christ. Yes, given the conscious make-up of human beings, there is indeed an element of persuasion involved in the divine drawing. However, the word itself—and the clear intent of the whole passage—goes far beyond this. The deep sense of our text is that God the Father, through the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit, opens an elect sinner’s inward eyes in such a way that he now can see—often with a shock of recognition and profound existential concern—his need of salvation; and as a result, he now freely flees to the Savior for this very thing (Acts 2:37, 16:30; Eph. 1:18; Heb. 6:18). In other words, elect sinners who were previously dead in sins and trespasses are effectively *dragged* to Christ by the sheer force of their new God-given desire for salvation.

A careful study of the NT use of this word (Greek: *elko*) shows that this is indeed the case. Peter *drew* the dead weight of his sword out its sheath (John 18:10); later on he *dragged* the dead weight of a fisherman’s net onto the shore (John 21:6). Meanwhile, the greedy masters of a poor Philippian servant girl whom Paul and Silas had delivered from a demon *dragged* the two apostles into the marketplace before the authorities (Acts 16:19). Just so, God the Father—by opening his elect children’s minds, and by renewing their desires and their wills—*effectively* (and not forcibly) drags those who were previously dead in

sin to eternal life in Christ. Likewise, when the sovereign Christ is lifted up through the preaching of the Cross, he will infallibly drag, or gather in, all his elect to himself (John 10:16, 12:32). Here again we have irresistible grace.

Such grace is also much on display in Jesus' Good Shepherd Discourse. Once again he is in the presence of his enemies and the hearing of his disciples. Therefore, he affirms:

"I am the good shepherd: The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. A hireling—someone who is not the shepherd and who does not own the sheep—sees the wolf coming, abandons the sheep, and flees; and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hireling and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. Moreover, I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them as well; and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock and one shepherd." (John 10:11–16)

Note carefully the indissoluble bond between the atonement Christ is about to make for his elect, and the results that will *necessarily* flow from it. First the Good Shepherd will lay down his life for the sheep; then he will bring them to himself. This bringing is certain: He *must* bring them. He is under orders from the Father to do so, and together with the Father and the Spirit he surely will. As a direct result of this bringing, his sheep *will* hear his voice, they *will* come to him, and there *will* be one flock with one shepherd. In short, redemption most certainly will be accomplished, and redemption most certainly will be applied. It is not that the ears, or the mind, or the will, or the feet of the sheep have no role in this process. Rather, it is that the sovereign Christ has total control over all four, yet in such a way that the sheep feel themselves free as a bird as they fly—in holy fear, desire, and love—to the bosom of the Good Shepherd.

Our final text, which we have already encountered several times, is especially important, since it introduces a rich NT concept that is closely related to irresistible grace: *effectual calling*. Listen again to the words of the Apostle Paul:

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. Moreover, those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Romans 8:29–30)

Here, in a passage that matchlessly imparts the comforts of sovereign grace, we have in broad outline the order of divinely orchestrated events leading to the full salvation of God's people. Observe how Paul describes all of this from the vantage point of the world to come: Together with the glorified saints, he is now *looking back* on all that God has done to redeem them. Thus, God first *chose* them before the founding of the world, *foreknowing* them as those whom he would make his own. Then he *predestined* them to become conformed to the image of the divine-human Christ, whom, at just the right time, he would send into the world to redeem his elect. Then, having redeemed them through the righteous life and atoning death of Christ, he effectually *called* them into a saving relationship with himself. This is none other than the sovereign *drawing* and *bringing* that Christ spoke of with his disciples. Then, through the God-given repentance and faith that were engendered by the divine call, he *justified them*. That is, he forgave them their sins, credited them with Christ's perfect righteousness, and declared them to be perfectly holy and righteous in his sight. Finally, because of the sanctifying and preserving work of the Holy Spirit, he *glorified* them at the return of Christ, and welcomed them as his eternal family into the glorious world to come.

How royally the Sovereignty Perspective reigns in this text! All is of God, nothing is of man. All of God's good pleasure, purpose, and plan *will* be accomplished. Paul is so certain of this that he represents

it as a cosmic *fait accompli*. In the sight of God, those whom he foreknew are already glorified and living with him in the world to come!

Effectual Calling

Let us take a few moments to discuss the key elements of the effectual call that Paul has just spoken of. This is important, since it will indeed highlight the sovereignty of God in the application of redemption, yet also bring into view the gospel test, and man's freedom and responsibility to take it with all his heart.

Foundational to the notion of God's effectual call is his *external call*. As a rule this is issued through the Church, which Christ himself has charged to proclaim the gospel to all nations (Matt. 28:19). God's external call might come in a worship service, at an evangelistic rally, in a marketplace, on a street corner, over coffee, on television, in a tract, on the Internet, etc. It is a call that *must* go out, *has* gone out, and *will* continue to go out until the end of the age. Note from the following texts and italicized words how the sovereign God himself will preside over the Great Commission and ensure its fulfillment:

- "I *will* make you fishers of men." (Matthew 4:19)
- "And this gospel of the kingdom *will* be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come." (Matthew 24:14)
- "But when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you *will* receive power; and you *will* be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the farthest ends of the earth." (Acts 1:18)
- And while they were fasting and worshipping the Lord, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate Barnabas and Saul to me for the work to which I have called them." (Acts 13:2)
- "But I *will* give authority to my two witnesses; and for 1,260 days they *will* prophesy, clothed in sackcloth." (Revelation 11:3)
- Now the Spirit and the Bride say, "Come!" So let the one who hears say, "Come!" And let the one who is thirsty come. Let

the one who so desires take the water of life without cost!
(Revelation 22:17)

We see the initial fulfillment of these texts on the Day of Pentecost. Speaking through the Spirit-filled apostles, God himself sends out the gospel call to thousands of Jewish and Gentile worshipers gathered in Jerusalem from all over the world (Acts 2:1f). Through the Church the divine Sower is casting the good seed of the gospel onto many different kinds of soil, putting all to the gospel test (Matt. 13:24–30).

This brings us to God's effectual call. It takes place in conjunction with his external call. As the seed of the Word is deposited into the ears of God's elect child, the Spirit of God uses that Word to convert him: to bring him to spiritual life and move him to repentance and faith, with the result that he freely comes to Christ for salvation. Thus does God effectually call his elect child into an eternal life-giving relationship with himself through the redeemer, Jesus Christ.

The Scripture abounds with dramatic instances of God's effectual gospel call. We think of the sinful woman who bathed the Savior's feet with her penitential tears (Luke 7:36ff). We think of greedy Zaccheus, who, upon receiving the call of Christ, vowed to repay all he had stolen, and more, after which he joyfully welcomed the Lord into his home (Luke 19:1–10). We think of the Day of Pentecost, when many in the great crowd were cut to the heart and cried out, "Men and brothers, what should we do?" (Acts 2:37). Likewise, we think of the Philippian jailer, who cried out to the apostles, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30). In all such cases the external gospel call has become an inward and effectual call. By the grace of God the seed of the Word has landed upon good soil, so that those who hear not only understand, but also go on to bear fruit and produce a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty (Matt. 13:23).

I have stated that the essential elements of God's effectual call are *regeneration*, *repentance*, and *faith*. Importantly, many biblical texts indicate that all three are gracious gifts of the sovereign God to his elect people. It will prove illuminating to discuss each one briefly.

Regeneration

Of the three elements involved in God's effectual call, regeneration is unique in that it is a work of God alone. In the parlance of the theologians, regeneration is *monergistic*. That is, there is only one worker involved: God. Man and his will have no part in it. And this is as it must be, for unless and until God draws near to a sinner and grants him new spiritual life, he will remain spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1). Yes, prior to his conversion he is aware of God, divine Law, and perhaps even the historical facts of the gospel. But for all that, he is blind to the full truth and urgency of the gospel (John 9:39), actively or passively hostile to it (Acts 2:13, 9:1, 17:32; Rom. 8:7), and therefore unwilling and unable to receive it (Rom. 3:9–18; 1 Cor. 2:14). He desperately needs to be awakened from his spiritual sleep, for it is a sleep of death (John 11:1–44; Rom. 13:11; Eph. 5:14). In the words of our Lord, he must be born again.

The classic NT text dealing with regeneration is John 3:1–21. Here we find Jesus teaching master Nicodemus about the new birth (vv. 1–8). Here we learn that apart from the new birth sinful man can neither see nor enter the Kingdom of God (vv. 3–5); that he is both blind and powerless, spiritually speaking. But how exactly does God grant this new birth? Our text answers fulsomely.

First, the Son of Man must be lifted up (v. 14). That is, Christ must first be lifted up on the Cross in order to atone for sins, and afterwards be lifted up in the preaching of the gospel so that men can believe on him for eternal life (vv. 15–16). The latter is the external call we have just discussed.

Secondly, as Christ is lifted up in preaching, the sovereign Spirit comes to God's elect child and grants him new spiritual life: a life that enables him to see the truth of the gospel, feel the urgency of a personal response, and make it appropriately. We see this in verses 7–8. "Don't be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it pleases; and you hear the sound of it, but you don't know where it's coming from or where it's going. So it is with everyone who

is born of the Spirit.” Like the wind, the Spirit is sovereign: He blows when and where he is pleased to blow. In the midst of the miracle of the new birth, God’s elect child cannot understand what is happening to him: who it is that is invading his soul, where he is from, or why he has come. Nevertheless, he definitely knows that *something* is happening, for just as the wind makes a sound in the trees, so the Spirit is producing an effect in his heart. His ears are now opened to the voice of God (John 6:45). His eyes are now opened to the truth of God (Luke 24:45; Acts 26:18; Eph. 1:18; Heb. 10:32). Through the regenerating work of the sovereign Spirit he is now able to see both the King and his Kingdom; to behold, inwardly, the deity of Christ (John 6:40), the redemptive purpose of his righteous life and atoning death (Acts 16:30), the truth of his resurrection (Acts 17:32), the necessity of calling upon him for salvation (Acts 2:21; Rom. 10:12–13), and the joy of submitting to his spiritual reign (Acts 16:34).

In sum, through the new birth the sovereign Holy Spirit grants to God’s elect children the gift of saving insight, belief, and conviction concerning the great truths of the gospel (John 16:5–11; Acts 16:14). Thus shall they enter the Kingdom of God (v. 5).

Repentance and Faith

The second and third components of effectual calling are *repentance* and *faith*. These differ from regeneration in that both involve not only a sovereign work of God’s Spirit, but also a free-will response on the part of man. Again drawing on the parlance of the theologians, we say that repentance and faith are *synergistic*: They are the result of two workers (God and man) working together. Through the gift of regeneration, God initiates the work; through the exercise of man’s freshly liberated will, he responds to it.

While it is indeed important to keep in view man’s responsibility in the matter of repentance and faith, it is also important to understand that the new birth *guarantees* that the sinner will fulfill it. Our Lord himself explains why: “A good tree *cannot* produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit” (Matt. 7:18). The Apostle Paul

concurr: “How *can* we who died to sin live in it any longer” (Rom. 6:2)? Likewise, the Apostle John affirms: “No one who is begotten by God practices sin, because his seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been begotten by God” (1 John 3:9). Regeneration imparts a new and godly nature; the new and godly nature imparts new and godly desires; the new and godly desires result in new and godly choices. Regeneration ensures that God’s elect child *will* repent, obey, and trust in Christ unto the salvation of his soul.

Here, then, is why Scripture so often characterizes genuine repentance and faith as gifts of the sovereign God. For example, concerning repentance Peter declares to his fellow Israelites: “He [Christ] is the one whom God exalted to his right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:31 NASB). Similarly, we find early Jewish believers reacting with surprise to the conversion of Cornelius and his household: “Then God has indeed granted to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life!” (Acts 11:18). Particularly impressive are these illuminating words of Paul to Timothy:

And the Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but kind to all, able to teach, and patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who stand in opposition, in hopes that God will grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will. (2 Timothy 2:24–26)

Repentance is indeed chosen, expressed, and lived out. But first it is granted.

Summing up: Through regeneration God grants his elect child to see the nature, gravity, and terrible cost of his sin, and to sorrow over it; and through that same regeneration he also moves his child freely to turn away from his slavery to self, sin, and Satan, and to surrender himself as a bond-slave to Jesus Christ, so that, at long last, he may be free indeed (Is. 6:5; John 8:36; Acts 16:30; 2 Cor. 7:11).

The situation is much the same with regard to saving faith. To be sure, there is a manward component involved. For this reason, at the

very beginning of his public ministry Jesus cried out to all Israel, “The appointed time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15). Likewise, when the crowd asked Jesus, “What should we do so that we might work the works of God?” the Lord answered and said to them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” (John 6:28–29). And again, when the Philippian jailer asked Paul and Barnabas, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” they answered, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ!” (Acts 16:30–31). In all these cases we clearly see that saving faith involves a choice on the part of the sinner: a free-will decision to exercise faith and trust in the Person and Work of Christ.

But again, such faith is not possible apart from regeneration. For how can someone exercise faith in Christ unless he first sees and believes the truth about who Christ is and what he has done? Such seeing and such believing are gracious gifts from above. Many NT scriptures affirm this truth. For example, Paul and Barnabas reported to the brethren in Antioch that God had “opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27). Writing about the apostles’ evangelistic work in Philippi, Luke says of a certain woman named Lydia that “God opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul” (Acts 16:14). Joyfully addressing the new converts in Thessalonica, Paul writes: “But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth” (2 Thess. 2:13 NASB). Speaking of his fellow-believers around the world, Peter describes them as “. . . those who have received a faith no less precious than our own” (2 Pet. 1:1). Finally, we hear the writer to the Hebrews speaking of Christ as “the author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2). In all such texts we learn that the gracious gift of regeneration lies at the base of saving faith; that through regeneration the sinner sees and believes the truth of the gospel; and that because of regeneration his freshly liberated will responds to the gospel with active trust.

Conversion

The end result of God's effectual call—of regeneration, repentance, and faith—is *conversion*. This may be defined as a spiritual 180-degree turn, a total reorientation of a person's whole being (Matt. 18:3; John 12:40; Rom. 16:5; 1 Tim. 3:6). Conversion is a process. Whether short or long, it typically involves spiritual awakening, hungering, hearing, reading, conversing, pondering, praying, seeking, receiving Christ (John 1:12), confessing Christ (2 Cor. 9:13; 1 Tim. 6:12), and (as a rule) sealing the great transaction by following Christ in water baptism (Matt. 3:13–17, 28:18ff; Acts 2:38; 1 Pet. 3:21–22). As Jacob of old might be pleased to put it, conversion is a great wrestling match that God initiates, that sinners embrace, and that God finally wins, all to the sinner's everlasting joy. In conversion man does indeed freely turn. But he freely turns because he is *being turned* by the outstretched arm and mighty hand of the sovereign God (Deut. 5:15; Ezek. 20:34–36; Matt. 18:3).

The Greatest Moment

At the beginning of this chapter I asked a question: What is the greatest moment of your life so far? The better to process what we have learned about God's gracious call, let us think for a moment about some possible experiences on the horizontal plane that might compete for this honor:

- The day you reconnected with your long lost father
- The day you met your birth mother
- The day you left the foster care system and entered the home of your new adoptive parents
- The day you met the person who would become your best friend
- The day you met the person who would become your spouse: someone you would never tire of getting to know, always enjoy being with, and upon whose wisdom, strength, and

companionship you would continually draw as you navigate the storms of life together

- The day you finally apologized to that person you hurt so deeply; and the day he or she freely forgave you and welcomed you back into the bond of friendship
- The day you discovered your vocation: the work you somehow knew you were destined to attempt and accomplish, or die trying
- The day you decided that this is the town or city where you want to live, and that these are the fellow citizens you hope to know, love, and serve
- The day you met that special teacher, or read that special book, which seemed to open up the meaning of things, so that now you felt equipped and confident to meet the great challenges of life and prevail

I believe that in these and similar scenarios God himself has graciously given us a glimpse of—and an invitation to—the unsearchable riches of those who are effectually called into the fellowship of his Son (1 Cor. 2:10–12). Yes, savoring those riches will require time and effort. But as the years unfold, and as God’s child faithfully participates in the normal round of Christian discipleship, he will see with ever-increasing clarity, wonder, and joy everything that became his in that holy moment when he trusted in Jesus Christ. In the course of our meditation on this subject, we have touched on many of these blessings:

- Justification (Rom. 3:28, 8:30)
- Reconciliation (Rom. 5:1–10)
- Spiritual adoption (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6)
- Definitive (i.e., once and for all) sanctification (1 Cor. 1:30, 6:11)
- Assurance of salvation (1 Thess. 5:23; 1 Pet. 1:5; Jude 1:1)
- Progressive sanctification (Rom. 6:19; Col. 3:10)

- Spiritual resurrection and perfection at the moment of death (Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 5:6–8; Heb. 12:23; Rev. 20:5)
- Bodily resurrection and glorification at the return of Christ (John 5:27–29; 1 Cor. 15:20ff)
- Eternal life with the triune God, the saints, and all the holy angels in the world to come (Rom. 8:18–25; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21–22).

Small wonder, then, that all the inhabitants of heaven rejoice when one sinner repents (Luke 15:7, 10). And small wonder that when a frightened, starving, and shame-faced son finally draws near to his God and Father in hopes of a crumb of mercy, he is shocked to find himself showered with kisses, and to hear his Father crying out to the family servants, “Hurry, bring out the best robe and place it on him; and put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it. And when we’re done eating, let us rejoice and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead, but has now come back to life; he was lost, but now is found!” (Luke 15:22–24).

Here, then, are the fruits—and here is the greatness—of God’s effectual call. Have you heard it? If so, I rejoice. But if not, take courage. As we’re about to see, you surely can, if only you are willing to call on him (Ps. 50:15; Rom. 10:13).

2. The Balancing Factors

As with all the Doctrines of Grace, so here: There are pitfalls; there are possibilities for misunderstanding, confusion, and fear. But again, God has given us the Test Perspective in order to lay all these to rest. With this in mind I want to address both seekers and saints once more, this time on the subject of irresistible grace and effectual calling.

Further Words to Seekers

Upon his first encounter with the doctrine of irresistible grace there is again a danger that the seeker of spiritual truth and reality will become paralyzed with doubts and fears. “How can I be sure that

God is really calling me? If he is, shouldn't I be having some kind of religious experience? What exactly does irresistible grace and effectual calling feel like?" These are natural and important questions, questions to which the Bible replies most encouragingly.

First, both Scripture and experience reveal that God's effectual call comes in different ways to different folks. Paul—a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent aggressor against the Church—was literally knocked of his horse by the appearance of the glorified Christ (Acts 9:1–18; 1 Tim. 1:13). His effectual calling was an effectual clobbering. Contrast that with the calling of the Gentile proselytes and God-fearers whom Paul encountered in Asia and Europe. These were open-hearted spiritual seekers. They had already drawn near to the light of God that shone through Judaism; later, when Paul, Barnabas, and Silas preached the gospel in their synagogues, they gladly welcomed the Light of the World: the light of Christ and the gospel (Acts 13:48ff). And then there were folks like Timothy. In all probability he simply imbibed the Christian faith as a child at the feet of his mother and grandmother (2 Tim. 1:5). Down through the centuries these kinds of conversions have been replicated innumerable times. So again: Both Scripture and experience teach us that a seeker of spiritual reality can never be quite sure what to expect in the way of God's effectual call.

But secondly, there is one thing of which he *can* be quite sure: the promise that God has given to all seekers, of whatever kind they may be. Let us hear it again from the Lord's own lips:

“Keep on asking, and it will be given to you; keep on seeking, and you will find; keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Or what man among you, if his son asks him for some bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks him for a fish, will he give him a snake? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:7–11)

I am aware that this text is found in the Sermon on the Mount, which was directed to Christ's disciples. But I am also convinced that he meant his words to reach the ears of potential disciples, of anyone seriously considering the claims of the Christian faith. Like so many other biblical texts, they unveil the unchanging face of God the Father towards those who seek spiritual reality, whether before, during, or after the conversion process. God desires all to seek him. He purposes that all should seek him. And to encourage such seeking, he gives a glorious promise to all: If they will seek him, they will surely find him, along with all the truth, goodness, and beauty that are found in him (Jer. 29:13; John 7:17; Acts 17:26–28).

But someone may ask, "What about the Apostle Paul? Surely he wasn't seeking spiritual truth." Well, there's no denying that his search was brief. Nevertheless, even he was forced to ask the glorified Christ, "Who are you, Lord?" And is this not precisely what every seeker of spiritual reality must ask of Christ, though as a rule it will take most of us a bit longer to get our answer (Matt. 13:45–46)? Also, note carefully that there was a considerable space of time between Paul's dramatic encounter with the Lord and the day of his baptism, when he finally sealed the great redemptive transaction (Acts 22:12–16). So then: Conversion is always a process, and it always involves a measure of seeking.

But again, whether the search is long or short, the promise is sure: Anyone who is honestly seeking spiritual truth will find it (Luke 8:15). Experience proves that this will typically involve some exploratory prayers to the God of the Bible, reading and pondering the New Testament, talking with Christian friends and acquaintances, visiting a local church, counseling with a local pastor, reading books and articles about the faith, etc. He who does such things shows that he is rising well to the gospel test. And if, after searching in this way, he concludes that Christianity is true and takes the yoke of Christ upon him, he will learn soon enough that he has been effectually called, and that by God's grace he has passed the test of life.

This brings me to a third and final point: If a person is experiencing the least bit of spiritual hunger and curiosity, he should surely take heart, for this itself is evidence of the Spirit's work in his life. As we have seen, the default position of the unregenerate human heart is hostility to God. Left to himself, "No man seeks after God" (Ps. 14:1–3; Rom. 3:11). Therefore, if anyone *does* seek after God—even if at first his seeking is along the highways and byways of our religiously confused and contradictory world—it is surely a sign that God's invisible hand is at work. This is the thrust of the Lord's fourth beatitude: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matt. 5:6). Why are they blessed? Because, as A. W. Tozer liked to say, the God who is always previous has previously blessed them with a hunger and thirst for righteousness!

There is, however, an important caveat: God has blessed such a person, not for the purpose of sitting by passively, waiting for him to come and finish the work all by himself. No, God has blessed him so that, with the urgency of a blind man groping in the darkness for a light switch, he will seek him and find him (Acts 17:26–28). Speaking from personal experience I can say that this kind of seeking, which God has promised to reward, is rarely easy and often protracted. It will require both persistence and courage. It will require a seeker to grapple with the "hard sayings" of the Christian revelation: sayings about creation, probation, fall, sin, wrath, judgment, and eternal punishment. It will require him to wrestle with the prospect of abandoning cherished beliefs and values, whether his own, those of his family, or those of the surrounding culture. It will require him to stand apart, philosophically speaking, from friends, family, fellow students, and co-workers. In short, a God-honoring search will normally require a seeker to seriously count the cost of becoming a disciple of Christ (Luke 14:25–33). This is the test of life. It is never easy to take, but infinitely worthwhile if passed. As it is written: "The young lions suffer lack and hunger, but those who seek the Lord shall not lack for any good thing" (Ps. 34:10 NKJV).

Further Words to Saints: Irresistible Grace and Sanctification

In this section I want to issue two important caveats to the saints.

First, historical experience reveals that a misunderstanding of irresistible grace can obscure God's appointed pathway to progressive sanctification and fruitful ministry. The problem here is that such grace is sometimes thought to entail Quietism: the notion that the true prescription for spiritual life and growth consists of "letting go and letting God." After all, if grace is always previous, it only seems reasonable that we should wait quietly for him to come to us, pick us up, and carry us along by his Spirit, with the result that we are empowered for service and granted victory over residual indwelling sin.

The allure of this viewpoint stems from the element of truth in it. The Scripture does indeed counsel the saints to wait upon the Lord (Ps. 27:14; Is. 40:31). And we do indeed see Christ and his apostles taking time apart to pray, worship, fast, and wait on God, with the result that they hear from him and step out into Spirit-led ministry (Mark 1:35, 6:46; Luke 6:12; Acts 10:9ff, 13:1–3). Also, the apostle Paul declared, as a matter of principle, that if we will walk in the Spirit, we will not fulfill the lusts of the flesh (Rom. 8:1–17; Gal. 5:16). Does not all this suggest that the key to a victorious Christian life and growth lies in passively waiting upon God?

In a word, no; for not even in the cases cited above does the Bible endorse a *passive* waiting upon the Lord: an emptying of the mind, a becalming of the emotions, and a neutralizing the will, as is the goal in Eastern meditation. On the contrary, both by precept and example, the Bible commends *an active and expectant pursuit of the Lord*, a pursuit that engages every one of our faculties. As it is written, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30).

Let us hear the Apostle Paul on this important subject:

So then, my beloved friends, just as you have always obeyed—not only as you did in my presence, but now much more in my absence—work out your own salvation

with fear and trembling; for God is the one at work within you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12–13)

Here we see the true fruits of God's prevenient grace: It does not crucify, bypass, or violate man's free will, but rather awakens and engages it. Just as grace moves the seeker to seek, so too does it move the saint to work. This is the sweet spot in our thinking about how to progress in ministry and sanctity. On the one hand, we are indeed to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling; on the other, we are to do so on the understanding that it is God himself who bestirs us to our holy labors, and who will visit us by his Spirit as we engage in them. It is, then, as we actively and expectantly meditate upon the Scriptures, pray, participate in church life, put to death the works of the flesh, put on Christ, and serve the Lord with our spiritual gifts, that God will meet us in the way, direct us to his work, and purify our souls (Gen. 24:27, KJV; Rom. 8:12–14; Phil. 3:12–16; Col. 3:5–17). As it is written, "While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Now separate Barnabas and Saul to me for the work to which I have called them'" (Acts 13:2). Because these men were ministering, they were ministered to; because they were seeking, they were found. Here, then, is how the saints may joyfully perfect life, service, and holiness in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7:1).

Further Words to the Saints: Irresistible Grace and Evangelism

The second caveat is similar to the first: Irresistible grace, wrongly understood, can obscure God's will for evangelism. The problem here is a faulty assumption leading to a wrong conclusion. The faulty assumption is that because unregenerate man is totally depraved—spiritually dead in sins and trespasses—God must not be at work in anyone except those whom he is effectually calling. The faulty conclusion is that it is therefore pointless to share the gospel with people who show no signs of the Spirit's effectual call. At a practical level this

double misunderstanding creates a hesitancy to speak to those who show no signs of interest in the gospel, or who give no evidence of spiritual hunger.

Here again the Test Perspective proves its great worth. As we have seen, it teaches us that God loves all, strives with all, tests all, and desires all to freely respond to him. Another way of saying this is that he *calls* all. Yes, the Sovereignty Perspective tells us that God effectually calls *some*. But the Test Perspective completes the picture by teaching us that in other ways he calls *all*. And since the Church has an important role to play in facilitating his calls, it behooves her to understand what those ways are. Here, then, at the risk of repetition, are some of the key biblical truths that the Church is authorized to proclaim to all indiscriminately, *in the confidence that the Holy Spirit will indeed use these truths to call all people without exception to God*.

First, God calls all to himself through his self-revelation in nature (Ps. 19:1ff, 97:6; Rom. 1:18ff) and providence (Ps. 65:1ff, 145:9; Acts 14:17, 17:25), thereby making his existence, power, presence, goodness, and love known to all. Yes, because of intrinsic depravity, many actively suppress their innate knowledge of these things. But the very fact of their suppressing it is proof positive that the knowledge is there (Rom. 1:18ff). Accordingly, the Church's job is to appeal to that knowledge; to explain that the God who has clearly revealed *something* of himself in nature has revealed much *more* of himself in the Bible, Christ, and the gospel. The Church must speak to all about *general* revelation in order to direct all to *special* revelation.

Secondly, God calls all to himself through the intricate workings of the human conscience. That is, the Spirit of holiness continually discloses to everyone the several elements of what philosophers refer to as *the objective moral order*. Those elements are: (1) moral law, (2) moral obligation, and (3) moral cause and effect (i.e., sowing and reaping). Deep down, all people are aware of this order. Inescapably, they are trying to live up to it, reconcile themselves to it when they fall short of it, and/or ignore it as best they can. As a result, they also know, however subliminally, that there is indeed a holy, omnipresent,

and omnipotent Moral Governor who actively sustains this order. Also, the Holy Spirit reinforces man's awareness of the objective moral order when he spotlights God's judgments in nature, society, history, and the narratives of Scripture (Gen. 6–8, 11:1ff, 19:1–29; Ex. 7–14; Ps. 105:7; Acts 16:22–30; Rev. 6, 8, 9, 16). Understanding all this, the Church, like the Apostle Paul, can reason with all people about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come (Acts 24:25; Rom. 2:1–16; 1 Tim. 1:8–11; Rev. 14:7). Even more importantly, she can explain to guilt-ridden sinners that through Christ, and Christ alone, we may be reconciled to the Objective Moral Orderer once and for all.

Thirdly, God calls all to himself through faith in Christ (Matt. 24:14, 28:18f; Acts 1:8; Rev. 14:7). He does so through the external witness of the Church, but also by the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit, who uses the words spoken by the Church to strive with sinful, recalcitrant, but God-conscious hearts (Gen. 4:1–15, 6:3; Acts 7:51, 24:25). In particular, the Church is instructed to speak to all people, as the Spirit may lead, about the Person and Work of Christ: his divine nature, righteous life, atoning death, and vindicating resurrection. She is to speak to all people about man's proper response to the gift of Christ: simple faith in him and his all-sufficient work. She is to extend to all people the manifold promises, invitations, and blessings of the gospel. She is to convey to all people God's command that they repent and turn in faith to Christ. And she is to issue to all people God's warnings about what will happen in time and eternity if they don't (Matt. 3:12; Mark 1:15; John 3:16–21; Acts 17:30; 1 Thess. 1, 2; Rev. 19:11ff, 20:11ff).

Again, the Church must never allow the doctrines of Total Depravity and Irresistible Grace to persuade her that the gospel can fall upon *altogether* deaf ears. Despite unsettling appearances to the contrary (and they are legion), the Holy Spirit really does speak inwardly to all through the gospel, with the result that all are accountable to respond (John 1:9, 9:35–41). Remember the words of our Lord to master Nicodemus: "And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of the

light, because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). The unbeliever is not condemned because he has not seen the light of truth in the gospel of Christ. He is condemned because he *has* seen it, but loved darkness more than light. Yes, the Holy Spirit really is at work in the hearts of all who hear the gospel. Knowing this, Spirit-led Christians can look to the Lord as to how, when, and with whom they are to share the gospel (Matt. 10:19–20). And when they do, they can confidently encourage each one to respond (Acts 2:40).

Finally, the Spirit calls all who hear the gospel, not only to consider its claims, but also to investigate the panoply of supernatural evidences that God has given in order to substantiate it. When I compare contemporary preaching with that of the apostles, I sometimes wonder if we have not lost sight of this important fact. For in addition to an evangelistic mandate, the Church has also received an apologetic mandate. She is not only to proclaim the gospel, but also to confirm and defend it (Phil. 1:7). Paul states this as a matter of principle when he writes that God has commanded the mystery of the gospel to be made known to all nations *through the prophetic Scriptures* (Rom. 16:26). That is, the Church is to confirm the truth of the gospel by placing in evidence before all nations the great tapestry of OT Christophanies, types, shadows, and predictive prophecies, all of which pointed ahead to the Person and Work of the Redeemer. Moreover, when we read the evangelistic sermons of the apostles, we see that in addition to citing OT evidences, they also consistently lifted up both the miracles of the Lord and his bodily resurrection (Acts 2, 3, 10, 13, 17; 1 Cor. 15). And when we consider the testimonies of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John found in the four gospels and the book of Acts, still more evidence comes into view: Christ’s virgin birth, the ministry of John the Baptizer, angelic visitations and testimonies, two dramatic theophanies, and the miraculous birth and growth of the Christian Church.

We find, then, that the God who sets the gospel test before the nations has graciously supplied a stupendous body of evidence that is meant to help them pass it. Clearly this is a God who desires to *reason*

together with all men (Is. 1:18; Acts 17:2, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8–9; 26:24–25). Accordingly, the Church must take pains to fulfill her apologetic mandate, trusting that the Holy Spirit *will* use this evidence to call all to a fair-minded investigation of the gospel. Some may indeed resist the Spirit (Acts 7:51), while others will sweetly yield (Acts 17:32). But all will hear his voice.¹

Summing up, we have seen that the Test Perspective guards against a misunderstanding and misapplication of the doctrine of irresistible grace. It teaches us that God is pleased to test all people everywhere as to their love of God, truth, and righteousness. It says that by his Spirit he does indeed call all people inwardly through their interactions with nature, providence, conscience, the gospel, and the body of supernatural evidence that confirms the truth of the gospel. It reveals that God is a God who strives with all (Gen. 6:3), enlightens all (John 1:9), and visits all (Luke 19:44). In proof of this we see in Scripture itself that God sincerely called some of history's most hardened sinners to repentance and faith: Cain, Abimelech, Pharaoh, Balaam, Saul, Ahithophel, Nebuchadnezzar, Herod, Judas, Pilate, Felix, Festus, Nero, and more. Therefore, as the Lord leads and as the Spirit empowers, the Church must go to all, preach to all, reason with all, pray for all, and urge all to keep on asking, seeking, and knocking until that happy day when the answer comes, the treasure is found, and the door is opened wide.

In the case of those who do come to Christ, the Church will understand that their deeds were done in God; that all their seeking, wrestling, repenting, and believing were in response to the breathings of the sovereign Holy Spirit: to God's effectual call. In the case of those who do not come to Christ, she will understand that the seed of the Word, *at least for the moment*, has not fallen on good ground (Mark 4:5); that the god of this world, *at least temporarily*, has blinded the eyes of the those who do not believe (Matt. 13:4; 2 Cor. 4:4). Nevertheless, she will also take comfort in the fact that the seed has been planted in their hearts, that in days ahead the Holy Spirit may

well move them to cultivate it through spiritual seeking, and that in due season they may yet come to know the Lord.

I am grateful that this was the mindset of several earnest Christians who, over the course of four long years, shared—or tried to share—the gospel to me, despite the fact that I showed no signs whatsoever of being effectually called. In heaven I will tell them that their labors were not in vain. In heaven I will heartily thank them all.

3. The Spiritual Benefits

In my study I have a copy of an old and beloved painting called *The Good Shepherd*. A lone sheep is stuck on a mountain ledge. The mountain itself is barren and bleak. Overhead, a vulture is circling, waiting for the death of its prey. Below lies a great chasm, whose menacing depths are hidden from full view. Just above the ledge, with face hidden and back to the viewer, there is a shepherd wearing a crown of thorns. With one arm holding both to his staff and the mountainside, he reaches down with the other to rescue his lost sheep. The sheep is looking him squarely in the face. Despite its desperate straits, the sheep is at peace. The Shepherd has come. All will be well.

I have loved this painting because I see in it a picture of my own salvation. After spending much of my youth in foolishness, pride, and lust, I embarked on a four-year journey through various Eastern religions, seeking union with the god of pantheism. In the process I had a brush with the living Christ, but eventually turned away, not liking the God of the Bible, or the way in which his Book described the world, its history, me, and my future.. Four years later, after wholly giving myself to Eastern meditation, I experienced a complete mental and spiritual breakdown. If anyone on earth was ever more lost than that poor sheep on the mountain ledge, it was me. I was dead—and as good as dead—all at the same time; I had no hope or ability whatsoever to save myself. But in the summer of 1974, through a sudden and dramatic turn of events, the Good Shepherd came to me. Let me say that again: I did not come to him, but he came to me, reached down, grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, and lifted me off the ledge into

his loving arms. It will take an eternity to thank him for it, and even that won't be long enough.

When I think of my own calling, and when I study closely the biblical texts dealing with effectual calling, I realize afresh the truth of what Tozer said: "God is always previous." At its heart all true spiritual life is essentially a human response to the gracious initiatives of God. It is this awareness—which grows deeper every day as our wise heavenly Father shows us our native spiritual poverty—that prepares the heart for a revelation of the Doctrines of Grace. Yes, God was previous in my conversion, when he came to me, turned my stiff neck, and set me face to face with his Son, who in turn rescued me from death in the abyss. But having seen that, I later realized that God was previous when he sent Christ to die for me before I was even born. And having seen that, I realized that God was also previous when, before the founding of the world, he chose me in Christ to be one of his beloved children. So now, when I turn my gaze to the future, I realize that God, in Christ, will be previous for the rest of my time on earth. Day by day he will stir me up to seek his face. As I do, he will continue to teach me, sanctify me, and empower me for service until the day I die, when once again he will come to me, grab me by the scruff of the neck, and haul me up into heaven above. In short, one of the great benefits of this particular doctrine of grace is that it serves as a gateway to the other four. It can be the first ray of light to shine on the last word of God concerning our salvation: "Salvation is from the Lord" (Jon. 2:9).²

A second benefit of this doctrine is closely related to the first: In it we receive our first lesson in the School of the Holy Spirit. The substance of the lesson is this: "Pay close attention to how you began your Christian life, for that's the only way you're going to be able to finish it!" Here is how the Apostle Paul expressed this crucial truth:

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you, before whose very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified? This one thing I would learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit,

are you now perfecting yourselves by the flesh? Have you suffered so many things in vain, if indeed it was in vain? . . . So I say: Walk in the Spirit, and you will not carry out the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit lusts against the flesh, for the two are opposed to one another, with the result that you cannot do the things you desire. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. (Galatians 3:1–4, 5:16–18)

These are the words of a spiritual Papa Bear who is afraid for his endangered cubs, and who is fierce about protecting them. Judaizers have come into their midst, preaching salvation by (their version of) Christ plus obedience to the Mosaic Law. Paul is livid. Why? Because these heretics are trying to bewitch his beloved flock, enticing them to move off the solid rock of the all-sufficient Person and Work of Christ onto the sinking sands of a fake Jesus, the (obsolete) Mosaic Law, and their own “good” works.

But what was the antidote? How did he try to get them back on the rock? Our text answers clearly: He reminded them of Day 1. He urged them to recall how they began. And how was that? It was “by the Spirit.” As he shared with them the infinite riches of the all-sufficient Christ, the Spirit moved in their hearts, melting them with the love of the Lord, and filling them with his joy (Gal. 4:12–15; cf. 1 Cor. 2:1–5; Col. 2:1–4). They began on this good ground, and as long as they remained there they enjoyed a marvelous sense of the Spirit’s presence and power. But as soon as they stepped away from it, the Spirit stepped away from them. Henceforth, the Galatians were severed from Christ; they had (temporarily) fallen from grace (Gal. 5:4). Paul was pleading with them to come home.

Why is this reproof so important? It’s important because here Paul is placing in our hands the Master Key to a rich and fruitful Christian life. He is saying, “If you want this kind of life, you must take your stand on the all-sufficient Christ. When you do, the Spirit will make his presence and power known. When he does, you will have all you need for Christian life and ministry. This is how you began your

Christian walk; and how you began your walk is how you are meant to continue and complete it with fruitfulness and joy. Remember God's effectual call. Remember his irresistible grace. Remember that he is always previous. Always live beneath the shadow of these great truths, seeking the Lord, waiting on the Lord, listening for the Lord, hearing from the Lord, and obediently serving the Lord in his wisdom, power, and joy. You will be perfected as you take your stand on Christ himself, and as you walk in the Spirit with him" (Phil. 3:1–11). Thus does irresistible grace set the Christian runner on the path to spiritual victory.

Finally, a good understanding of irresistible grace will supply the Church with skill and confidence for her evangelistic mission on earth. Here, two big steps are involved. First, she must become clear about the redemptive purpose of her sovereign God, which is to gather together a people for his glory and their good. Taken together, the Doctrines of Grace supply this very thing. But secondly, she must also become clear about the means, or method, by which the sovereign God has purposed to accomplish this. In time, through the study of Scripture, she will see this as well. As a great many texts reveal—some of which are cited below—God begins by sending his Spirit to his people. Then, having equipped them with his Word, he sends them out in the power of the Spirit to proclaim his gospel to all nations (Col. 1:5). And then the Spirit uses that message to effectually call God's elect. As the Church keeps her eyes on these simple truths she will be filled with the zeal of the Lord of Hosts (Is. 9:7). Being confident, not in themselves, but in God's purpose, power, Spirit, and Word, they will eagerly go forth again and again, until the last saint is gathered in. And then the end shall come (Matt. 24:14).

This dynamic is marvelously on display in the book of Acts, whose main purpose is constantly to refocus the Church on her God-given mission on earth, and to renew her confidence that she can indeed complete it with good success. From the Day of Pentecost onward we behold the Church exploding outwards from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, to Asia, to Europe, and thereafter to the uttermost parts of the earth. As the disciples pray, study, worship, receive guidance,

go forth, preach, suffer, endure, bounce back, and preach again, the Lord works with them and through them to open hearts, convict of sin, grant repentance, instill faith, and gather in all who are appointed to eternal life (Mark 16:20; Acts 13:48). The High King of Heaven said, “I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). Knowing from Scripture how the High King will do it, and being confident that he cannot fail, his Church will eagerly rise to her high calling.

4. The Biblical Basis

Here again is a fulsome list of biblical texts, this time related to external calling, effectual calling, and irresistible grace. Texts in regular print emphasize the sovereignty of God, the irresistibility of his grace, and the assured effectiveness of his call. Texts *in italics* emphasize his desire that all without exception should hear his gospel call, turn to him in Christ, and be saved. Taken together, these texts define the mission of the Church and assure her of its good success.

- *For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon You. (Psalm 86:5)*
- *Sing to the LORD, bless his name; proclaim good tidings of his salvation from day to day. Tell of his glory among the nations, his wonderful deeds among all the peoples. For great is the LORD and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods. (Psalm 96:2–4)*
- In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the surviving remnant of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the Mediterranean. He will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel; he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth. (Isaiah 11:11–12 NIV)

- Now this is what the LORD says—he who created you, O Jacob, and he who formed you, O Israel: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; you are mine! When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and when you go through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you. When you walk through the fire you will not be scorched, and the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your place. Because you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you, I will give men in exchange for you, and nations in place of your life.” (Isaiah 43:1–4 BSB)
- *Break forth, shout joyfully together, you waste places of Jerusalem; for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The LORD has bared his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, so that all the ends of the earth may see the salvation of our God. (Isaiah 52:9–10)*
- *“Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourself in abundance. Incline your ear and come to me. Listen, that you may live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, according to the faithful mercies shown to David.” (Isaiah 55:1–3)*
- “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth, and making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so will my word be which goes forth from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it. For you will go out with joy and be led forth with peace; the mountains and the hills will break forth into shouts of joy

before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.”
(Isaiah 55:10–12)

- “Is not my word like fire?” declares the LORD, “and like a hammer which shatters a rock?” (Jeremiah 23:29)
- “Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD: “I will put my law within them, and will write it on their heart; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. They will not teach again, every man his neighbor and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they all will know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.” (Jeremiah 31:31–34)
- “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you will keep my judgments and do them.” (Ezekiel 36:26–27 NKJV)
- “Therefore, behold, I will allure her, bring her into the wilderness, and speak kindly to her. Then I will give her her vineyards from there, and the valley of Achor as a door of hope. And there she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt. It will come about in that day, declares the LORD, that you will call me Ishi [i.e., my husband], and will no longer call me Baali [i.e., my master]. For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, so that they will be mentioned by their names no more.” (Hosea 2:14–17)

- *Come to me, all who are weary and loaded down, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my load is light.” (Matthew 11:28–30)*
- *“And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” (Matthew 24:14)*
- *“Go, therefore, and make disciples in all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you. And behold, I am with you each and every day, even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19–20)*
- And he said, “The kingdom of God is like a man who scatters seed on the ground; then, night and day, he goes to bed and gets up, and the seed sprouts and grows, he himself not knowing how. For the ground brings forth the crop all on its own: first the stalk, then the head, and then the full grain in the head. But as soon as the crop is ready, the man immediately puts in the sickle, for the time to harvest has arrived.” (Mark 4:26–29)
- “All whom the Father gives me will come to me; and he who comes to me I will never drive out.” (John 6:37)
- “Moreover, I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold; I must bring them as well. And they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock and one shepherd.” (John 10:16)
- “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And as for me, if I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all to myself.” (Now Jesus said this in order to signify the kind of death he was about to die.) (John 12:31–33)
- “Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: It is good for you that I am leaving. For if I do not leave, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go my way, I will send him to you. And when he has come, he will convict the world concerning sin and

righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I am going to my Father and you see me no more; and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged.” (John 16:7–11)

- *“But when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will receive power; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the farthest ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)*
- “But God has exalted this same Jesus to his own right hand as Prince and Savior, to grant to Israel both repentance and forgiveness of sins.” (Acts 5:31)
- *So opening his mouth, Peter declared: “Truly I now see that God is no respecter of persons, but that in every nation the one who fears him and does what is right is welcomed by him.” (Acts 10:34)*
- Now when they heard all these things, they immediately dropped their objections and glorified God, saying, “Then God has indeed granted to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life!” (Acts 11:18)
- Now when the Gentiles heard that, they began to rejoice, and also to celebrate the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. (Acts 13:48)
- Now a certain woman by the name of Lydia—a seller of purple fabrics from the city of Thyatira, and a worshiper of God—was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to embrace the things spoken by Paul. (Acts 16:14)
- *For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes him [or, in him] will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord is lord of all, overflowing in riches to all who call on him. For, “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Romans 10:11-13).*
- Yes, he is the reason you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification

and redemption—so that as it is written, “He who boasts, let him boast in the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 1:30)

- But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved); and he raised us together, and seated us together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the endless ages to come he might display the surpassing riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved, through faith. And this comes not from yourselves: It is the gift of God, and not the fruit of works, so that no one can ever boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. (Ephesians 2:4–10)
- For to you it has been granted in behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for his cause, experiencing among yourselves the same struggle that you saw me face, and now hear that I am facing again. (Philippians 1:29–30)
- We also ask that in accordance with his glorious might you will be strengthened with all power for all endurance and all steadfastness, joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the realm of the light. For he has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption: the forgiveness of our sins. (Colossians 1:11–14)
- *Now I rejoice in the things I suffer for your sake as I fill up in my flesh whatever is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, doing so for the benefit of his body, which is the church. In accordance with the stewardship that God gave to me for your benefit, I have become her servant, with a charge to fully proclaim the word of God, the mystery hidden from ages and generations gone by, but now revealed to his saints. To them God was pleased to reveal how*

great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. He is the one we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, so that we may present every man mature and complete in Christ Jesus. And I too labor towards this end, striving in accordance with the working of Christ himself, which works in me with great power. (Colossians 1:24–29)

- Every generous act, and every completed gift, is from above and descends from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow cast by turning. Having willed it long ago, he gave us new birth through the message of truth, so that we might be a kind of first fruits of all his creatures. (James 1:17–18)
- Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who, in accordance with his abundant mercy, has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is incorruptible, undefiled, and that will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who, through faith, are being kept by the power of God for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:3–5)
- *Then I saw another angel flying high in the sky overhead, having an everlasting gospel to proclaim to the inhabitants of the earth, even to every nation and tribe and language and people. And with a loud voice he kept on saying, “Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made the heavens and the earth, the sea and the springs of water.” (Revelation 14:6–7)*
- *Now the Spirit and the Bride say, “Come!” So let the one who hears say, “Come!” And let the one who is thirsty come. Let the one who so desires take the water of life without cost! (Revelation 22:17)*

CHAPTER 7

PERSEVERANCE IN THE FAITH

1. The Big Idea

The fifth doctrine of grace is perseverance in the faith, also referred to as the eternal security of the true believer. Some in the Reformed tradition prefer to speak of preservation in the faith, since this term more sharply highlights the antecedent role of the sovereign God in the perseverance of his children. Clearly, both expressions are helpful. Reflecting as they do both biblical paradigms of salvation, they give us the complete biblical picture: The sovereign God who preserves is the One who moves and empowers his people freely to persevere, so that they may fully pass the test of life.

Several different lines of evidence support the doctrine of perseverance in the faith. As a result, some Arminians, even if inconsistently, will affirm it. Let's take a moment to look at some of the most important.

The Other Doctrines of Grace Entail Preservation

First, preservation in the faith is not simply *supported* by the other doctrines of grace, but (to use the language of logic) positively *entailed* by them. In other words, even if there were no biblical texts explicitly teaching this doctrine, a good Berean, simply by contemplating the other four, could not help but deduce that it is true.

It's easy to see, for example, that total depravity entails divine preservation, since no human being, left to himself, could ever come to faith or persevere in it. "Apart from me," said the Lord Jesus, "You can do nothing." This includes perseverance. The saints persevere because Christ enables them to do so.

Unconditional election entails divine preservation since it is certain that the sovereign God who chose a people for his own possession and purposed their final glorification must also have purposed all the means necessary for them to attain his goal. This is clearly Paul's premise in Romans 8:29–30:

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. Moreover, those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Again, the apostle is so confident in the sovereignty of God that he presents the glorification of the saints as a *fait accompli*. And what is true of their glorification must also be true of their preservation. Accordingly, Paul might well have written, ". . . and those whom he justified he also preserved; and those whom he preserved he also glorified." Because God is sovereign to the end, the preservation and glorification of the saints is sure (1 Thess. 5:23).

Definite atonement entails divine preservation since it is certain that Christ has paid the penalty for all the sins of all his people: past, present, and future. Therefore, it is also certain that while they will indeed sin during their earthly pilgrimage, they will never do so in such a way as to exhaust the infinite merits of his sacrifice, thereby falling away from the faith. The hymnist sang, "When I saw that cleansing fountain, opened wide for all my sin . . ." If the fountain was opened for all of his sin, how shall he sin often enough to stanch the fountain of forgiveness, thereby forfeiting his salvation?¹

Finally, irresistible grace (effectual calling) also entails spiritual preservation since, by definition, it involves three great spiritual gifts: regeneration, justification, and the sealing work of the Holy Spirit.

With special reference to the ideas of preservation and perseverance, let us briefly consider each one of them.

Regeneration Entails Preservation

While it is certainly true that in OT times the Holy Spirit was *with* the saints, it is quite clear from Scripture that true regeneration—spiritual rebirth unto eternal life in the presence and family of God—is a gift that God was pleased to reserve for “these last days,” the days of Christ and the New Covenant (John 7:37–39, 14:17; Acts 2:14–21). And, as is often the case, God saved the best for last. Thus, even in OT times both Jeremiah and Ezekiel looked forward to a day when God would institute a new and better covenant with his people. Under this covenant he would give them a new heart of flesh and write his laws and commandments, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts: tablets made of flesh (Jer. 31:31ff; Ezek. 11:19, 36:26; 2 Cor. 3:3; Heb. 8).

We find, then, that it belongs *essentially* to the New Covenant that all who are effectually called into it *will* walk in ongoing obedience to their God. As it is written: “My servant David *will* be king over them, and they *will* all have one shepherd; and they *will* walk in my ordinances, and *will* keep my statutes and observe them” (Ezek. 37:24; John 10:16). This understanding pervades the NT as well. To give but one example, the Apostle John writes, “No one begotten by God practices sin, for his seed abides within him; and he cannot continue in sin, because he has been begotten by God.” (1 John 3:9).² Thus, the new birth, which is God’s special gift to his New Covenant children, entails that because of the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit the saints will never fall back under the dominion of sin, but will persevere in the faith unto eternal life (John 14:16; Rom. 6:14).

Justification Entails Preservation

Justification is the divine act in which God declares a person to be righteous in his sight based on his or her faith in the all-sufficient redemptive work of Christ. On this score my favorite text is John 5:24:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and will never come into judgment: He has crossed over out of death and into life.”
(John 5:24)

Here we see that effectual calling—the inward spiritual hearing of Christ’s word in the gospel—leads to saving faith, and saving faith to a great double blessing. On the one hand, there is justification: Through faith in Christ the believer’s sins are forgiven and Christ’s righteousness is credited to him, with the result that, once and for all, he has passed out of condemnation. He will never come into judgment for his previous sins. On the other hand, having passed out of condemnation, he has also passed, once and for all, out of the sphere of death and into the sphere of life. And this life is eternal. As Jesus stated elsewhere: “I am the resurrection and the life: He who believes in me will live, even if he dies; and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:25–26). In short, anyone who has been justified by faith in Christ has—and always will have—eternal life. Through the power of this life he *will* persevere, and therefore *cannot* fall away.

This is the thrust of yet another great NT text on justification: Romans 5:1–2. Paul writes:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and so rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

Here we learn three important truths about justified persons. First, their justification is a past event. At a particular moment in time, when they first trusted in Christ, they *were* justified: They *were* forgiven of all their sins—past, present, and future—and, through the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, *were* declared righteous in God’s sight. Both *were* acts of God, and both *were* performed once and for all. Secondly, we learn that justification has present and ongoing consequences. Henceforth, justified persons enjoy peace with God, access to him, and a permanent favorable standing before him. In other

words, they are his kids, both now and for all eternity. Finally, we learn that because of these things God's justified children are filled with joy. Why? *Because they are filled with hope: that is, spiritual confidence about their eternal future.* Having shown them that they *have been justified*, the Spirit also shows them that they *will* be glorified. But if they *will* be glorified, it is certain that they also *will* persevere in the faith. And so, with confidence and joy, they press on.

The Sealing Work of the Spirit Entails Preservation

Over and again it is written in the NT that at the moment of their conversion the saints are *sealed* (in Christ) by or with the Holy Spirit. To appreciate the riches of this idea we need to know a little about the use of seals in biblical times. As a rule, a person would seal an object (e.g., a letter, a vessel, a tomb, etc.) by affixing a dollop of clay or wax to the object, after which he would emboss the dollop with some kind of stamp (e.g., a ring or cylinder). As the NT use of this word makes clear, such seals served a variety of purposes. They could be used to confirm authenticity (John 3:33, 6:27; Rom. 15:28), indicate ownership (2 Tim. 2:19; Rev. 7:3–5, 8), or secure against illicit entry (Matt. 27:65–66; Eph. 1:13, 4:30).

The apostles drew upon the practice of sealing in order to describe what happens to a new believer in Christ when he receives the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Thus, we find Paul writing to the Ephesians as follows:

And when you heard and believed the message of the truth (the good news of your salvation), you too were sealed in him with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the down payment on our inheritance, given with a view to the full redemption of the purchased possession, for the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:13–14)

Here Paul states that at the moment of saving faith the Ephesian saints were *sealed in Christ by means of the promised gift of the Holy Spirit*. Now, one can hardly doubt that the apostle regards this gift as

a mark of ownership, and also as a mark that authenticates the saints' new identity as the children of God. Here, however, the emphasis decidedly falls on the idea of protection and preservation. Here the Holy Spirit is viewed as a friendly power whose mission is to secure the believer in Christ: that is, to guard against illicit entry or kidnapping by hostile forces. The Apostle John evinced the same understanding when he wrote, "We know that no one begotten by God practices sin, but that he who was begotten by God keeps him, so that the evil one cannot take hold of him" (1 John 5:18). Paul and John agree. Because of the new birth the believer is sealed in Christ by means of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Because he is thus sealed, Christ himself will keep him in himself. And because Christ himself will keep him in himself, neither the world, the flesh, nor the devil can ever pull him out! The believer in Jesus is eternally secure.

We see, then, that the spiritual sealing of believers in Christ implies their preservation in the faith. And wondrous to tell, Paul himself immediately goes on to make that implication explicit. He tells us straightforwardly that this precious gift is also meant as a *deposit*, a *pledge*, and a *down payment* (Greek: *arrabon*). In other words, it is meant as a *guarantee* that the saint will indeed receive the inheritance God has promised him: the redemption of his body at the resurrection of the dead, and eternal life in and with the triune God in the glorious world to come (Rom. 8:23; Eph. 4:30). Therefore, let every Christian know that through the gift of the Holy Spirit God has set a preserving power at the very core of his being, and that because of this power the saints will indeed persevere to the end and receive their inheritance. And let every Christian know that God *wants* him to know this, and to rejoice (Rom. 5:2, 8:16-17; 1 John 5:13)!

Explicit Biblical Texts

The final line of evidence demonstrating the preservation of the saints is the large body of biblical texts that explicitly affirm it. I have listed a number of them in the last section of this chapter, all of which speak powerfully for themselves. Here, however, I would call attention

to two of the most important. The first is John 10:22–30, a passage that has meant a great deal to me personally.

The Lord Jesus, in attendance at the Feast of Booths, has been teaching the people. As a result, the Pharisees have begun to question and challenge him. Confronted by the hostility of these worthless shepherds (Ezek. 34:1ff; Zech. 11:17), the Good Shepherd speaks out in the hearing of God's true flock for their edification and comfort:

²² Then came the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³ and Jesus was walking on the temple grounds in Solomon's portico. ²⁴ So the Jewish leaders surrounded him and began asking him, "How long are you going to keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." ²⁵ Jesus answered them, "I did tell you, but you don't believe. The miraculous works I am doing in my Father's name, these testify about me; ²⁶ but you don't believe because you don't belong to my flock. ²⁷ My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I myself give them eternal life, and to all eternity they will never perish, nor will anyone ever snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; and no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one."

The powerful encouragement embedded in these words stems from two great facts. On the one hand, they display four of the five doctrines of grace. On the other, they give us the most striking affirmation of the divine preservation of the saints to be found in all of Scripture. Small wonder, then, that for two millennia the flock of God has clung to these words for dear life.

Observe first the presence, directly or indirectly, of four doctrines of grace. Total depravity and its corollary, spiritual inability, are on display in that these hostile Pharisees cannot hear the voice of Christ, and therefore do not believe in him (v. 27; John 8:43). Unconditional election is on display because the Father has not given these Pharisees to Christ, with the result that they do not belong to his flock (vv. 26, 29). Effectual calling is on display in that his sheep will certainly hear

his voice (v. 27). And the divine preservation of the saints is on display because his sheep will certainly follow him (v. 27), and because no one—not even the sheep themselves—can snatch them out of his hand or his Father’s hand (vv. 28–29). It remains only to add that just moments earlier the Lord had affirmed—not once, but twice—that he, the Good Shepherd, would soon lay down his life (especially) for the sheep (vv. 11, 15). Therefore, definite atonement is on display as well. Thus, it turns out that in the Lord’s discourse about the Good Shepherd all five of the doctrines of grace are present, with the accent falling sharply on the divine preservation of the flock of God.

Finally, let us also note the many ways in which verses 27–30 imply or explicitly affirm divine preservation. Why do his sheep hear his voice, and why do they keep on following him? It is because the Good Shepherd gives them eternal life. But this life is not only an eternal standing; it is also a never-ending supply of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1–2; Phil. 1:19). In other words, here again we see that God’s gift of the Holy Spirit will place a preserving power in the hearts of his flock (Phil. 2:12–13). As a result, it will place them in the hand, not only of an omnipotent Christ, but also of an omnipotent Father who has given his Christ all authority in heaven and earth (Matt. 28:18). Therefore, being safely in the mighty hands of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the flock of God will never perish, nor can anyone or anything, including themselves, ever snatch them out of their hands. Divine power and preservation will ensure the saints’ perseverance until that happy day when the Good Shepherd pastures his flock in the world to come.

As for our second text, we have already encountered it several times. But who can fail to include it here, or to regard it as one of Scripture’s loftiest bastions of spiritual assurance? Listen, therefore, once again to the Apostle Paul as he gives us the Grand Finale of his declaration of the manifold fruits of justification:

³¹ What then shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not

spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, how shall he not also, together with him, freely give us all things? ³³ Who can bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; ³⁴ who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is the one who died—or rather, who was raised, who also is at the right hand of God, and who also makes intercession for us. ³⁵ What then can separate us from the love of Christ: Can tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ (Just as it is written, “For your sake we are put to death all day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter.”) ³⁷ Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is found in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:31–39)

Why is it that no created thing (and surely we ourselves are created things!) can separate us from the love of God that is found in Christ? The text answers fulsomely. It is because God is for us (v. 31). It is because the God who loved us enough to give us his own Son as our redeemer will surely love us enough to give us everything else we need for the fulfillment of our redemption (v. 32). It is because the God who has justified us refuses to hear a single charge against his elect: He will swiftly throw the accusation—and the accuser—right out of the courtroom (v. 33)! And it is because Christ Jesus—pleading the infinite merits of an atoning death that has been eternally vindicated by his resurrection from the dead—ever lives to make intercession for us (v. 34). As we learn from the Revelation, the Lamb who was slain stands forever between the Church and the throne of the Holy God; as a result, the Church herself will forever stand there with him (Rev. 5:6; cf. Eph. 1:20, 2:6). Therefore, let those of us who are still journeying through the howling wilderness of this present evil age take heart: Because of all these great gifts, they shall surely persevere (Rev. 12:11).

2. The Balancing Factors

We have now seen how lavishly God has been pleased to reveal in Scripture the truth of the divine preservation of the saints. We have also seen why he has done so: so that the saints, being fully assured of their salvation, may live the Christian life as God meant it to be lived: in righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17). Without this doctrine the door is opened wide for doubt, fear, and compulsive legalism to enter in. With it, the saints are shut up to the God of love, and to his gracious invitation to draw upon that love at all times. The intended result is that the love of God should increasingly become the supreme motive for their worship and service in the world.

However, in order to enjoy these rich benefits, the saints must be certain that divine preservation in the faith really is the teaching of Scripture. And in order to believe that, they are going to have to wrestle with a number of other texts—commonly cited by our Arminian brothers—which seem to refute it. Importantly, it is precisely as the saints interact with these challenging texts that the Holy Spirit will bring a healthy balance to their faith and practice. In particular, they will come to see more clearly God’s part (preservation) and their part (perseverance) in the final salvation of their souls. The relevant texts fall into two broad categories, and comprise “the other side of the story” on the doctrine of the preservation of the saints. Let us take a few moments to carefully look at them both.

Texts Stating or Implying That Final Salvation Depends on Perseverance

Texts in this category are abundant, and not a few of them give us the words of our Lord himself. For example, as he brought the Sermon on the Mount to a close, Jesus said:

“So then: Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice may be likened to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floodwaters rose, and the winds blew and beat against that

house; but it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock.”
(Matthew 7:24–25)

Clearly, these words are designed to elicit the perseverance of the saints: Those who hear, act, and build upon the word of Christ will survive the great storms of life, death, and final judgment; and those alone.

Similarly, the Lord spoke of his true disciples as follows: “But as for the seed that landed on good ground, these are the ones who, when they hear the word in an honest and good heart, take hold of it and bring forth fruit with patience and endurance” (Luke 8:15). And on at least two other occasions he explicitly stated what our two previous passages imply: “He who endures to the end will be saved” (Matt. 10:22, 24:13). Thus, final salvation depends upon taking hold, bringing forth, patiently enduring, and standing firm. It depends upon perseverance.

The apostles follow in their Master’s footsteps. Accordingly, we find Paul issuing a warning to any Roman Christians who are inclined to boast against unbelieving Jews: “Behold, then, the kindness and severity of God: to those who fell, severity; but to you, God’s kindness, if you continue in his kindness; otherwise you too will be cut off” (Rom. 11:22). Likewise, he promises the Colossian Christians that God will one day present them holy in his sight if indeed they continue in [the] faith, grounded, steadfast, and never moved away from the hope of the good news that they heard (Col. 1:21–23). Soberingly, he warns the saints in Ephesus, “If we deny him, he also will deny us” (2 Tim. 2:12). And after instructing and exhorting his beloved colleague Timothy, he concludes, “Keep close watch over yourself and your teaching. Persevere in all these areas, for in so doing you will save both yourself and those who listen to you” (1 Tim. 4:16).

The other apostles are in full accord. Peter, having exhorted the saints to cultivate a wide variety of godly attitudes and practices, concludes by saying,

Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for by practicing these things you will never stumble. For in this way the entrance into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly presented to you. (2 Peter 1:10–11)

The writer to the Hebrews admonishes, “For we have become partakers of Christ if indeed we hold our initial confidence firmly until the end” (Heb 3:14; cf. Heb. 10:36). James, laying out the challenging terms of genuine Christian discipleship, declares, “Blessed is the man who bears up under trial, for when he has passed the test he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love him” (James 1:12).

And then we have Jude. Though expressly confident of God’s keeping power (Jude 1:1), he nevertheless exhorts the saints to build themselves up on their most holy faith, and to pray always in the Holy Spirit. Why? In order to *keep themselves* in the love of God (Jude 1:20–21). Finally, placing his seal of approval on all these exhortations, we have the exalted Christ himself, who gives stupendous promises of eternal life in the world to come, not simply to him who believes, but “to him who overcomes” (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26, etc.).³

What are we to make of these texts? Do they prove, as our Arminian brothers contend, that a true saint can fail to persevere in the faith and so lose his salvation? My response, issued from the Golden Strand, is twofold.

First, if we address this question *exclusively* from within the Test Perspective, we must conclude, “Of course it is possible, for all these texts clearly state or imply that it is. Why else would God, who obviously *wants* his people to persevere, give them so many promises, exhortations, and warnings, if in fact there were no danger of falling short of final salvation?” Moreover, even if we had no such scriptural proofs, our immediate, intuitive experience of ourselves as free human beings, engaged in mortal combat with the residual sin in our members, would persuade us that this danger is real. For is it not true that all of the saints—sometimes with no little sense of alarm—can join with

the hymnist in singing, “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it; prone to leave the one I love. Here’s my heart, O take and seal it; seal it for thy courts above!” Again, taking our stand *exclusively* within the Test Perspective, and reckoning honestly with the alarming double-mindedness that can so easily infect our walk with God, we must conclude both from Scripture and experience that it is indeed possible for a saint who fails to persevere to fall away from the faith.

But secondly, it is also true that the Bible itself invites us—indeed, urges us—to consider this question from within the Sovereignty Perspective as well. And once we do, we see things in a loftier and far more encouraging light. For looking steadily through the lens of the Doctrines of Grace, and through the many scriptural assurances of divine preservation, we are now able to say, “Yes, my Arminian brother is right: A true saint is free to do as he wishes, and is therefore *in principle* free to fall away from the faith. However, *in practice* this is impossible, since God, through the new birth, has so worked in his whole being—in his understanding, conscience, affections, and will—that despite all temptations and moral failures, he cannot and will not desire to turn away from his Savior once and for all.”

In other words, true saints are like the Apostle Peter, who, together with a handful of loyal disciples, resolutely stayed put when many of his Master’s other “disciples” had abandoned him and gone home. When Christ asked them, “Do you men also intend to leave?” Peter replied, ‘Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life’ (John 6:68). Peter is forever bonded to his Master, and so too are all the rest of the saints. They *will not* leave because they *cannot* leave. For this reason, the Apostle John writes, “No one who is begotten by God practices sin, for his seed abides in him; and he cannot continue in sin, because he has been begotten by God” (1 John 3:9). The Apostle Paul agrees: “To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand” (Rom. 14:4). Again, spiritual defection is possible *in principle* because the pilgrim saint is free and not yet perfected in holiness; but *in practice* it is impossible because his new nature now *inclines* him towards holiness; and

the sovereign, covenant-keeping God has committed himself to keeping it that way (Matt. 7:17–19).

Will True Saints Ever Suffer Spiritual Shipwreck?

Some years back theologian Louis Berkhoff gave us a powerful biblical illustration of the mysterious harmony between God's sovereign preservation and man's responsibility to persevere. The illustration is found in Acts 27. After many days at sea in the midst of a great storm, the men on board a ship that was headed for Rome gave up all hope of being saved (v. 20). However, in a nighttime vision an angel of the Lord stood before the Apostle Paul, assuring him that he and all the men on the ship would survive (vv. 23–25). Shortly thereafter—and by a true miracle of providence—the ship neared the island of Malta in the dead of night. Thinking to escape the doomed vessel, the sailors began lowering the ship's boats on a pretense of setting out the anchors. But when Paul realized what they were doing, he said to the centurion, "Unless these men remain in the ship you yourselves cannot be saved" (v. 31). Happily, the centurion took immediate action, the sailors remained on board, and all the crew and passengers were saved. Thus, God's sovereign purpose to preserve them was fulfilled. However, he was pleased to fulfill that purpose through his angel, his apostle, his Word, and the work of his Spirit in the hearts of free moral agents who had a very real life-and-death decision to make.⁴

I trust the application is clear, even if the metaphysics are shrouded in mystery. If the sovereign God purposes to preserve his people, they will surely be preserved. However, as all the texts we have cited so far reveal, he does not simply do it *for* them. Rather, he does it in and through a personal relationship *with* them. Accordingly, in his Word he speaks to his people in such a way as to quicken and engage their newly liberated will. By means of instruction, promise, warning, exhortation, and encouragement he would motivate them to be active (and not passive) participants in a lifelong walk with him. And as they read his Word, they understand. They see that they have been born again to a life of actively seeking, finding, hearing, following, and enjoying

the Lord. They see that if they will do these things faithfully they will grow in their knowledge of God, and in the assurance of their salvation. But they also see that if they fail to do these things and turn away from him, they will perish. *They see that even for Christians, life is still a test.*

Such seeing has major consequences. Herded along in part by a healthy fear of falling away—but also, and far more so, by a growing love for the Lord who first loved them—the sheep are determined to stick close to their Shepherd, listen for his voice, swiftly head out when he sends them on a mission, and just as swiftly head back to the safety of his side when the mission is accomplished. Theirs is a whole new (eternal) life of coming in, going out, and finding pasture (John 10:9); of laying hold of that for which Christ Jesus laid hold of them (Phil. 3:12); of pressing on and racing towards the mark to win the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:7–16). In sum, through the many biblical texts stating or implying that final salvation depends upon lifelong perseverance, God motivates his people freely to love and obey him. And as they do so, he empowers their obedience, develops their knowledge of him, strengthens their assurance of salvation, casts out crippling fears, and faithfully preserves them to the blessed end. “For God is the one at work within you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13). The God who sovereignly preserves is the one who secretly empowers his beloved people to persevere.⁵

Texts Appearing to Say That True Christians Can Lose Their Salvation

Texts in our second category are also quite numerous. Moreover, some of them do indeed appear to mount a sharp challenge to the idea of eternal security, for which reason they have often troubled the saints by opening doors to unhealthy doubts and fears. In this section I will briefly examine a number of the most important. However, before doing so it is necessary to set the stage by discussing a mysterious, painful, and frequently neglected biblical topic: false brethren.

My view is that nearly all of the texts found in our second category refer to false brethren: people who profess faith in Christ but who are not born-again, repentant, believing, justified, Spirit-sealed believers in the Lord. As I read Scripture, there are basically two kinds of false brethren: hypocrites and apostates. Let us take a moment to discuss each one.

Hypocrites

Hypocrites are people who, for one reason or another, associate themselves with God's family and participate in the round of church life, but who have no real interest in developing a personal relationship with the Lord, hearing his voice, or serving him in the power of the Holy Spirit with their time, talent, and treasure. Also included in this definition is the idea that such people typically maintain an external relationship with the church to the end of their lives. In other words, they are not apostates: They neither leave the church, nor are they expelled from it because of persistent doctrinal or moral failure.

A number of biblical texts commonly held to support the idea of spiritual fallibility are actually referring to the dreadful destiny of lifelong hypocrites. A prime example is found towards the end of the Sermon on the Mount, where our Lord says:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but [only] he who does the will of my Father in heaven. In that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and drive out demons in your name, and perform many [miraculous] works of power in your name?’ And then I will openly declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness.’” (Matthew 7:21–23)

Clearly, the reference here is to hypocrites. They call Jesus “Lord” but they do not do the will of their Lord, whether of the Father or the Son. Astonishingly, the persons here in view were able to perform supernatural feats. Did they do so by the power of the Holy Spirit, as Judas did? Or was it by the power of demons that came to them as

angels of light (2 Cor. 11:14; Rev. 13:13–14, 16:14, 19:20)? Whatever the answer, it is certain that these are not regenerate persons who fell away, but hypocrites who never came to know the Lord at all. Jesus will mean it when he says, “I *never* knew you.” Those whom he does know—and those who will never perish—are those who hear his voice and follow him (John 10:27–28). The hypocrites envisioned here do neither.⁶

A much more challenging text that I think properly falls into this category is the Parable of the Virgins. It reads as follows:

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now five of them were foolish and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they brought no oil with them; but the wise brought vessels full of oil along with their lamps. Now while the bridegroom tarried, they all grew drowsy and fell asleep. But at midnight there came a shout: ‘Look, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’ Then all those virgins got up and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out!’ But the wise answered and said, ‘No, for there may not be enough for both of us; go instead to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ But as the foolish were on their way to buy more oil, the bridegroom arrived and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut. Later on the other virgins also arrived, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open to us!’ But he answered and said, ‘I tell you the truth: I don’t know you.’ So then: Keep careful watch, for you know neither the day nor the hour. (Matthew 25:1–13)

This is one of three parables appearing towards the end of the Olivet Discourse, in all of which the Lord exhorts his disciples to exercise vigilance, faithfulness, and perseverance to the very end: whether of their lives or of the present evil age. Read superficially, it looks as if the five foolish virgins were true Christians who remained faithful most of their lives but then faltered in the home stretch, thereby

forfeiting their salvation. After all, like the other five women, they too were virgins, they too had lamps and oil, and they too were waiting for the Bridegroom. Should we not say, then, that they too were true Christians who, through spiritual carelessness, “ran out of oil,” fell away, and were lost?

By way of response, I want to acknowledge at the outset that this parable is indeed partly directed *to* true Christians (i.e., “wise virgins”). Through it and others like it the Lord not only exhorts them to persevere, but also *empowers* them to do so by means of a healthy fear. As we just saw, it is by the Spirit and through warnings such as these that the sovereign God motivates his elect children to cling to Christ, thereby preserving them for his eternal kingdom.

However, in the case of the five foolish virgins I do not believe that Christ is speaking *about* true Christians. Above all, this is because of the many other biblical texts—not a few of which give us the words of our Lord himself—assuring us that true believers cannot fall away. In other words, true believers will never definitively “run out of oil,” since it is written that when Christ gives them the Holy Spirit, he (the Spirit) will remain with them forever (John 14:16); and that at the moment of faith the Spirit seals true believers in Christ for time and eternity (2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13, 4:30).

Returning to our text itself we also see that in the Judgment the Lord will say to the foolish virgins, “I do not know you” (cf. Luke 13:22–30). Admittedly, these words are not as decisive as, “I never knew you” (Matt. 7:23). Yet we know from Scripture itself that as a matter of fact the Lord *never* knew these virgins, since on another occasion he said of his true flock, “My sheep hear my voice, *and I know them*, and they follow me. I myself give them eternal life, and to all eternity they will never perish, nor will anyone ever snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:27–28). If the Lord ever knew a sheep, he will always know that sheep. And this entails that the sheep *will* persevere unto eternal life.

Who then do the five foolish virgins represent? The conclusion is inescapable: They represent false brethren, spiritual hypocrites. Yes,

they are professing Christians; yes, they are in church; and yes, they may even verbalize a certain eagerness for Christ's return. But the oil that lights their lamps is not the indwelling Holy Spirit. Perhaps it is the lively atmosphere of Christian worship, or the friendship and support of true Christians, or the winsomeness of the preacher, or the prospect of finding a mate, a job, a client, or even a following. Whatever the case, for people such as these there awaits a great crisis at the Lord's return. It will produce in them a desperate search for the one true oil: a genuinely saving relationship with Christ. Hitherto they have gone to the wrong dealers; they have purchased for themselves counterfeit oil for a counterfeit Christian walk. But now, when the true saints direct them to the one true dealer—who is Christ himself—it is too late.

The sobering moral of the parable—manifestly directed to all people, preachers included—is clear: While Today is still called Today, let everyone who names the name of the Lord examine himself to make sure he is truly in the faith (Heb. 3:13; cf. 2 Cor. 13:1ff; 2 Tim. 2:19; 2 Pet. 1:1–11). Let him retire to his “inner room,” and there begin (or continue) to cultivate a close personal relationship with the Good Shepherd, so that he hears his voice, follows him day by day, and thus becomes assured that he has indeed inherited eternal life (Matt. 6:6; John 10:27–28; 2 Pet. 1:10).

Apostates

The second kind of false brother, and the one that especially concerns us in our present discussion of perseverance, is the apostate. This is the person who initially professes faith in Christ, is baptized, attends church for a season, and then turns away from the faith; or it is the person who teaches or behaves in such an egregiously non-Christian manner that he is eventually expelled from the church.

Importantly, Scripture assures us that this will be a perennial problem for the true Church of Christ; that at any given moment in Church History true Christians must expect to encounter false teachers, false prophets, and false brethren who temporarily embrace and

proclaim the faith, but who afterwards depart from it. Our Lord, for example, taught that some people will initially respond to the gospel with great enthusiasm, but later fall away when affliction or persecution arises because of the Word (Matt. 13:20–21). He warned that in the last days many will depart from the faith, betraying one another and hating one another (Matt. 24:10). The Apostle Paul told the Ephesian elders that after his departure savage wolves would come in among them, not sparing the flock; indeed, that from their own number (i.e., from among the elders) apostates would arise, speaking perverse things and trying to draw away disciples after themselves (Acts 20:29–30). Likewise, he also taught that in later times some would fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and demonically inspired teachings purveyed by false brethren (1 Tim. 4:1). And echoing these prophecies, the Apostle Peter warned that false teachers will indeed arise among the saints, secretly introducing destructive heresies, and even denying the Master who bought them, thereby bringing swift destruction upon themselves (2 Pet. 2:1–2).

Soberingly, we read that some of these predictions were already being fulfilled in NT times. Hymenaeus and Alexander made shipwreck of their faith (1 Tim. 1:19–20). Philetus strayed from the foundational truth of the resurrection (2 Tim. 2:16–18). The unregenerate Diotrophes, having somehow risen to a position of leadership in the church, openly opposed and slandered the apostles, and was hostile to true saints (3 John 1:9–11). False brethren abandoned the Ephesian house churches, proving that they were never brethren in the first place (1 John 2:19). And according to Jude, certain false teachers had already crept into the churches unnoticed, men who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who were turning the grace of God into licentiousness, and denying their only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ (Jude 1:4).

What are we to make of this phenomenon? Why has God so fulsomely warned his people about apostasy? When we encounter these texts, what exactly are we supposed to learn and do? In a moment,

we will look closely at a number of them. But first I want to offer three reasons why I think God addresses this issue so pointedly.

First, in these texts God is warning his true children to stand strong against a specific kind of temptation: the kind that will come through wolves in sheep's clothing, whose bad example and/or bad doctrine might draw them away from the faith. Accordingly, for true believers these texts have the same general purpose as others stating or implying that final salvation depends upon faithful perseverance. God uses these warnings to impart to his elect a healthy fear of being deceived, tempted, and led astray. In so doing he is preserving them in the faith.

Secondly, in these texts God is preparing true Christians—and especially true Christian leaders—to deal with false brethren and apostates when they encounter them. Now on the face of things, this seems like a mystery. Why would God ordain that true Christians must watch out for—and struggle against—false Christians? Happily, the test paradigm, coupled with some helpful Scripture passages, gives us at least part of our answer. Thus, in the OT we find God speaking to Moses and Israel as follows:

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, 'Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the LORD your God is testing you to find out if you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall follow the LORD your God and fear him; and you shall keep his commandments, listen to his voice, serve him, and cling to him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the LORD your God who brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, to seduce you from the way in which the LORD your God commanded

you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from among you.
(Deuteronomy 13:1–5)

Importantly, what was true for OT saints turns out to be true for NT saints as well: God has ordained that his elect children will be tested by the appearance of false brethren and apostates. Why so? The answer appears to be that through such testing they will learn—at deeper and deeper levels—to know, love, follow, fear, and cling to their Lord. Testing produces sanctification, and sanctification brings glory to God and maturity to the saints. When, for example, the challenges of Christian discipleship suddenly become very costly, and a number of professing believers suddenly walk away from the faith and “go home,” true believers will have to decide whether they are going to stand with the Lord or follow the apostates (John 6:66). Again, when a heretic rises up in the church and draws away disciples after himself, true believers will have to decide whether he speaks truly or falsely, and whether to follow him or not. Similarly, when a heretic or an immoral person like Esau appears in the church, true shepherds and true sheep will have to decide whether they are going to “wink at it” or instead courageously pay the price necessary to maintain the purity of the church through an appropriate exercise of church discipline (Heb. 12:15–17; Rev. 2:2). Divine testing requires costly decisions; costly decisions, if made according to God’s will, develop wisdom, covenant loyalty, and love for God and the brethren. And again, they bring glory to God. We may not like such tests, but if and when we pass them we will very much like the beautiful fruit they have produced.

A third purpose for these texts—and perhaps their primary purpose—is to instruct, encourage, and warn those who currently are false brethren, in hopes that by hearing such admonitions they will become true brethren. As in the case of church discipline, so here: God’s goal is redemptive. Speaking to men and women who are on probation before him, he would have them examine themselves to see if they really are in the faith (2 Cor. 13:1ff). He would have them lay hold of the Word of God and all the other means of grace in order to make their calling and election sure (2 Pet. 1:10).

Yes, the apostasy of false brethren is a painful mystery; but with the help of the Test Perspective we can see how the sovereign Potter can use it to fashion vessels for eternal honor and glory (Rom. 9:21; 2 Tim. 2:20–21).

One Clarifying Text

Turning now to a discussion of specific texts dealing with Christian apostasy, I want to begin with what is certainly the most important of all. In his epistle to the Asian churches, the Apostle John writes:

Children, it is the last hour; and just as you have heard that [the] antichrist is coming, so also many antichrists have now arrived on the scene, by which we know it is indeed the last hour. They went out from us, but they never belonged to us; for had they truly belonged to us, they would have continued with us. But they went out so as to be exposed: to make it clear that none of them belong to us. (1 John 2:18–19)

Here John is giving the definitive explanation for all actual Christian apostasy, whether the kind that has already happened or the kind that is predicted to happen. In every case apostates will “go out” from the church because, spiritually speaking, they were never really in it. Yes, they professed faith in Christ, were baptized, and for a season participated in the normal round of church life. But in fact they were never true members of Christ’s Church, for the Spirit had never baptized them into his body (1 Cor. 12:13). They were outwardly related to the people of God, but not inwardly related to the Christ of God, or to the God of the people. They were not clinging redemptively to the Head, and so were not spiritually a part of the Body (Col. 2:19). Not having been born again, or brought to genuine repentance and faith, or justified, or sealed by the Spirit, in a time of testing they fell away.

Ten Challenging Texts

These fundamental truths equip us to wrestle with several specific texts that have troubled many saints down through the years, texts that

seem to teach that true saints can indeed fall away from their Lord. To save space, I have not usually reproduced the texts themselves, so please read this section with your Bible in hand. Also, my comments here will be relatively brief. For further insight, you may wish to consult the helpful notes in *The Reformation Study Bible*.

1. Matthew 13:20–21

Here in the Parable of the Four Soils the Lord speaks of those who hear the Word, immediately receive it with joy, yet soon fall away in the face of affliction or persecution. However, the real reason they fall away is that they have no firm root in themselves. In other words, the Spirit has not regenerated the heart of such persons, with the result that the Word of God does not take firm and lasting root in the good soil of a new heart (Luke 8:15).

2. John 15:2, 5–6

Here in the Lord's discourse on the True Vine he warns that every branch in him that does not bear fruit will be taken away. Also, if anyone does not abide in him he will be thrown away as a branch, dried up, thrown into the fire, and burned. Hearing these words, all true believers will surely tremble and cling to the vine. If, however, a professing believer does turn away from Christ, it proves that he was not a true branch, but rather what gardeners call *a plant sucker*. It shows that whatever sap was in the branch came from an external association with God's people, or perhaps from a gracious operation of the Spirit that fell short of regeneration. Cain, Balaam, Saul, Ahithophel, and Judas are all examples of men who were indeed visited by the Spirit of God, but who were not among his true people.

3. 1 Corinthians 9:24–27

In this text Paul urges believers to run the race of faith intentionally, faithfully, and with all diligence. Speaking of his own race, he says, "I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified." Here is a man who

knows that no created thing can separate him from the love of Christ (Rom. 8:31ff). Yet he also knows that until he has actually crossed the finish line it is still possible to lose the race. Can he then lose his salvation? Looking at things from within the Sovereignty Perspective, no. Looking at things from within the Test Perspective, yes. And so, with a mixture of holy fear, God-given confidence, and an abundance of joy, Paul races on (Phil. 3:14).

4. Galatians 5:2–4, 10

Here Paul is warning wavering Galatian Christians that if they seek to be justified in God's sight by trusting in Christ *plus* embracing the Mosaic Law (as the Judaizing heretics were urging them to do), they will have severed themselves from Christ and fallen away from grace. Now as a matter of fact, Paul is confident *in the Lord* that this will not happen, or at least not permanently (v. 10). In other words, the Lord has shown him that all or most of the Galatians are truly born again, and will therefore, by God's grace, repent of their dalliance with legalism and be preserved in the true faith. If, however, one or more among them do permanently step away from the all-sufficient Christ in order to place their confidence in Moses and personal law-keeping, it will not show that they have lost their justification, but rather that they never had it in the first place.

5. Hebrews 6:1–12

In this especially challenging text the writer to the Hebrews sternly warns wavering Jewish Christians against apostasy in the form of a return to Judaism. The difficulty here stems from the fact that the believers under discussion seem to have enjoyed a rich work of the Holy Spirit. They have been enlightened, tasted of the heavenly gift, been made partakers (sharers) of the Holy Spirit, and tasted both the good Word of God and the powers of the age to come. Yet the writer states that such people have either fallen away from the all-sufficient Son of God, or are in danger of doing so. Does his language

therefore prove that born-again Christians can permanently fall away from the faith?

To receive our answer, we need to take a closer look at both the text and its context. When we do, we see that the writer (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) has carefully chosen his words in such a way that they can apply both to true and false Christians. Being confident that they will largely fall on the ears of true believers, he means the words to spur them on to covenant loyalty, diligence, faith, patience, and the full assurance of hope, all the way to the end (vv. 9–12).

However, in the case of a professing believer who really has fallen away, the writer's words explain why: Their experiences of the Word, Spirit, and power of God—whether external or internal—fell short of true regeneration, which in turn would have led to true repentance, faith, justification and assurance of eternal life. Note in particular that these persons only *tasted* of the gift, rather than consumed God's full meal (vv. 4–5). Note also that the writer never explicitly states that they were regenerated, justified, sealed, or indwelt by the Spirit. Finally, note from vv. 7–8 that in the case of actual apostates (if in fact there were some) the ground upon which the heavenly gifts fell like rain was bad: It did not drink in the rain, it did not bring forth vegetation, and it did not receive a blessing from God. Rather, it only yielded thorns and thistles, was worthless and near to cursing, and wound up being burned. Had such persons been regenerate, the ground would have been good, and they would have manifested the fruit of perseverance in the faith (Matt. 13:8; Mark 4:8). But they were not regenerate, so they did not.

6. Hebrews 10:26–31

Of the three major warning passages in Hebrews this is the most fearsome, since it directly threatens apostates with eternal punishment. The writer speaks here of persons who have received the knowledge of the truth, been sanctified by the blood of the (new) covenant, but then go on to sin willfully, trample the Son of God under foot, and insult the Spirit of grace by setting aside Christ and the New Covenant as

the one true way of salvation. Moreover, in warning such persons the writer quotes from the very Law to which they are tempted to return: “The Lord will judge his people” (Deut. 32:36). Are they then born-again Christians who have fallen away from the faith?

As in Hebrews 6, so here: Yes, the persons in view have a knowledge of gospel truth; and yes, they have experienced certain influences of the Holy Spirit, whether external or internal. However, the writer says nothing here that would force us to conclude that he is thinking of regenerate and justified saints. Rather, he has once again chosen his words so carefully that they can speak warning both to true saints and mere professors. If, in days ahead, some of those to whom he writes really do fall away, were they truly sanctified by the blood of the covenant? No, *but they professed to be*, and the writer cites their (mere) profession in order to underscore the guilt of anyone who actually renounces it (see 2 Pet. 2:1). Or again, were they truly one of the Lord’s people? No, *but they professed to be*, with the result that the writer issues a warning to *all* who profess the faith: “God took your profession seriously; see that you maintain it.” So then: Our text does not teach that born-again Christians can lose their salvation; but it does remind us, in the most solemn tones, that in order to be saved believers must not shrink back to destruction, but rather keep the faith unto the eternal preservation of their souls (Heb. 10:39).

7. 2 Peter 2:1–22; Jude 1:14, 19

Short as they are, these passages are vitally important for a right understanding of who can and cannot fall away from the faith. Here we find the two apostles doing battle with the same cabal of false teachers who have crept (Jude) or will creep (Peter) into the church, wreaking havoc among the true saints, denying their Master and Lord, Jesus Christ, and therefore going to eternal destruction. In short, we are dealing here with genuine Christian apostates.

Were such men born-again and justified believers in Christ? Clearly not. Peter describes them as false teachers (v. 1), as the spiritual kin of fallen angels and the perverts of Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 6),

as unreasoning animals born to be captured or killed (v. 12), as springs without water, and as mere mists driven along by a storm (of sin) (v. 17). Jude, after using much the same imagery, adds a decisive word, declaring that all such persons are merely natural (i.e., unregenerate) men, not having the (indwelling) Holy Spirit (v. 19).

But if they are not true Christians, why does Peter predict that they will openly deny “the Master who bought them” (v. 1)? Why does he say that they—and all who follow them—will be like dogs returning to their vomit: people who had temporarily escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, but then voluntarily entangled themselves in them once again (vv. 20–22)? And why does Jude use much the same language to describe the behavior of actual apostates (v. 4)?

We have already indicated the answer. The apostles are not affirming that Christ actually bought the apostates, or that he ever was truly their Master and Lord. Rather, they are pointedly citing the apostates’ own public profession in order to highlight the gravity of their renouncing it (2 Pet. 2:21). Similarly, they are not affirming that such persons ever had a saving knowledge of Christ, or that they had definitively escaped the defilements of the world, as all true Christians do (Rom. 6:1ff; 1 John 3:9). Rather, as a result of a darkly motivated enthusiasm for the message of the gospel, they briefly embraced it, publicly professed it, walked by its ethical standards, and worshiped among its true God-begotten children, in time only to grow tired of the whole thing, distort the gospel message to suit their own lusts, and thereby explicitly or implicitly deny it altogether.

Yes, these are crucial passages for any deep discussion of Christian apostasy, since they reveal that any text which *seems* to teach that born-again Christians can fall away, or have fallen away, is actually speaking of false brethren: of merely natural men, of those who do not have the (indwelling) Holy Spirit (Jude 1:19; cf. Rom. 8:9). But again, these texts do indeed speak warning—and encouragement as well—to true Christians. By all means let them rejoice to know that they are truly called: beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ (Jude 1:1).

But for that very reason let them also diligently eschew every thought of following the apostates into sin and error. Rather, let them faithfully build themselves up on their most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, thereby keeping themselves in the love of God as they wait with eager expectation for the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ that will bring them to the fullness of eternal life (Jude 1:20–21).

Texts from the Revelation

Our final three texts are from the Revelation. Here, a few introductory words are in order. The Holy Spirit designates the Revelation as a prophecy (1:3, 22:7, 14, 18). Scripture defines prophecy as divinely inspired foretelling and/or forth-telling, all with a view to the edification, exhortation, and encouragement of the saints (1 Cor. 14:3). In the Revelation God accomplishes this three-fold purpose in two main ways. On the one hand, he gives the saints visions and declarations which assure them that the High King of Heaven—the exalted and all-sovereign Lord Jesus Christ—will infallibly bring his redemptive plans to pass, both within the remainder of Salvation History, and consummately at its end. In these revelations he encourages the saints through the Sovereignty Perspective. On the other hand, he also gives the saints instructions, promises, exhortations, and warnings in order to motivate them to persevere in the faith to the end, whether the end of their lives or the end of the present world. In these revelations he exhorts them through the Test Perspective. Once we see the interplay of the two paradigms in the Revelation, we can better understand texts that seem to teach that a true saint can fall away. Let us turn to the first of them now.

8. Revelation 3:4–5

In Revelation 3:4–5 we hear the words of the exalted Lord to the Christians in Sardis:

But you do have a few names in Sardis who have not stained their garments; and these will walk with me in white, for

they are worthy. He who overcomes will be dressed in this way: in garments of white. And I will never erase his name from the Scroll of Life, but will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.

Consider first the Lord's refrain: "He who overcomes." In chapters 2–3 it occurs seven times, bringing each of his messages to the seven churches of Asia to a close. In every case it precedes a promise of some great blessing that awaits faithful saints in the glorious world to come. Importantly, true saints can hear this refrain in two ways. From within the Sovereignty Perspective they can hear the Lord saying, "Because you are chosen by God, redeemed by Christ, and begotten and preserved by the Holy Spirit, you *will* overcome and inherit all these blessings." But from within the Test Perspective they can also hear him saying, "Because you are still a free human being on gospel probation—a child of God called to do battle with the world, the flesh, and the devil—you *must* overcome and remain faithful to the end if you hope to inherit these blessings." Thus, the wise saint, keeping the two paradigms in proper balance, will learn from the seven "He who overcomes" that he must press on in the faith with a healthy mix of godly fear and strong confidence.

But what of verse 5: "And I will never erase his name from the Scroll of Life, but will confess his name before my Father and before his angels"? Surely the Lord is addressing born-again Christians here, since their name is already written in the Scroll of Life. Does this warning mean that such persons can lose their salvation?

Yes and no. Yes, because the present reality of their gospel probation demands that they persevere until the day of their death or the Day of the Lord's return, thereby ensuring that in the Judgment Christ will confess their names before the Father and the holy angels, thereby sealing up their salvation to all eternity (Luke 12:8).⁷ But no, because the sovereign God who wrote their name in the Scroll of Life before the founding of the world has promised that they certainly will persevere; that no one will ever snatch them out of his hand, or out of his Son's hand; and that they are—and always will be—more than conquerors

through him who loved them (John 10:27–30; Rom. 8:37; Rev. 13:8, 17:8). For this reason, they will indeed overcome; and having overcome, the Lord Christ will clothe them in garments of white, after which—to all eternity—he will never erase their names from the Scroll of Life, but will confess before his God and Father, and before all the holy angels: “These are Mine!” (Is. 43:1)

9. Revelation 3:15–16

In what is surely the sternest reproof addressed to any of the seven churches in Asia, the Lord directed these words to professing Christians in Laodicea. Was he speaking to born-again believers? Is it really possible that he would spew lukewarm Christians out of his mouth? Can backslidden born-again believers “cross the dead line” and be rejected and lost after all?

To find our answers we must begin by noting carefully that here Christ is speaking to the Laodicean church *as a whole*. Early on it doubtless was aflame for him: All or most of its members were on fire for the King and his Kingdom. Now, however, a generation or two later, it has grown lukewarm. Practically speaking, this means that while a few of the Laodicean Christians were surely dining intimately with their Lord (v. 20; Rev. 3:4), the vast majority were either badly backslidden or Christians in name only. As a result, the church as a whole was in danger of falling under Christ’s judgment.

What might that have looked like? Strong persecution driving nominal believers into hiding and apostasy? A judicial hardening of (unregenerate) hearts, such that many who once professed the faith now suddenly turn against it? Numerous Laodicean house churches folding altogether? A tiny remnant of true believers (and alarmed backsliders) forced to start the work of the Kingdom from scratch?

Whatever the Lord had in mind, we meet him here speaking sternly, mercifully, and lovingly both to the nominal and the backslidden. Standing at the door of the church, knocking, extending a sincere invitation to a fellowship meal with the High King of Heaven, he offers the nominal new birth, and the backslidden renewed fellowship, all

on condition of honest repentance and faith. If the nominal spurn his offer, he may indeed spew them out of his mouth, in the sense of finally severing their external connection with the life-giving ordinances of the Church, and so from proximity to the Head of the Church as well (John 15:1–7; Col. 2:18–19). As for the backslidden, if they will not repent he may simply take them home (1 Cor. 11:30). Sadly, they will be numbered among those who largely built with wood, hay, and stubble; those whose works will be burned up in the judgment while they themselves are saved only as someone who escapes through a fire (1 Cor. 3:12–15). Nevertheless, the Lord will never spew them out of his mouth (Ps. 89:30–37; John 6:37, 10:27–30).

But what of earnest Christians? Are these words meant for them as well? Indeed they are, for here faithful believers learn once again to steer clear of all worldliness, and to dine daily and intimately with the High King, who will gladly warm their hearts and make them hot for the knowledge of God and the work of his Kingdom (v. 15; Rom. 12:11). But if, as they read these words, they find themselves stricken with a fear of rejection, let them swiftly remember the King's precious promise to his own: "All that the Father gives me will come to me; and the one who comes to me I will certainly not cast out" (John 6:37; 1 John 4:18). Most assuredly, that includes "spew out" as well.

10. Revelation 22:18–19

Our final text is particularly challenging. As he completes his inscripturation of the tremendous prophetic word that is the Revelation, John, under the inspiration of the High Prophet himself, writes:

I myself testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy contained in this scroll: If anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues that stand written in this scroll. And if anyone takes away from the words of the prophecy contained in this scroll, God will take away his portion from the tree of life and the holy city, from the things that stand written in this scroll.

Surely the apostle knows that born-again Christians will hear or read these words. So does he really believe that it is possible for the world, the flesh, and the devil to overcome them in such a way that they would dare to alter the words of this prophecy, thereby forfeiting their salvation?

Clearly not, for as we have seen, no apostle writes more fulsomely than John about the eternal security of the true flock of God. We need, then, to remember that here, as elsewhere, the Spirit is addressing all who *profess* Christ, and not just true saints. Keeping this in mind we can therefore well imagine that certain hypocrites might find parts of John's prophecy so unpalatable that they are tempted to excise the offending portions, or to add some new portions designed to negate the old. But here, in the most dreadful terms, the Spirit explicitly warns them against it. One can also imagine—and fervently hope—that in receiving this warning such persons will not only be restrained from their sin, but also moved to true repentance and faith in the Lord.

But what of verse 19? Do nominal Christians have a portion (share) in the Tree of Life and the Holy City? No and yes. No, because in fact it is true Christians alone who have a real share in these blessings, a share that will not be taken from them (John 10:28). But yes, because hypocrites may *think* they have a share in them, or *be thought* to have a share in them by saints who really do. But their *supposed* share will indeed be taken from them on the day when Christ—either in mercy or judgment—awakens them to the truth of who they really are, and where they really stand in relation to him.⁸

Has the Spirit, then, nothing at all to say to true believers in our text? On the contrary, here he instructs them yet again never to tamper with Holy Scripture (Deut. 4:2, 12:32; Prov. 30:6; Is. 66:2); here he equips them to warn professing believers who might be tempted to do so; here he admonishes them to take this prophecy with utmost seriousness; and in so doing, here he presses them afresh into its fabulously enriching depths. In all these ways he is pleased to preserve them in their most holy faith, so that one day soon they will indeed *fully* partake of the Tree of Life and the Holy City of God.

Conclusion: Troubling Texts and Fine Fruits

Let us conclude this leg of our journey by taking a few moments to review some of the main reasons why God has given us so many texts that *seem* to contradict the well-attested doctrine of the eternal preservation of the saints.

First, as is quite clear from the length of this section, such texts force us into a close study of biblical teaching on this doctrine. They are an invitation to theological reflection, balance, and maturity. They oblige every good Berean to say to himself: “The God of truth whom I love and serve does not lie or contradict himself. Either his Word tells me I am eternally secure or it does not. Therefore, leaning prayerfully on the only One who can open my mind to understand the Scriptures, I will examine every text on this subject, trusting him to show me the truth of the matter.” And as the believer does so, he beholds to his amazement how marvelously the two biblical paradigms of redemption work hand in hand, how God is teaching him to keep them in proper balance, and how in so doing he is fashioning him for a fruitful and joyful Christian life.

Secondly, we have repeatedly seen that the warning texts are actually an integral part of God’s plan to preserve his people in the faith. Here he speaks to them in such a way as to engender a godly fear, engage their free will, and motivate them to be active (and not passive) participants in their relationship with God. True saints understand this. They realize that they have been born again unto a lifelong journey of prayer, Bible meditation, watchfulness, holiness, Christian service, and an active participation in the full round of church life. They know they must abide in Christ and keep in step with their Good Shepherd. And as they do, they find themselves walking intimately, safely, fruitfully, and joyfully with Aslan at their side. Thus do they see through the warning texts of Scripture that a loving heavenly Father is sanctifying and preserving them for his heavenly kingdom (Ps. 27:8; John 15:1ff; Acts 11:23; Phil. 2:12–13; Col. 3:1; 1 Tim. 4:16)!

Finally, through the texts that specifically warn against hypocrisy and apostasy God motivates his elect people to lay hold of “the full assurance” of their salvation, thereby growing in the perfect love that casts out the crippling fear of being lost (Col. 2:2; 1 John 4:18). Fascinatingly, we see this vital truth in one of Scripture’s most fearsome warnings against apostasy: Hebrews 6. Having issued his warning, the writer goes on to say:

But though we speak in this way, in your case, beloved friends, we are convinced of better things—indeed, of things that accompany salvation. For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love you have shown towards his name in having ministered—and in still ministering—to the saints. Nevertheless, we want each of you to keep on showing this same diligence so as to enjoy the full assurance of hope all the way to the end, so that you won’t grow sluggish, but will instead become imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. (Hebrews 6:9–12; cf. Heb.10:22)

Clearly the writer is confident that most, if not all, of his readers are safely in Christ. In order to encourage them, he reminds them of their ministry accomplishments, placarding these good deeds as marks of their salvation. But also note his pastoral wisdom: Knowing well that these young (or at least immature) saints are on a God-appointed journey from spiritual concern to spiritual confidence, he sets before them a great prize: *the full assurance of hope*. And he also sets before them the way to attain it: *diligence*, plus a healthy *imitation* of those who, by that same diligence, have already reached heaven.

The Apostle John also counsels diligence: diligent *abiding*. The Son of God has graciously given us an understanding, so that we may know we have eternal life in the one true living God (1 John 3:1-2, 5:13, 20). But our sense of assurance is not unshakable: Because of spiritual warfare and human frailty, fears of divine wrath and retribution can enter in (1 John 3:19-20, 26; 4:18). Therefore, let us diligently *abide*: in Christ, who is God, the Son (1 John 2:28, 4:15; 5:5); in

the apostles' teaching (1 John 2:14, 24; 2 John 1:9); in the pursuit of holiness (1 John 2:6; 3:3, 6); in obedience to the Lord's commands (1 John 3:24); and in the strong confidence that when we fail (as we surely will), our Advocate with the Father will always have our back (1 John 2:1–2). And let us also abide in love (1 John 2:10; 4:12, 16). For as we live and serve in God's love, we shall assure our hearts before him (1 John 3:18–20); for as love is perfected within, the fear of punishment is driven out (1 John 4:18). So it is that our wise heavenly Father uses the rough and tumble of spiritual life to beget in his children a holy quest for assurance, a quest through which the Holy Spirit will banish all crippling fears of falling away (1 John 3:24; 4:13; cf. Col. 2:2; 2 Pet. 1:1–11).

3. The Spiritual Benefits

I have sometimes wondered if God's purpose in revealing the first four doctrines of grace was not primarily to undergird the fifth: the divine preservation of the saints. Knowing full well the frailties of his elect children—that they are but dust—and knowing all they would have to face in their long, difficult, and dangerous pilgrimage through the wilderness of this present evil age, was there anything they would need more than a sense of eternal security in the midst of the fray? And so, despite the ruckus he knew it would cause among the theologians, God decided to give his saints an anchor for their souls, assuring them in his Book that he chose them before the founding of the world, sent his Son to redeem them without fail, exchanged their depraved hearts for a new heart of love by the Spirit's effectual call, and now promises to preserve them faithfully all the way to the end. Five times over, the divine Pastor, understanding that his panicky sheep must feel secure or perish, says to them: “You are mine. You always have been, and you always will be. Peace be with you (John 20:19, 21).”⁹

But let us now unpack this big idea by touching briefly on some of the key benefits of this special doctrine.

First, this doctrine powerfully undergirds the believer's quest for the assurance of salvation. For how shall Christians ever feel

secure if they think they might “cross the dead line” through some particular sin or quantity of sins, and therefore lose their salvation once and for all? How shall they not be terrified when God seems to have withdrawn himself from them, and they are brought face to face—sometimes for weeks or even months on end—with the dreadful presence and power of residual sin in their members? With what shall they shield themselves against the flaming arrows of the accuser of the brethren, who tells them that their new birth was really a spiritual abortion, and that the seed of the gospel, in their case, has fallen on such wretched soil that they have already fallen away? God has not predestined his saints to a cakewalk. The journey to practical holiness is along dreadful highways and byways of testing, temptation, doubt, fear, and gut-wrenching moral failure. What poor, dumb, apoplectic sheep could ever hope to make such a journey successfully unless he knew, in spite of all appearances and feelings to the contrary, that his Good Shepherd was right there with him, and that in due season he would indeed make him lie down again in green pastures? The doctrine of the eternal preservation of God’s flock is solid ground for each and every sheep to walk on. Take it away, and they will fall in a heartbeat.

Secondly, this doctrine benefits the saints by disclosing to them the proper way in which they shall indeed persevere in the faith: by casting themselves daily upon the divine Preserver. For at the time of their conversion Christ did not say to them, “There, I have saved you. Now be good, work hard, and I’ll see you by and by in heaven.” No, he said, “There, I have saved you. Now you are in heaven, and heaven is in you, for you are in me, and I am in you. Now you can be good through me. Now I can work hard through you. The key thing is to fix your eyes on me. The key thing is to listen for my voice. We’re heading for my Father’s house, and I promise you I know the way. The key thing is to walk with me!”

Is this not the teaching of Scripture? Is this not how true saints *must* persevere, and *will* persevere: simply by walking, one day at a time, with the One who preserves them? It is indeed, since our Lord commands us:

“Abide in me, and I in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it abides in the vine, so too you cannot bear fruit unless you abide in me. I am the vine and you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him—he will bear much fruit; for apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:4–5)

And here is the Apostle Paul, echoing his Master’s words:

So I say: Walk in the Spirit, and you will not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh, for the two are opposed to one another, with the result that you cannot do the things you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. (Galatians 5:16–18)

And again he says:

So then, my beloved friends, just as you have always obeyed—not only as you did in my presence, but now much more in my absence—work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is the one at work within you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12–13)

Such texts richly illumine both the method and the graciousness of divine preservation. God graciously gives the Spirit to his people. The Spirit graciously moves them to cling to Christ for guidance and power to walk in his will. As they do, God graciously preserves them. Thus, what is true of their conversion and sanctification is also true of their preservation: The saints have an essential role to play. And yet, at the very same time, they gladly confess themselves to be altogether dependent upon, and carried along by, the Holy Spirit. They are like master Gandalf when he went to fetch Frodo and Sam off of Mt. Doom. Clinging for dear life to the eagle’s wings of God’s preserving presence and power, they fly swiftly through the earth on rescue missions for the High King of Heaven (Deut. 32:10–12). Yes, the

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saints do indeed strive to be good and do good. But if they have been taught by God, they always do so looking to the Lord, and with his rich promise ringing in their ears:

“Fear not, I am with thee,
O be not dismayed,
For I am thy God
and will still give thee aid;
I’ll strengthen thee,
help thee, and cause thee to stand,
Upheld by my righteous,
omnipotent hand.”

Finally, the doctrine of divine preservation supplies the Church with a message of hope for a lost and frightened world. Ever since the fall of man, human existence has been fraught with peril, uncertainty, and deep, existential anxiety. Sitting in darkness and the shadow of death, we look for a light; pummeled by waves of calamity and sorrow, we reach out our hands, groping for an anchor of the soul. We long for security; we sense that it must be available; we look for it here and there but cannot lay our hands upon it. This is especially true of those who live in the postmodern and post-Christian West, where traditional authorities, institutions, beliefs, and practices—all originally reared on biblical foundations—are now questioned, challenged, and openly rejected. As a result, multitudes now despair of ever finding the absolute truths, values, and genuine spiritual experiences that alone can give them stability, security, and hope. Here is why so many among us are angry, driven, isolated, medicated, addicted, and suicidal. Like terrified children lost in a mall, they are acting out, screaming for Daddy or Mommy to come and get them.

What might it mean for such folks to learn that a heavenly Father has loved them since the founding of the world; that through simple faith in their older brother, Jesus Christ, they can be adopted into God’s eternal family once and for all; that their Father has explicitly promised to supply all their needs, whether physical or spiritual, and

never to leave them or forsake them; that he is in complete control of every circumstance of their lives, and using those circumstances for their ultimate good; that nothing and no one can ever pluck them out of his hand; and that after faithfully guiding them through this life, the Savior himself will come to them and carry them up into the next (John 14:1–3)?¹⁰ Would not someone who actually believed such things be like a man who had found a treasure buried in a field, or who had stumbled on a pearl of inestimable value (Matt. 13:44–46)? Would he not feel that he had been given “eternal comfort and good hope by grace” (2 Thess. 2:16)? And would he not want to share these precious gifts with all the other frightened children of this world? Such is the heart and mission of the Church of Jesus Christ, the privileged custodian of the doctrine of the eternal security of the saints.

4. The Biblical Basis

Here is our final list of Bible passages, this time dealing with perseverance in the faith. Texts in regular print show that the covenant-keeping Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the sovereign and omnipotent preservers of their people. Those *in italics* show that the saints have a crucial role in this preservation: They themselves must persevere in the faith. Taking advantage of all the means of grace, they must walk in the Holy Spirit, abide in the Vine, follow the Good Shepherd, and boldly pitch their tent before the Throne of Grace. Thus shall they grow in the assurance of their salvation, continue steadfastly to the end, receive a hearty welcome into the eternal kingdom of their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and to all eternity give all the glory to God.

- Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. (Psalm 23:6)
- Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. (Psalm 36:5 ESV)

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- As for me, you uphold me in my integrity, and you set me in your presence forever. (Psalm 41:12)
- I will sing of the LORD's great love [i.e., his covenant love] forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations. I will declare that your love stands firm forever, that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself. You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant, 'I will establish your line forever, and make your throne firm through all generations.'" . . . Once you spoke in a vision; to your faithful people you said . . . "If his sons forsake my law and do not follow my statutes, if they violate my decrees and fail to keep my commands, I will punish their sin with the rod, their iniquity with flogging; but I will not take my love from him, nor will I ever betray my faithfulness. I will not violate my covenant or alter what my lips have uttered. Once for all I have sworn by my holiness—and I will not lie to David—that his line will continue forever, and his throne will endure before me like the sun; it will be established forever like the moon, the faithful witness in the sky." (Psalm 89:1–4, 19, 30–37 NIV)
- I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth. He will not allow your foot to slip; your Protector will not slumber. Behold, the Protector of Israel will not slumber or sleep. The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is the shade on your right hand. The sun will not strike you by day, nor will the moon by night. The LORD will guard you from all evil; he will preserve your soul. The LORD will watch over your coming and going, both now and forevermore. (Psalm 121 BSB)
- At that time GOD will unsheathe his sword, his merciless, massive, mighty sword. He will punish the serpent Leviathan as it flees, the serpent Leviathan thrashing in flight. He will kill that old dragon that lives in the sea. "At that same time, a

fine vineyard will appear. There's something to sing about! I, GOD, tend it. I keep it well watered. I keep careful watch over it so that no one can damage it. I'm not angry. I care. Even if it gives me thistles and thorn bushes, I'll just pull them out and burn them up. Let that vine cling to me for safety, let it find a good and whole life with me, let it hold on for a good and whole life. (Isaiah 27:2–5 MSG)

- “For the mountains may be removed, and the hills may shake, but my loving-kindness will not be removed from you, and my covenant of peace will not be shaken,” says the LORD who has compassion on you. (Isaiah 54:10)
- “I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me. I will rejoice in doing them good and will assuredly plant them in this land with all my heart and soul.” (Jeremiah 32:40–41 NIV)
- *“So then: Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice may be likened to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floodwaters rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; but it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock” (Matthew 7:24–25)*
- *“He who endures to the end will be saved.” (Matthew 10:22; cf. 24:13)*
- *“But as for the seed that landed on good ground, these are the ones who, when they hear the word in an honest and good heart, take hold of it and bring forth fruit with patience and endurance.” (Luke 8:15)*
- “Simon, Simon, listen to me! Satan has received permission to sift you all like wheat. But as for you, Simon, I have prayed that your faith will not fail; so when you have returned, strengthen your brothers.” (Luke 22:31–32)

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- “For God so loved the world that he gave his uniquely begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him would not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)
- “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes the One who sent me has eternal life: He will never come into judgment, but has crossed over out of death *and* into life.” (John 5:24)
- Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never hunger, and he who believes in me will never thirst. But as I told you: You have indeed seen me, yet you don’t believe. All whom the Father gives me will come to me; and he who comes to me I will never drive out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that of all he has given me I should lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I myself will raise him up on the last day.” (John 6:35–40)
- “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I myself give them eternal life, and to all eternity they will never perish, nor will anyone ever snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; and no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” (John 10:27–29)
- *“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away; and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, so that it will bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Abide in me and I in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it abides in the vine, so too you cannot bear fruit unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me and I in him—he will bear much fruit; for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown*

out like a branch and withers away; and they gather them up and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.” (John 15:1–6)

- “And now I am no longer in the world; but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name—the name that you have entrusted to me—so that they may be one, even as we are one. While I was with them, I kept them in your name: the name that you have entrusted to me. I also guarded them, so that none of them perished except the son of destruction, so that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you; and I am saying these things in the world so that my joy may be in them, full and complete. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them; for they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I am not asking that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them safe from the evil one.” (John 17:11–15)
- Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and so rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. (Romans 5:1–2)
- Yet God displays his own love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. And now that we have been justified by his blood, how much more will we be saved from wrath through him. For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. (Romans 5:8–10)
- For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. Moreover, those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Romans 8:29–30)

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- What then can separate us from the love of Christ: Can tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? (Just as it is written, “For your sake we are put to death all day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter.”) Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is found in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35–39)
- *Behold, then, the kindness and severity of God: to those who fell, severity; but to you, God’s kindness, if you continue in his kindness; otherwise you too will be cut off. (Romans 11:22)*
- For the gifts and the calling of God are without regret or change. (Romans 11:29)
- He also will keep you strong to the very end, so that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 1:8)
- And when you heard and believed the message of the truth (the good news of your salvation), you too were sealed in him with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the down payment on our inheritance, given with a view to the full redemption of the purchased possession, for the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:13–14)
- And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. (Ephesians 4:30)
- For of this one thing I am sure: He who began a good work in you will continue to perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:6)
- *So then, my beloved friends, just as you have always obeyed—not only as you did in my presence, but now much more in my absence—work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;*

for God is the one at work within you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12–13)

- *But whatever things were gain to me, these I count as loss because of Christ. More than that, I count all things as loss compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and regard them as rubbish. I do this in order to gain Christ, and to be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own based on the Law, but on that which comes through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and depends on faith. My goal is to know him, together with the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, thereby being conformed to his death, so that by all means I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:7–11)*
- *And you—who formerly were alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds—he now has reconciled through the death of Christ’s physical body, in order to present you holy, blameless, and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded, steadfast, and never moved away from the hope of the good news you heard, news that has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have been made a minister. (Colossians 1:21–23)*
- For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God; and when Christ, who is our life, appears, you too will appear with him in glory. (Colossians 3:3–4)
- Now may the God of peace himself make you holy through and through; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept completely sound, blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is he who calls you; he also will bring it to pass. (1 Thessalonians 5:23–24)
- But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and protect you from the evil one. (2 Thessalonians 3:3)

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- *Keep close watch over yourself and your teaching. Persevere in all these areas, for in so doing you will save both yourself and those who listen to you. (1 Timothy 4:16)*
- But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him as I look ahead to that day. (2 Timothy 1:12)
- *If we deny him, he also will deny us. (2 Timothy 2:12)*
- Yes, and the Lord will rescue me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen! (2 Timothy 4:18)
- *But Christ was faithful as a Son over his own house, whose house we are, if we hold firmly to our confidence, and to the hope in which we glory . . . For we have become partakers of Christ if indeed we hold our initial confidence firmly until the end, while we are still being told, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.” (Hebrews 3:6, 14–15)*
- For when God made his promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no one greater, he swore by himself, saying, “When I bless you, I will greatly bless; and when I multiply you, I will greatly multiply.” And so, by patiently enduring, Abraham obtained the promise. For men always swear by that which is greater, and for them an oath of confirmation brings an end to every dispute. In the same way, God, desiring still more clearly to show the heirs of the promise the immutability of his purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for him to lie, we might have strong encouragement, we who have fled for refuge by laying hold of the hope set before us. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, both firm and secure, and which also enters the sacred space behind the veil, where the forerunner—Jesus himself—has entered for us, having become

a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.
(Hebrews 6:13–20)

- For by one offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. (Hebrews 10:14)
- Through faith you are being kept by the power of God for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:5)
- *And for this very reason, you, on your part, must make every effort to supplement your faith with moral excellence; and moral excellence with knowledge; and knowledge with self-control; and self-control with perseverance; and perseverance with godliness; and godliness with brotherly kindness; and brotherly kindness with love. For if these things are yours and constantly increasing, they will ensure that you are neither ineffective nor unfruitful in the spiritual knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is blind—spiritually shortsighted—having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for by practicing these things you will never stumble. For in this way the entrance into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly presented to you. (2 Peter 1:5–11)*
- They went out from us, but they never belonged to us; for had they truly belonged to us, they would have continued with us. But they went out so as to be exposed: to make it clear that none of them belong to us. (1 John 2:19)
- No one begotten by God practices sin, for his [i.e., God's] seed abides within him; and he cannot continue in sin, because he has been begotten by God. (1 John 3:9)
- For whatever is begotten by God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world: our faith. (1 John 5:4)

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- I have written these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know you have eternal life. (1 John 5:13)
- We know that no one begotten by God practices sin, but that he who was begotten by God keeps him, so that the evil one cannot take hold of him. (1 John 5:18)
- Jude, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, and the brother of James, to those who have been called, dearly loved in God the Father, and preserved for Jesus Christ: May mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you. (Jude 1:1–2)
- *But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, eagerly waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that will bring you to eternal life. (Jude 1:20–21)*
- Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to stand you faultless before the presence of his glory with surpassing joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time, now, and through all the ages *to come*. Amen. (Jude 1:24–25)
- Now when the dragon saw that he was thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. But she was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time away from the face of the serpent. And the serpent, following behind the woman, poured forth water from his mouth in order to sweep her away. But the earth gave help to the woman, opening its mouth and swallowing up the river that the dragon was spewing out of his mouth. So the dragon was enraged at the woman, and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring: all

who keep the commandments of God, and who hold fast to the testimony of Jesus. (Revelation 12:13–17)

CONCLUSION

LIVING TOGETHER WELL ON THE GOLDEN STRAND

MY GOAL IN THIS BOOK HAS BEEN TO PROMOTE THE UNITY of the Church. It is a goal near to the heart of the triune God. To this end God the Father sent his Son into our sin-fractured world, to gather into one a people for his own possession (Tit. 2:14; 1 Pet. 2:9). To this end God the Son lived, died, and rose again, to create one flock with one Shepherd (John 10:16), and to bring into being the one New Man (Eph. 2:15). To this end the exalted Head of the Church poured out the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, baptizing them into one Body and causing them to drink of the one Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). To this end he gave his Body apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, so that these “joints and ligaments” might bind the members into one and facilitate the growth of his Body in love (Eph. 4:16; Col. 2:19). To this end he admonished believers to guard the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:1–6). And to this end he promised that one day up ahead they all will attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God: to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness that belongs to Christ (Eph. 4:11ff). Scripture assures us it will be a sight to see (Eph. 5:25–27; Col. 3:1–3; Rev. 21:10–11)!

But to see God’s heart in this matter is not only to rejoice; it is also to be grieved by any form of deep-seated and protracted disunity. It is to hear the cry of the Holy Spirit: “My beloved brothers, such

things ought not to be” (James 3:10). And so it is with the centuries-old gulf that separates Calvinist and Arminian brothers. Somehow a divine revelation that was meant to edify, equip, and empower the one Body of Christ has become the occasion of a long-standing family feud. Surely an enemy has done this (Matt. 13:28). But what is the antidote? How shall we reach the higher ground that God intends for his family to take, inhabit, and enjoy?

In our journey together I have tried to answer these questions. Following the lead of my theological mentors, I have argued that the solution here is not to polarize, but to harmonize. It is not to stake out fighting ground, but to search out middle ground. In particular, it is to recognize that God has given us two paradigms, two perspectives, two different ways of looking at his redemptive work in the world. The first is the Sovereignty Perspective. It consists of an ocean of divine revelation that discloses his all-inclusive decrees, his all-controlling providence, and the five Doctrines of Grace. The second is the Test Perspective. It consists of an ocean of divine revelation that discloses a loving creator and redeemer who is pleased to test the residual freedom of his sinful human creatures by the light of his self-revelation in nature, conscience, Christ, and the gospel. Yes, God has given us two different perspectives on his redemptive activity. And yes, to our finite and fallen minds they seem incompatible. But because they both come from God, we have no choice but to do as brother Packer counseled: “We must teach ourselves to think of reality in a way that provides for their peaceful coexistence, remembering that reality itself has proved actually to contain them both.” We are not at liberty to swim exclusively in one ocean, or to ignore or revile the other. We are called to see, reach, and live together well on the Golden Strand that stands between them.

But again, how exactly are we to do this? Summing up what we have learned on our journey, and focusing now on practical applications, I would offer the following six steps.

First, we must make our peace with the Sovereignty Perspective. However difficult it may be, however long it may take, however much

prayer, Bible study, and theological discussion it may require, we must, with God's help, humbly welcome the five Doctrines of Grace as his revealed truth. In the body of this book I have tried to describe them accurately, evince their biblical basis, demonstrate their reasonableness, interact fairly with opposing views, and carefully balance them with biblical texts from the Test Perspective. I have also honestly shared with you the agonies and ecstasies of my own long-term date with the Doctrines of Grace. After nearly five decades, here is my testimony: This date has been fabulously rich with spiritual challenge, growth, and blessing. I heartily commend it to one and all.

Secondly, having welcomed the Sovereignty Perspective, we must let it fulfill its God-ordained purposes in our heart. In particular, we must let each of the Doctrines of Grace fulfill its distinctive role in our spiritual formation. I have argued that our wise heavenly Father had his reasons for unconditionally electing a radically depraved but beloved people to become the members of his eternal family; for sending his Son into the world to actually redeem them; for irresistibly calling them by his Spirit to saving faith; for committing himself to their preservation in the faith; *and for revealing all of these things to us in his Word*. In regard to the latter, I have suggested that God gave us these doctrines so that we might behold his glory—the radiant, many-faceted beauty of his being—and learn to walk humbly, soberly, securely, dependently, diligently, gratefully, and gladly in his presence. In short, I believe that God has revealed these high and holy truths so that we, by wrestling hard with the Angel of the LORD, may come to know, love, worship, and serve him aright (Gen. 32:22–32). It is the work of a lifetime and the proper preparation for eternity.

Thirdly, in our journey to spiritual maturity we must avoid the pitfalls of the Sovereignty Perspective. Again, the problem here is not with the doctrines themselves, but with our finite and sin-infected minds, which are ever so capable of misunderstanding, distorting, and even abusing these lofty truths. As a result, they do at times *appear* to breed confusion, fear, pride, imbalance, division, fatalism, stoicism, indifference, and more. But all such shortfall is actually the work of

our sinful flesh, coiling itself snakelike around the beautiful pearl of God's revealed truth.

Similarly, we also have seen that we must guard ourselves against the work of the *diabolos*—the slanderer—who would use these doctrines to prey upon our spiritual weakness, trying to cast a dark shadow over the goodness of God; trying to portray him on the screen of our imaginations as a cruel tyrant instead of what he truly is: a wise and benevolent King whose judgments are unsearchable, and whose paths are past tracing out. Yes, in the great contest between Calvinists and Arminians an enemy has been at work (Matt. 13:28). But good Bereans are not ignorant of his devices. They understand that he will always pitch a fierce battle against any revealed truth that is heavily freighted with divine light and life. Accordingly, they will steadfastly resist the deceiver and the slanderer, firm in their faith in the character of God and the importance of the Doctrines of Grace. Like Joshua and Caleb of old, they are resolved to take *all* the holy ground that God has given them for an inheritance (Ex. 33:19; Ps. 27:4, 136:1; Rom. 15:4; 1 Pet. 5:8–9).

Fourthly, having seen and welcomed the ocean of divine revelation that gives us the Sovereignty Perspective, we must immediately turn and do the same with that of the Test Perspective. In other words, we must also embrace the truth that all mankind—sinners and saints alike—are on probation; that throughout our few short days in the anteroom of eternity our creator is testing us to see if we will use the precious gift of our residual freedom to love God, truth, and righteousness in whatever ways he is pleased to reveal them to us.

Wonderful indeed—especially for sovereignty-heavy Calvinists—are the blessings of the Test Perspective. It properly balances the Sovereignty Perspective, thereby protecting us from the pitfalls associated with it. It prepares us for further tests of our own, and alerts us to the fact that there will always be a cost to passing them. It humbles us, placing us on level ground with all people, since all alike are taking the tests of God. It thrusts us into the Lord's harvest fields, filled with a desire to help others take and pass God's supreme test, which is

the gospel test. It equips us to do so, supplying us with an evangelistic paradigm by which we might encourage folks to hear, investigate, and receive Christ and the gospel. It motivates us to equip ourselves for evangelistic work by mastering sound doctrine, basic Christian evidences, and the wise and gentle ways of the Holy Spirit, through whom we may minister to our neighbors in love. It unveils the glory of man: a creature cast in the image and likeness of God, bearing within himself a living portrait and reflection of the absolute freedom of his creator. It shows us that such creatures have unspeakably important decisions to make about their supreme loyalty in life, and their eternal destiny after death. And it obligates the Church to respect their freedom, even as it trains her to address it skillfully, humbly, sincerely, and effectively (2 Tim. 2:22ff). How vital the Test Perspective is for our walking and working with the Lord; and how vital it is for all of us—seeker or saint, Calvinist or Arminian—to receive it gladly.

Fifthly, we must rise to the unique responsibilities that the Test Perspective lays upon us. The more we behold them in Scripture, the more daunting they appear; but anchored to the Sovereignty Perspective we can meet them boldly, not out of fear or bare duty, but out of love for God our Father, and in the power of the sovereign Spirit, through whom alone we can live out the Christian life. By this power, and through the various means of grace, we can persevere in the faith. We can pursue holiness, without which no one will see the Lord. When we stumble in that pursuit, we can repent, confess our sin, appropriate God's forgiveness, get back up, and pursue it once again. We can lay hold of our spiritual gifts and operate in them. We can perform the good works for which we were created in Christ Jesus. And again, we can each do our part in fulfilling the Great Commission, bringing—or helping others to bring—the good news of the gospel test to every creature. The Test Perspective says that God desires us to do all these things; the Sovereignty Perspective assures us that we can and will.

Finally, we must guard against the pitfalls of the Test Perspective. They too are many, but only because of our spiritual frailty; only

because we fail to balance the Test Perspective with the Sovereignty Perspective. How easy, for example, to think that God's love and favor are tethered to our performance in the various tests of life. How tempting to think that when we fail, he becomes angry with us. How dreadful to think that when we struggle and fail repeatedly, he will surely cast us off. I fear that many of my Arminian brothers—and not a few of my Calvinist brothers as well—have joined me in stumbling into some of these deep pits, wherein the grace-note of joy and the song of the Lord are silenced beneath a crushing weight of doubt, fear, and condemnation. Beloved friends: The Sovereignty Perspective is your great hope. It is God's master provision for balancing the Test Perspective and avoiding its pitfalls. It is heaven's eye-salve for seeing the Test Perspective transformed from a deadly enemy into a beloved friend. It is a fabulous gift, graciously given by God our Father to help you run the race that is set before you, and to win it (Phil. 3:13–15; Heb. 12:1–2).

How then shall we live together well with the Doctrines of Grace? We shall humbly receive them as a precious gift from God. We shall continually meditate upon *why* he has given them to us, and shall learn to draw life, love, assurance, and holy boldness from them. We shall be fully aware of the pitfalls associated with them, and the spiritual warfare surrounding them. We shall avoid those pitfalls, and triumph in that warfare, by humbly receiving the Test Perspective as an equally precious gift of God, through which we shall keep the Sovereignty Perspective in proper balance. We shall continually meditate on *why* God has given us the Test Perspective, and—with the Sovereignty Perspective solidly beneath our feet—rise eagerly and confidently to its various responsibilities. We shall be aware of the pitfalls associated with the Test Perspective and of the spiritual warfare that surrounds it. And we shall triumph over them both by balancing Test Perspective with the Sovereignty Perspective. In sum, we shall live together well with the Doctrines of Grace when we live together fully on the Golden Strand.

The Ultimate Golden Strand

I have shot my arrow. My aim has been to disclose the Golden Strand. My goal has been to see my Calvinist and Arminian brothers living together well upon it. But what if I seem to have missed the mark? What if some of my Calvinist brothers believe I have ceded too much ground to the Arminians? What if some of my Arminian brothers believe I have given away the store to the Calvinists? What then?

Let me respond with a closing testimony.

A few years back, as I was reading through the New Testament, I began to notice that the Lord Jesus is repeatedly depicted as being “in the midst.” So, like Moses of old, I decided to turn aside and see this great sight: how and when and why the Lord Jesus continually appears “in the midst.”

Here is what I saw.

As a boy, Jesus was accidentally separated from his father and mother during the Passover observances in Jerusalem. When the distraught parents finally found him, there he was in the temple, seated in the midst of the Scribes and Pharisees, all of whom were marveling at his wisdom (Luke 2:46).

As a grown man, Jesus embarked on a ministry to his fellow Israelites, proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom and calling them to repent and believe in him. In the fulfillment of that ministry God granted that he should perform mighty signs and wonders in their midst (Acts 2:22).

When teaching his disciples about prayer, he told them that where two or three are gathered together in his name, there he is in the midst of them (Matt. 18:20).

When the last of the convicted scribes and Pharisees had finally slunk away, Jesus and the woman who had been caught in adultery were left alone in the midst: presumably of a large crowd which had seen, heard, and been stung by the beauty of God’s compassion, mercy, and grace (John 8:9).

When the Feast of Tabernacles rolled around, Jesus went up into the temple courtyard and taught: in the midst of the Feast, and, it would appear, in the midst of the courtyard and the people (John 7:14).

When he was brought to trial before his enemies—Caiaphas, Annas, Pilate, Herod, and the Roman cohort—he stood with quiet strength and dignity in their midst, like a sheep before its shearers (Is. 53:7; Matt. 26:57-67).

When the Romans nailed him to the Cross, they crucified two criminals along with him, one on either side, and Jesus in the midst (John 19:18).

After his resurrection the Lord appeared, not once, but several times in the midst of his disciples (Luke 24:36; John 20:19, 26).

According to the writer to the Hebrews, ever since the Day of Pentecost Christ has been declaring God's name to his spiritual brethren, and singing praises to him in the midst of the assemblies (Heb. 2:12).

The Apostle John, in a stupendous vision granted to him on the island of Patmos, beheld Christ standing in the midst of seven golden candlesticks, and walking around among them (Rev. 1:13, 2:1).

In a subsequent vision of the throne room of heaven, John suddenly saw a Lamb, as if it had been slain, standing in the midst, between the elders and the throne of God (Rev. 5:6).

Throughout eternity past, he who in time would become the Christ lived in the midst of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (John 15:26, 17:5).

At the beginning of time, he was in the midst of the creation of God, for through him, by the Holy Spirit, God the Father brought all things into being and fashioned them as they are (John 1:1-3; Heb. 1:2; Rev. 4:11).

He is ever in the midst of the providence of God, since, at God's good pleasure, all things are held together and controlled by him (Col. 1:17; Rev. 5:7, 6:1).

He is in the midst of God's redemptive purpose and plan, since he is the one Mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5).

And on the day of his return, when the heavens and the earth shall flee for safety before his face, he will be seated on his throne in the midst of the universe itself, there to judge the world in righteousness, turn the wicked into hell, recreate the cosmos, and descend with his beloved Bride into the midst of a glorious new world to come (Matt. 24:29–31; Rev. 20:11–15, 21:1ff).

How can these passages further help us resolve the great debate that swirls around the Doctrines of Grace, or indeed around any other contested teaching of Holy Scripture? I believe that God himself has given us the answer. And he does so in yet another passage where Christ is seen *in the midst*.

Jesus has taken Peter, James, and John to a high mountain apart. While he is praying, the appearance of his face is altered, and his cloak turns white and shines like lightning. Suddenly, two men—Moses and Elijah—appear with him in glory and begin to speak with him. Awakened to the sight, trembling with fear, yet eager to profit from this extraordinary gathering of his spiritual heroes, Peter addresses his Master, offering to build three shelters, one for each of them. But it was not his Master who replied: It was God the Father himself!

But even as [Peter] was speaking these words, a cloud appeared and began to overshadow the two men; and as they entered the cloud, the disciples were gripped with fear. Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, my chosen One. Listen to him!” And when the voice had finished speaking, they found Jesus standing there all alone. (Luke 9:34–36)

All alone. Mark those words well. God the Father himself, the fountainhead of all truth, commanded the disciples to fix their eyes on his chosen One: the chosen channel of his supreme revelation to all mankind, the chosen Teacher of the whole human race. In so speaking, he therefore eliminated or subordinated to his Son every other teacher who had ever lived, or who ever would. Accordingly, this is

the word of God the Father to his pilgrim people: All Christians of all times and all places must always remember that when their minds need illumination, when their hearts need pacification, and when their churches need unification, they are to come first and foremost to the Chosen One of God.

Here, then, is God's *ultimate* Golden Strand: the Lord Jesus Christ. And deep down we all know this, Calvinists and Arminians alike. Because Christ has received us to himself, because he lives in us, and because we live in him, we know immediately and intuitively that *right now*, despite any and all theological differences, we who are born again are standing together as one on this holy ground. This is a unity that Christ prayed for (John 17:1ff). This is a unity that he purchased with his life's blood. This is a unity that his Father has *already* granted to us all. This is a unity that enables us to say *even now* that there is one Body, indwelt by one Spirit; and that all who are members of this Body share one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father, who is over all, and through all, and in all (Eph. 4:4–5).

This present unity in Jesus Christ and around the essentials of the faith is of great practical consequence. It means that we can and must receive one another as spiritual brothers and sisters, bear with one another's frailties, forgive one another's offenses, serve one another with spiritual gifts, love one another, help one another, encourage one another, exhort one another, and stir one another up to good works.

But while this unity is indeed the basis for a vibrant life together in Christ, it is also the basis for something more. For again, the Lord himself has assured us that if we will *keep* standing together on this good ground—working out our salvation in fear and trembling—then one day up ahead God will bring us into the *perfect* spiritual unity that still eludes us: into the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ himself. Let every quarreling Calvinist and every arguing Arminian take heed and take heart.

How will this promise be fulfilled? We have seen that apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, and the Holy Scriptures will definitely be involved. But important as they are, in the end the

promise of perfect unity can only be realized as *each one of us* turns to God's chosen One and listens to him. He alone is the one in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3). He alone is the one who speaks the words of God to our hearts (John 3:34). He alone is the one who opens our minds to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45). He alone, through his Spirit, is the one who guides us into all truth (John 16:13). He alone is the one who rests our aching heads and troubled hearts on his vast and comforting bosom (John 13:23). And he alone is the one who will *fully* bring us into the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3).

Yes, God our Father has given the Church a loving heavenly Husband; and he has ordained that Christ should continually wash his beloved Bride with the water of the Word until that happy day when he presents her to himself as a glorious Church, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing. But if all this is so, then we must prepare ourselves. For as surely as Christ's Word is the foundation of his Church, and as surely as all Scripture is profitable, so surely do we know that sooner or later our Beloved will invite each one of us to join him on a long-term date with the Doctrines of Grace. And unless I am very much mistaken, when we finally arrive at this destination wedding we will find ourselves being welcomed by a great multitude of brothers and sisters who are living, loving, working, worshiping, and rejoicing together exceedingly well upon the Golden Strand.

NOTES

Chapter 1: A Long-term Date with the Doctrines of Grace

1 In several places in his writings the Apostle John speaks of Christ as the *monogenes* of God the Father (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9; cf. Heb. 11:17). Some translate this Greek word as *only-begotten*, others simply as *only*, or *one and only*. Having studied the question closely, NT theologian Denny Burk opts for *uniquely begotten*. I myself favor this translation and use it throughout this book. For Burk's reasoning on this subject, please visit www.dennyburk.com and search for the article entitled *Deep in the Weeds on MONOGENES and Eternal Generation*.

2 Most Arminians adhere to what is called “the penal, substitutionary” view of the atonement. According to this view, the crucified Christ stood in for sinners as their substitute and paid the penalty for their sins, which is death. However, down through the years some Arminians have rejected this understanding, realizing that it entails either a limited atonement (i.e., the Calvinist view) or Universalism (i.e., the view that all will be saved). Accordingly, these Arminians have developed and/or embraced other theories of the atonement, including the Moral Government and Moral Influence views. I will have more to say on this subject in Chapter 5, and also in the end notes for Chapter 5.

3 From the poem *Invictus*, by William Henley.

4 The story of God's search for me, and of my resulting search for him, is found in a little self-published booklet entitled *Furnace for Gold*. It is available as a downloadable PDF on my website, or in hard copy through the ministry of *Come Let Us Reason*: www.clr4u.org.

Chapter 2: Spying the Golden Strand

1 For an extended discussion God's sovereignty over all things see Dean Davis, *The Test: A Seeker's Journey to the Meaning of Life* (Redemption Press, 2010), pp. 283–289.

2 It is true that our Lord's test in the wilderness of Judea was but one of many, and that his entire life was a probation, successfully passed in our behalf, and brought to completion on the cross, where he cried, "It is finished!" But what held true for his test in the wilderness held true for his entire test on earth, and for ours as well: It is not open-ended, extending to all eternity, but is finite and brought to a close at the end of our earthly lives.

3 I am aware that my Calvinist readers will contest this statement. In a way, I myself will do so in the pages ahead. But please remember that here I am writing strictly from within the Test Perspective, and without reference to the Sovereignty Perspective. According to the latter, man in sin is a slave to sin, and cannot take the least step towards God, truth, and righteousness without divine enablement. According to the former, man in sin nevertheless knows that God, truth, and righteousness exist, that he (man) ought to pursue these things, and that he is free to do so, if only he will. The paragraphs and pages ahead will make the importance of these distinctions clear.

4 J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (InterVarsity Press, 2001), chapter 2.

5 The danger of this pitfall is painfully on display in the life of the 18th-century English poet, William Cowper. For a compassionate description of his spiritual plight, see John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God* (Crossway Books, 2001), chapter 2.

Chapter 3: Total Depravity

1 R. C. Sproul writes:

The Christian view is that God creates us with wills, with a capacity to choose. We are volitional beings. But the freedom given in creation is limited. What ultimately limits our freedom is God's freedom. This is where we run into the conflict between divine sovereignty and human freedom. Some say that God's sovereignty is limited by human freedom. If that is the case, then man is sovereign, not God. The Reformed faith teaches that human freedom is real but

limited by God's sovereignty. We cannot overrule the sovereign decisions of God with our freedom, because God's freedom is greater than ours. Human family relationships provide an analogy. Parents exercise authority over the child. The child has freedom, but the parents have more. The child's freedom does not limit the parents' freedom in the way that the parents' freedom limits the child's. When we come to the attributes of God, we must understand that God is the most free.

See the article, *Since God is Sovereign, How are Humans Free?* (<https://www.ligonier.org/blog/god-sovereign-how-are-humans-free>).

2 The Westminster Confession of Faith, a bastion of Calvinism, explicitly acknowledges the inescapable reality of man's free will. In the section on God's decrees it states:

God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin, *nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.*

The thought here, stated somewhat cryptically, is that God himself has decreed that man shall be—and shall always experience himself as—a free and morally responsible creature before him. It is precisely this freedom that makes us morally accountable creatures of God. In an effort to express this idea Calvinists speak of man as having “compatibilist free will.” They mean that man's will is indeed free, in the sense that God never forces him to choose one way or another; but also that God remains absolutely sovereign, in the sense that he is somehow ultimately in control of all the free decisions that men make. Thus, in a mystery, God's sovereignty and man's free will are said to be compatible. Arminians, on the other hand, speak of “libertarian free will.” By this they mean that God has limited his own sovereignty in such a way that man has absolute control over his choices. We have seen, and will continue to see, that the Calvinist view is the scriptural

one, even though it forces us to live out the Christian life under the discipline of an antinomy; that is, in the face of a baffling mystery. Meanwhile, the Arminian view appears to be unscriptural, and for that reason entangles us in many theological and philosophical problems of its own.

3 The American Calvinist theologian, Charles Hodge, helpfully summed up his discussion of free will as follows:

The doctrine of free agency, therefore, which underlies the Bible, which is involved in the consciousness of every rational being, and which is assumed and acted upon by all men, is at an equal remove, on the one hand, from the doctrine of physical or mechanical necessity [i.e., the notion that free will is an illusion, and that all man's choices are determined by physical processes in the brain], which precludes the possibility of liberty and responsibility; and, on the other, from the doctrine of contingency, which assumes that an act, in order to be free, must be uncertain; or that the will is self-determined, acting independently of reason, conscience, inclinations, and feelings [i.e., with no underlying causes]. It teaches that a man is a free and responsible agent because he is the author of his own acts, and because he is determined to act by nothing outside of himself, but by his own views, convictions, inclinations, feelings, and dispositions, so that his acts are the true products of the man, and really represent or reveal what he is.

In this section of his work Hodge's main thesis is that this view of human freedom is not only biblical and true to human experience, but also fully compatible with divine foreordination, foreknowledge, and the certainty of all foreknown events.

See Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Wm. Eerdmans, Reprint, 1977), Vol. II, p. 307.

Chapter 4: Unconditional Election

1 “Election is active; reprobation is passive. In election God actively intervenes to rescue those who deserve destruction, whereas in reprobation God passively allows some to receive the just punishment they deserve for their sins.” J. M. Boice and L. Ryken, *The Doctrines of Grace* (Crossway Books, 2002), pp. 101–106.

2 In one of his essays, 19th century theologian Robert Dabney recounts the story of a certain Major Andre, who, for an act of treason, was sentenced to death by George Washington. Washington felt deep compassion for Andre and very much wanted to pardon him. However, in the end, for a variety of compelling reasons, he decided against it. While acknowledging the limitations of this earthly analogy, Dabney argues that it does indeed give us a glimpse of how God can be loving and compassionate towards all, and yet at the same time, for wise and holy reasons that pass our full understanding, elect to save only some. For a fuller discussion, see John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Multnomah Press, 1991), pp. 145–146.

3 For a short introduction to Open Theism, with a critique, please visit www.monergism.com, and read the article by John Frame, entitled, *Does the Bible Affirm Open Theism?*

4 It is well worth noting that God’s desire for the maximal display of his glory has a specifically trinitarian dimension. As a number of NT texts reveal, the Father desires all men to honor his Son, just as they honor him; and the Son has purposely undertaken his great redemptive mission so that the Father may be glorified through the Son (John 5:23, 17:1–3; Phil. 2:5–11; Rev. 5). Also, Jesus said of the Holy Spirit that when he comes he will glorify Christ (John 16:14). Creation and redemption are meant to issue in the saints’ Spirit-led adoration of the triune God.

Chapter 5: Limited Atonement

1 In my discussion of the atonement I will assume that my Arminian brothers follow the teaching of Arminius himself, namely, that Christ died as a substitute for sinners, paying the penalty for their

sins. However, as we are about to see, this view leads necessarily either to Calvinism or Universalism. Accordingly, some of Arminius' successors adopted the Moral Influence and/or Moral Government theories of the atonement. According to the former, the purpose of Christ's death was to demonstrate the love of God for sinners, thereby eliciting a response of repentance and faith, for which reason God forgives their sins. According to the latter, God did not fulfill his Law by sending his Son to endure the penalty for our having broken it. Rather, he arbitrarily relaxed his Law by sending his Son to show us, through his death, that sin is serious, ugly, and destructive, and that God will indeed punish it in some way. This demonstration mercifully modifies, yet also vindicates, God's threatening under the Law, (hopefully) secures the repentance and faith of sinners, and thereby preserves and promotes his moral government of the world. Here again forgiveness appears to be based on man's repentance and faith, rather than on Christ's actually bearing the stated penalty for sin. The thrust of the present chapter is to show that Christ's death was indeed penal and substitutionary, for which reason it is, by its very nature, effective only for God's elect. See Louis Berkhoff, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 384–391.

2 For a detailed study of the universality texts, see *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective* (Crossway, 2013), Part II, especially chapter 14.

3 For more on John 11:51–52 see Wm. Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: John* (Baker Academic, 1953), pp. 166–166.

4 I do not deny that there may in fact be some for whom it is “too late” to be saved. But these are persons who have resisted the Spirit for so long (Gen. 6:3), and turned from the light of the gospel so completely (John 3:18–21), that God has handed them over to a depraved mind (Rom. 1:28; 1 Tim. 6:5; 2 Tim. 3:8), with the result that their conscience is now seared (1 Tim. 4:2) and past feeling (Eph. 4:19). Obviously, such persons will no longer show any interest in the Bible's message of salvation. But this implies that if anyone *does* show such an interest, it is by no means “too late” for him. And this is the testimony of Scripture. The prodigal may indeed begin his journey

back to his Father's house, no matter how egregious his sins (Luke 15:1ff). "Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him. For he himself knows our frame; he is mindful that we are but dust" (Ps. 103:13–14). "O Israel, hope in the LORD, for with the LORD there is lovingkindness, and with him there is abundant redemption" (Ps. 130:7).

5 Quoted in *The Doctrines of Grace*, pp. 132–133.

Chapter 6: Irresistible Grace

1 For an excellent illustration of the way the Spirit is pleased to use gospel evidences to call people to faith, see Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Zondervan, 1988), and the movie by the same name. See also Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Thomas Nelson, 1999).

2 Here is Charles Spurgeon's testimony about how he came to believe in the Doctrines of Grace. Observe that it was his own personal experience of God's effectual call that brought him through the door and into the full light of Sovereign Grace:

One weeknight when I was sitting in the house of God, I was not thinking much about the preacher's sermon, for I did not believe it. The thought struck me, "*How did you come to be a Christian?*" I sought the Lord. "*But how did you come to seek the Lord?*" The truth flashed across my mind in a moment—I should not have sought him unless there had been some previous influence in my mind to *make me* seek him. I prayed, thought I, but then I asked myself, *How came I to pray?* I was induced to pray by reading the Scriptures. *How came I to read the Scriptures?* I did read them, but what led me to do so? Then, in a moment, I saw that God was at the bottom of it all, and that he was the Author of my faith, and so the whole doctrine of grace opened up to me, and from that doctrine I have not departed to this day, and I desire to make this my constant confession: "I ascribe my change wholly to God."

Chapter 7: Perseverance of the Saints

1 In this connection we do well to remember a doctrine we have encountered before: the eternal intercession of the High Priest of Heaven in behalf of his people. As the writer to the Hebrews teaches us, Jesus Christ formerly fulfilled, and now continues to fulfill, the rich typology of the Jewish Feast of the Atonement. Having offered himself once and for all as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of his people, he rose from the dead, ascended above, and entered the Holiest Place—heaven itself—there to appear in the presence of God the Father on their behalf (Heb. 9:24ff). His presence serves as an eternal reminder to God that Christ has paid the penalty for all the sins of all his children, with the result that all of their post-conversion sins will continually be forgiven, and the gracious (preserving) influences of the Holy Spirit will continually be bestowed. Because Christ ever lives to make intercession for the saints, they are ever seated in the heavenly places, ever present in the Holy of Holies, and ever united with the Holy Family: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (John 14:18–24, 17:22ff; Eph. 1:3, 2:4–6; Heb. 6:19, 7:25). No matter the length or depth of their struggles and failures upon the earth, such a people will surely persevere to the end.

2 John is not saying that the saints will not wrestle with indwelling sin, or stumble into actual sin; he is well aware that they will (1 John 1:8, 2:1). Rather, he is saying that true saints will not *continually live in sin*, as they did prior to their conversion. Because of the divine life living within them, they will keep up their quest for moral purity, even as they look in faith to their Advocate with the Father when they fail (1 John 2:1, 3:3). Falling short of the glory of God, they fall confidently into the all-forgiving arms of the Christ of God (Rom. 3:23).

3 See also Acts 13:43, 14:21–22; 1 Cor. 15:58; Phil. 2:12, 3:12; Heb. 6:11, 12:1–3; 1 John 2:28.

4 Louis Berkhoff, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 15th printing, 1977), p. 107.

5 For a richly poetic depiction of the ascent of a born-again Christian to the high places of the knowledge of Christ and his love, see Hannah Hurnard's *Hinds Feet on High Places*.

6 The same explanation applies to the Parable of the Talents (Matt. 25:14–30) and the Parable of the Minas (Luke 19:11–27). The failed and condemned “servants,” who appear to represent certain “Christian” leaders, are appointed their portion with the hypocrites, because that is exactly what they were.

7 Revelation 20:4–6 speaks of “the first resurrection.” Elsewhere I have defended the view that the saints attain “the first resurrection” when they finish their spiritual race, die in the faith, and enter heaven. Of such persons the text says, “Blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection: Over these the second death holds no sway, but they will be priests of God and of Christ; and they will reign with him throughout the thousand years.” The central message of this challenging text is: The gospel probation of those who are in Christ is brought to a victorious conclusion on the day of their death. Henceforth they are perfectly holy, and therefore sealed against all possibility of falling away. Henceforth they will reign with Christ *in life* (i.e., with no further battles with indwelling sin, Rom. 5:17). Henceforth they will reign with Christ *in heaven* for the remainder of the “1000” years (i.e., the time in which the Holy Trinity [3] will complete [10] the application of the redemption purchased by Christ [10x10x10]). Henceforth, the Second Death, which is the Lake of Fire, can never imperil these souls. Henceforth their names can never be removed from the Scroll of Life. The First Resurrection is the glorious reward of all who persevere in the faith till the end of their lives. See Dean Davis, *The High King of Heaven* (Redemption Press, 2014), pp. 475–484.

8 See Herman Hoeksema, *Behold He Cometh: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1969), pp. 723–724.

9 Giving us a sense of the importance of the doctrine of eternal security, Charles Spurgeon wrote:

“I must confess that the doctrine of the final preservation of the saints was a bait that my soul could not resist. I thought

it was a sort of life insurance—an insurance of my character, an insurance of my soul, an insurance of my eternal destiny. I knew that I could not keep myself, but if Christ promised to keep me, then I should be safe for ever; and I longed and prayed to find Christ, because I knew that if I found Him, He would not give me a temporary and trumpery salvation, such as some preach, but eternal life which could never be lost.”

10 Samuel Rutherford wrote, “Ye have only these two shallow brooks—sickness and death—to pass through; and ye have also a promise that Christ shall do more than meet you, but that He Himself shall come and go with you, foot for foot, yea, and bear you in His arms. O then! for the joy that is set before you, for the love of the Man (Who is also God over all, blessed forever) that is upon the shore to welcome you: Run your race with patience!” See Samuel Rutherford, *The Loveliness of Christ* (Vintage Puritan, 1909).

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“THEM’S FIGHTIN’ WORDS!”

So say many Christians when you mention the Doctrines of Grace, otherwise known as the Five Points of Calvinism. How have these excellent gifts from God our Father become a battleground on which the saints war against each other, instead of common ground on which they fight as one in the cause of the gospel?

In this book, retired pastor and author Dean Davis traces the problem to a species of drowning. The trouble begins when we fail to see that God has given us not one, but two oceans of biblical revelation dealing with salvation. The first is the Sovereignty Perspective. This ocean speaks of God’s eternal decrees, his all-controlling providence, and the five Doctrines of Grace. Here are the waters in which our Calvinist brethren love to swim. The second is the Test Perspective. In this ocean we encounter a loving Creator who is pleased to test his free human creatures through his self-revelation in nature, conscience, and the gospel. These are the waters in which our Arminian brethren love to swim.

But, says Davis, when we elect to swim more or less exclusively in one ocean, we forfeit the blessings of the other and actually wind up drowning: overwhelmed by waves of confusion, anxiety, anger, and internecine war.

The solution? Davis calls it the Golden Strand: that narrow spiritual isthmus where the two oceans meet, where he himself found solid ground, and where the Church can indeed live together well with the Doctrines of Grace.

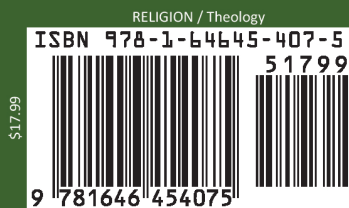
“If you’ve ever been frustrated by the Calvinist/Arminian debate, or you just want to learn more about it, this book is a much-needed breath of fresh air. I’ve read more than a few on this subject, and *In Search of the Golden Strand* is now my very favorite!”

— **Pastor Michael Rowntree**



Dean Davis is a retired pastor and the director of *Come Let Us Reason*, a Bible-teaching ministry focusing on apologetics and worldview studies. He is the author of several books, including *The High King of Heaven: Discovering the Master Keys to the Great End Time Debate* (Redemption Press). He lives with his wife, Linda, in Santa Rosa, California.

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