

THE WONDERFUL GRACE OF JESUS
Five Doctrines that Shape, Define, and Preserve
the Good News

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FIVE DOCTRINES THAT SHAPE, DEFINE, AND
PRESERVE THE GOOD NEWS

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“Blessed Lord Jesus,/No human mind could conceive or invent the gospel./Acting in eternal grace, thou art both its messenger and its message..../Blessed be thou, O Father, for contriving this way,/Eternal thanks to thee, O Lamb of God, for opening this way,/Praise everlasting to thee, O Holy Spirit, for applying this way to my heart./Glorious Trinity impress the gospel on my soul, until its virtue diffuses every faculty.”¹

“May Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who, seated at the Father’s right hand, gives gifts to men, sanctify us in the truth; bring to the truth those who err; shut the mouths of the calumniators of sound doctrine, and endure the faithful ministers of his Word with the spirit of wisdom and discretion, that all their discourses may tend to the glory of God, and the edification of those who hear them. Amen.” Conclusion, Canons of Dort, 1618.

“But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” (Ephesians 2:4-9).

Introduction

There are two basic positions of the Protestant faith. First, there are those who insist that our salvation is, more or less, up to us. Those who hold this view claim that our moral behavior determines our final destiny; good people go to heaven. Still others insist that it is God who saves us but only after we make the first move. People must contribute their faith, their acceptance of Jesus, or the right heart attitude, and then God rewards such actions on our part with eternal life. In the final analysis eternal salvation depends ultimately upon a human decision or activity. Second, there are those who believe that salvation is completely

¹ Arthur Bennett, ed., “The Gospel Way,” *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 62.

God's work from beginning to end. The difference between these positions is critical. Debate over this difference has occupied the church's attention from its very early days.

It is not sufficient to say, "Let's just all love Jesus and forget about our differences." Granted, many Christians on both sides of the issue believe the same things about the person of Jesus Christ. In this we rejoice. However, these two positions represent two different views of the gospel. It affects both what we tell lost people, and how we tell them. Did Jesus actually save people in his death, or did he only make salvation possible? Was his death all-sufficient or must I add something to it? Do I focus on Christ's ability to save, or my ability to make it happen? Do I seek Christ, or does he seek me? Should I accent clarity and truth in preaching or persuasion and decision? This is more than a matter of emphasis. It is a matter of substance.

Churches that teach salvation is all of God from beginning to end are called Reformed. They are so-called because of their identity with the sixteenth century back-to-the-Bible movement called the Reformation. The Reformed faith is also referred to as Calvinism because John Calvin was one of the major reformers of that period. However, in the early seventeenth century, students of Jacob Arminius sought to promote an old error. They made their case in the form of a Remonstrance, or protest, to the Dutch Parliament by asserting five points. They claimed: 1) People, though sinful, nevertheless possess free will and thus the ability to choose God; 2) God chose for salvation only those whom he foreknew would choose him; 3) Christ died to save everyone, but only if they first believed; 4) The work of the Holy Spirit to attract people to Christ can be resisted; 5) People can potentially fall from grace since much depends on them.

In 1618 a Dutch council, called the Synod of Dort, responded to the Remonstrance point by point in what has been called the Five Points of Calvinism. Although Calvin would have agreed with them, he was no longer living by this time and had no immediate influence on the points that bear his name. We will refer to these

points as the "doctrines of grace" because they guard the biblical teaching, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). They affirmed the following: 1) Total Depravity—Sin in the human heart is so pervasive that people will not and cannot seek the true God unless God takes the initiative; 2) Unconditional Election—Before the beginning of time, God chose some for eternal life, not because he foreknew that they would chose for Christ, but because he predetermined that they would; 3) Particular Redemption—Christ's atoning death has accomplished with certainty the redemption of God's elect people; 4) Irresistible Grace—The Holy Spirit grants new life to those for whom Christ died so that they freely and willingly embrace Christ as Savior; 5) Perseverance of the Saints—All those truly born again, God will preserve to the end.

The differences between these two views of the gospel are often cast as a debate between the followers of John Calvin and Jacob Arminius. They are thus dismissed as a theologian's squabble. But it's not as simple as that. Here are two very distinct visions of the Christian faith. What's more, these differences didn't arise only in the Reformation. As early as the fifth century AD, St. Augustine and a British monk named Pelagius contested over the same issues. The question of how God saves us should be an ever-present concern to the church. When we lack clarity with regard to our understanding of the gospel, as is so prevalent today, we are poorer for it.

In this essay we will be exploring these five defining features of the biblical gospel. It is our view that the latter vision is the correct one. We agree with Jonah when he said, "Salvation comes from the LORD" (Jonah 2:9). We look to Jesus, who is said to be both "the author and perfecter of our faith" (Heb. 12:2). We share in Paul's confidence that, "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6). We believe that the "doctrines of grace" preserve the integrity of the gospel of grace. They make our witness to Christ strong and effective. They alone bring substantial glory to God and

significant joy to the human heart.

Total Depravity

There was a day when doctors treated a variety of illnesses by bleeding the patient. It was believed that bad blood was the cause of sickness. What kept the practice alive for centuries was that it often appeared to work. It wasn't until the discovery of bacteria and antibiotics that diseases could be treated more effectively. The point is this: A problem must be clearly understood before the correct remedy can be applied.

No one disputes the reality of human conflict. Wars are ubiquitous. Family disarray is epidemic. Backbiting occurs in the workplace. Crime is ever with us. Human sexuality is confused. Children do rebel. Human indecency is flaunted. Mayhem often rules. As a fever in a sick body, the symptoms are evident. The remedy to these terrible realities is where confusion occurs.

Historically there are three basic views of the human nature: people are good, but perhaps misguided; evil, although more or less restrained; or somewhere in between. The modern social sciences have embraced the former. Children learn in school that there are no good or bad behaviors, only appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. People are regarded as basically good but lack the home or educational environment for their goodness to be cultivated.

The Bible sees the human condition differently. Although initially created in the image of God, people now possess as a result of the fall a proclivity against God and his ways. The Bible calls this sin. Reformed theologians refer to this condition as totally depraved. By totally we do not mean that people are as bad as they can be. But since sin has affected the entirety of human nature (mind, will, and affections), people do not desire or seek God.

St. Augustine explored this troubling reality in the human heart as he recalled an incident from his youth. One night, with a gang of

boys, he stole pears from a neighbor's orchard. St. Augustine saw more in this episode than an example of a simple youthful prank. He said in his *Confessions*, "I stole something which I had in plenty and of much better quality. My desire was to enjoy not what I sought by stealing but merely the excitement of thieving and the doing of what was wrong... Even if we ate a few, nevertheless our pleasure lay in doing what was not allowed."² Augustine had a loving mother, and he enjoyed the best educational opportunities of his day. But he also enjoyed sin and reveled in it for no other reason than the pleasure it brought him. Until we are willing to admit the truth of total depravity, our solutions will be like bleeding people to cure a fever, offering false hope but no remedy.

The Bible describes the human spiritual condition in a number of ways. Three metaphors impress upon us how absolute this condition is. Spiritually speaking, we are blind (John 9:25), not dim-sighted or blurry-eyed. We are dead (Eph. 2:1), not sick or even near death. We are lost (Luke 15:31), not a little off track. Furthermore, the Bible insists that there are certain things required of us that we are unable to do. Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44). Sin has destroyed our ability to come to Christ apart from divine intervention. In sin we do not desire God's gift of his Son. St. Paul said, "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Rom. 8:7). Apart from God's sovereign and saving work we will never say "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long" (Ps. 119:97). Again the Apostle says, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). Spiritual realities are an enigma to the sinful heart apart from God granting light to it by his Spirit.

This is a desperate condition of which few are willing to confess. The prophet Jeremiah said, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or

² St. Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 29.

the leopard its spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil” (Jer. 13:23). We lull ourselves into thinking that we are not that bad. We fall into the trap Paul spoke of in 2 Corinthians 10:12. He said, “When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise” (2 Cor. 10:12). We rise above the average person when we compare ourselves with other people. But, before a holy God, “all have sinned and fall short” of his glory (Rom. 3:23). David writes that we are conceived in sin (Psa. 51:5). Outside of Christ we will die in our sin. In other words, we are totally depraved and are in need of the totality of God’s redeeming love on our behalf.

It is popular today in matters of religion to counsel people to follow their hearts. But the Bible says, “the heart is deceitful above and things and beyond cure” (Jer. 17:9). The problem is sin; but, God has a cure. It is found in the Father’s unconditional election, his particular redemption through Christ, and irresistible grace of the Holy Spirit. This is the full gospel. Herein lies our eternal hope.

Unconditional Election

My mother had a method to announce that it was time for dinner. We had a brass bell attached to the side of our house. When she wanted us home, she would simply ring it. The “ding, ding, ding,” of that bell would cover the entire neighborhood for blocks. Everyone could hear it. But the only two who responded were my sister and I.

There were times when we hated that bell. We were ridiculed for it. It called us at inopportune times. But in the larger picture of things, it was a mark of ownership. It called us home to a hot meal. It announced a special privilege. It reminded us that we were members of a loving family. However, our place in that family was not a matter of our choice, but a choice our parents made before we were conceived.

Jesus was pressed repeatedly to defend his ministry. On one occasion he told his detractors, “You do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:26-27). Jesus makes an important point here. There are those who are his sheep, and there are those who are not his sheep. Those who are his sheep believe. Those who are not his sheep ignore or despise him. We do not become his sheep by believing. Rather, we believe because we are already his sheep.

We call this the doctrine of election. God’s family is made up of those whom God has chosen before the beginning of time. No one deserves to be part of this family, for all have sinned and fall short of his glory. Nevertheless, the Father has graciously chosen some to be his sheep. For example, the Lord said of Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you . . . [and] I set you apart” (Jer. 1:5). The first chapter of Ephesians also makes this clear, “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world.... In Love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:4-5). Again it says, “In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Eph. 1:11).

Reformed theologians speak of this choice as being unconditional. In other words, God’s choice was not based on his foreseeing that some people would fulfill certain conditions prior to being chosen. He was not looking for people who were good, or possessed special redeeming qualities. He did not merely see those who would believe, and then choose them. It was a sovereign choice made simply “in conformity with the purpose of his will.” The reason why God chose some and passed over others will have to remain beyond the reach of human understanding. However, what Moses said of Israel is important here: “The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other people, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers” (Deut. 7:7-8). In other words, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

This doctrine is a great mystery. It has been said, “Try to explain it, and you can lose your mind. Try to explain it away, and you can lose your soul.” This doctrine is also a source of great comfort. I am filled with joy in knowing that he who saves also protects. In those days when I am filled with fear and doubt, I find comfort in knowing that the Lord’s decrees stand firm (Isa. 46:10). Election fosters humility in our lives as no other doctrine. I cannot claim one ounce of merit for which God is obligated to reward me. I cannot claim a flicker of faith as my own (Phil. 1:29), which would give me an edge on eternity. The only thing I bring to my salvation is the sin for which Christ died. Salvation is of the Lord, and I can do nothing but give all glory to God.

This doctrine also is a motivation and encouragement for evangelism and missions. It reminds us that here is an enterprise that cannot fail because it does not depend ultimately upon us. To be sure, we must be faithful in the Great Commission, but it is the Lord who brings the harvest (1 Cor. 3:6-7). No human being is capable of knowing who is elect and who is not. We are told only to take the gospel to all nations. Jesus said, “No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matt. 11:27). This work is like ringing the bell (Isa. 55:11). His sheep will come home. All others will keep on playing.

In Christ we are members of a loving family—a family shrouded by the love of the Father. This is the root of grace: that we, the undeserving, would be marked as his children before the beginning of time.

Particular Redemption

John chapter 10 is a favorite among Christians because it presents Jesus as a tender shepherd to his flock. It also raises a very important question: For whom did Christ die? Did he die to save everybody, or did he die to save a particular people? Did his death atone for all the sins of all people, or all the sins of some

people? To ask it yet another way, did Christ’s death only make salvation possible for people, or did it actually accomplish the salvation of those for whom he died?

The chapter makes a very clear distinction. There are those who are his sheep, and there are those who are not his sheep. Those who are his sheep trust him. Those who are not his sheep reject him (10:24-26). But there is also another point that must not be missed. Jesus actually identifies those for whom he died. He says, “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me . . . and I lay down my life for the sheep” (10:11, 14-15).

We call this doctrine particular redemption or definite atonement. It is so called because Jesus went to the cross with a particular or definite people in mind. There are many verses in Scripture that particularize Christ’s death. For example, Isaiah 53:8 says, “for the transgression of my people he was stricken.” Joseph was told to give him the name Jesus, “because he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). Jesus later said he would, “give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45), and knew he was granted authority by the Father to give eternal life, as he said, “to all those you have given him” (John 17:2). Later Paul would charge certain elders, “Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (Acts. 20:28).

Sadly, this is not the majority view in the evangelical world today, although it has been in the past. The modern church has been so influenced by the view that everybody must have a chance, that our personal decisions become more important than God’s gracious actions. They insist, “What about all those verses that say things like, ‘God so loved the world?’ (John 3:16) or that God is ‘not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance’” (2 Pet. 3:9). The problem is, not everyone is saved. In this all evangelicals agree. In the majority evangelical view we are then left with an atonement that didn’t accomplish anything for certain. It only made salvation possible for whoever chooses to

accept it. These two views are like two bridges.³ The one is very broad, but it only crosses the river halfway. If we are to get to the other side, we must jump or swim. But in the final analysis it depends on something we do. This certainly is not grace. The other view is like a narrow bridge that reaches to the other side. Not all will cross. But those who are granted passage will cross. Jesus said, “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away” (John 6:37).

The fact is Jesus did die for the world, but not in the sense that he died for every last person. To be sure, sin has set people on a hell-bound course. But, the Father in his grace chose some for glory (Rom. 9:14-21). The Son, in his loving condescension, purchased their redemption. Christ died for people from “every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9-10). In other words, he died for the whole world, not just Jews or Europeans or Orientals. There is logic to this doctrine. If sin has rendered us totally unable to make any spiritual motion toward God and his kingdom, then our only hope must depend totally upon God’s initiative—his choice. And, if we were chosen in him before the foundation of the world unto this blessedness, as the Bible teaches (Eph. 1:4-5), then Christ’s Calvary mission served to reconcile his people, his sheep, his church to the Father once and for all. When Jesus said, “It is finished,” he meant, “It is finished” (John 19:30).

It is not the visible church’s role to determine who’s elect. It should be sufficient for us that, “the Lord knows those who are his” (2 Tim. 2:19). It is the church’s role to lift up Christ and his cross before the world. We proclaim him (1 Cor. 1:18; 2:2; 2 Cor. 4:5; Col. 1:28), and call people to turn from their sin in repentance and trust him as their all-sufficient Savior. If you have done so with a sincere heart, then be assured, Christ died for you.

³ Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1932), 153.

Irresistible Grace

Lazarus had been dead for only a few days. He was buried and sealed in his tomb. When Jesus arrived to comfort the grieving sisters he was taken to the cemetery where he insisted that the stone be removed from the tomb’s entrance. Then Jesus did an incredible thing. Calling out in a loud voice, he commanded, “Lazarus, come out!” Instantly, we read, “The dead man came out” (John 11:43-44). Expositors of the Bible have often suggested that if Jesus had not mentioned Lazarus by name, his command would have emptied all the tombs. Perhaps! But this much is clear: Lazarus was dead. At the command of Jesus Lazarus awakened and entered the world of the living.

If the Bible truly teaches that we are dead, blind, and lost, if we have any hope for salvation, it must begin and end with God. The Father chose us to be his own from before the beginning of time. Jesus, God’s Son, redeemed those whom the Father had chosen. It is the Holy Spirit’s ministry that brings us from death to new life in Christ. Calvinism calls this efficacious or effective grace because the Spirit’s transforming power is compelling and complete. Or, it is called irresistible grace because we can no more resist the Spirit granting new life, than Lazarus could have resisted the call of Christ to arise. Jesus said, “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away” (John 6:37; cf. Matt. 27). The Bible teaches regarding Lydia of Thyatira, “The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message” (Acts 16:14).

Some are troubled, concluding that God must impose saving grace on people against their will, while others who want to be saved are ignored. This is wrong thinking. The fact is, the sinful soul does not want Christ and will not seek Christ until that of which Ezekiel spoke takes place: “I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh . . . declares the Sovereign LORD” (Ezk. 11:19-21).

The famous Aesop's Fable, The Wind and the Sun, may serve as an illustration of the workings of irresistible grace:

The Wind and the Sun were disputing which was stronger. Suddenly they saw a traveler coming down the road, and the Sun said: "I see a way to decide our dispute. Whichever of us can cause that traveler to take off his cloak shall be regarded as the stronger. You begin." So the Sun retired behind a cloud, and the Wind began to blow as hard as it could upon the traveler. But the harder he blew the more closely did the traveler wrap his cloak round him, 'til at last the Wind had to give in to despair. Then the Sun came out and shone in all his glory upon the traveler, who soon found it too hot to walk with his cloak on.

The Holy Spirit doesn't blow the stubborn, unbending soul into his kingdom. He rather shines the warmth of his grace upon our hearts so that we willingly respond to the love of God in Christ. His grace is both efficacious and irresistible.

This doctrine is a great encouragement in many ways. By it we realize that the gospel ministry does not depend on our art of persuasion but on the Holy Spirit's quickening. When the Word of God is proclaimed, the Lord says, "It will not return to me empty, but it will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isa. 55:11). True believers are "children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (John 1:13). Jesus said, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:8).

This doctrine is also the source of great assurance. By grace, the Lord grants us faith to embrace the gospel (Phil. 1:29), cultivate the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), and foster love for the people of God. "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers" (1 John 3:14). As we rejoice to see the Spirit of God working in the lives of others, so we also rejoice at the Spirit's ministry in our own lives. If you love Christ, give God the glory. It is he, who with his Spirit, called you by name

from your tomb of sin and death to new life by his irresistible grace.

Perseverance of the Saints

Among Christians, Peter is a legend. He was one of Jesus' first disciples. He was the first to confess him as the Christ, the Son of the living God. He was bold and bombastic, arising as leader among the apostles. However, Peter is also known for his failure. On the night of Jesus' trial he put his own safety first by denying the Lord three times. Jesus saw it coming and said, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you [emphasis mine], Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:31-32).

Can there be anything more certain than when the Great Intercessor prays for his own people? He, who prayed for Peter in his weakness, also prays for us today whom he has effectually called. Thus the author of Hebrews assures us that, "[Jesus] is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (Heb. 7:25).

This preserving power of grace is what we call the perseverance of the saints. It is a precious doctrine, for it recognizes that since there is nothing we have done to earn our salvation, there is nothing we can do to lose our salvation. It affirms that God will always finish the work he has started in our lives. Paul is confident of this when he says, "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6). Our Lord has promised this blessed security to his sheep—all those for whom he laid down his life (John 10:11), who listened to his voice, and to whom he granted eternal life (John 10:26-28). He said, "They shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand." And again, "No one can snatch them out of my Father's hand" (John 10:29-30).

Jesus taught, "He who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Mark

13:13). Understand that our ability to stand firm or persevere to the end is borne out of our heavenly Father's faithfulness to graciously preserve us, his people, to the end. The Bible's greatest passage, its locus classicus, regarding God's preserving grace is Romans 8. Here Paul is convinced that the golden chain of redemption can never be broken, insisting that, "those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified" (Rom. 8:30). From beginning to end, salvation is of the Lord. The chapter concludes with this provocative question, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" Paul's answer is, "Nothing!" He continues: "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:35-39).

Like Peter, we often fail shamefully and fall miserably. But Jesus, our gracious Savior, prays for us too. In his high priestly prayer Jesus said: "I pray also for those who will believe in me through their [the apostles'] message....Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world" (John 17:20-24). This immutable love of the Father for his only begotten Son has been extended to those sons and daughters who are now adopted into his family. The hymnist George Matheson has written, "O love that will not let me go, I rest my weary soul in Thee."⁴ Peter, who knew his own foibles and frailties, could later testify of God's preserving grace enabling him to persevere to the end. Many years later he would write of the safety and security he enjoyed in Christ, by saying, "And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast" (1 Peter 5:10).

⁴ George Matheson, "O Love That Will Not Let Me Go," in Trinity Hymnal (Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1990), #708.

Two Testimonies

When I began this essay on the "doctrines of grace," I noted that there were two basic positions to the Protestant faith: either the Lord alone saves, or people help save themselves to one degree or another. I also noted that how we regard God's grace "affects both what we tell lost people, and how we tell them." To illustrate this, let us consider two testimonies of Christian experience and two ways the gospel is often presented.

Over the years I have heard many people share their testimony of Christian conversion. Wittingly or unwittingly they also share these two competing views, revealing their understanding or misunderstanding of the gospel. One person may testify: "My life was in shambles. I was so miserable; I never thought happiness was possible. One day I woke up and just decided things needed to change, so I resolved to search for life's real meaning. I tried religion. I tried church. None of it worked for me. Then a friend told me how he found happiness in Jesus. I could too. All I needed to do was accept Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior. It was so easy. I knew I had a choice to make. I could accept him or reject him. I decided to take the leap and pray the sinner's prayer. It worked! I'm so glad I found Jesus. Now my life is filled with joy. I know Jesus is real because he lives in my heart."

Another person expresses it this way: "I was living in sin. Its grip was so strong, I was blind my own misery. However, my soul began to awaken to my need for salvation through a Christian friend who spoke often of Jesus' love in his death and resurrection. At first I was annoyed, but over time the Lord softened my heart. The Spirit of God impressed upon me how deep my sin and rebellion really was. The Bible brought powerful conviction showing me that I could not change my ways. Through his Word the Lord revealed to me that I was in fact lost and without hope apart from his saving grace. I could never be righteous enough to earn God's favor. One Sunday I went to church with my friend, and the preacher spoke of Christ's redeeming love in his death for sinners just like me. I learned that

his righteousness was all I needed. The power of God's Word turned my heart to Christ. It was as though the sun rose upon my soul that day. Trusting him as my Savior now seems as natural as breathing. I am so glad Jesus found me. Now I live in light of his wonderful promise never to leave or forsake me."

I have heard many testimonies like these over the years. They are born out of two contradictory views of the gospel. One places confidence in what a sinner does to accept Jesus; the other places confidence in what Jesus does to save sinners. One affirms human ability to make the right decision; the other affirms the power of God's Word and Spirit to conquer the human heart. One relies on the testimonies of others; the other relies on the testimony of revealed truth. One tells stories of spiritual experiences; the other tells the story of Jesus. One sounds boastful; the other is humble. One is an aberration of the gospel; the other is the gospel.

These testimonies relate more than two different experiences. They reveal two different views of the gospel message and how it was presented. One view erringly presents the gospel this way: "Jesus is a gentleman who never imposes himself on anyone. You must choose. You must decide. Remember the picture of Jesus in the beautiful garden knocking on the door? You may have noticed that there is no doorknob because Jesus won't barge in. He wants to be invited. Jesus loves you so much that he will not force himself on you. You must let him in! You must open the door!"

The other view correctly presents the gospel like this: "The love of God is seen in a Savior doing for you what you could not do for yourself. Jesus obeyed the law perfectly in your behalf. He is your righteousness. He bore the wrath and curse of God in your place. Thus he is your sin-bearer. Indeed, 'Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.' He graciously offers life in his name through the gospel to all who receive his gift. This invitation is published for all who have ears to hear. Perhaps he is even speaking to your heart today. Oh, won't you cast yourself upon his mercy, for he will freely pardon."

The doctrines of grace are, admittedly, a profound mystery to mortals. However, they are clearly taught in Scripture. To alter them is to weaken our message or to lose it altogether. And an altered gospel is no gospel at all (Gal. 1:6-9). To preserve these doctrines is to assure that the gospel will continue to go forth with power. We then have greater assurance that those coming to faith in Christ under its influence are really coming to faith in Christ and not merely responding to a technique or an emotional moment. The doctrines of grace place the emphasis on the all-sufficient work of Christ. They stress what Christ does to save, not what we do to save ourselves. All glory goes to God.

Hopeful, a character in John Bunyan's devotional classic, *Pilgrim's Progress*, shared with his traveling companion, Christian, the prayer he prayed when he came to saving faith. I trust this prayer expresses the desire of your heart as well.

God be merciful to me a sinner, and make me to know and believe in Jesus Christ; for I see that if his righteousness had not been, or I have not faith in that righteousness, I am utterly cast away. Lord, I have heard that thou art a merciful God, and hast ordained that thy Son Jesus Christ should be the Savior of the world; and moreover, that thou art willing to bestow him upon such a poor sinner as I am, (and I am a sinner indeed) Lord; take therefore this opportunity, and magnifie (sic) thy grace in the Salvation of my soul, through thy Son Jesus Christ. Amen.⁵

⁵ John Bunyan, *Pilgrims Progress* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 162-163.