



THE CHRISTIAN

and

SOVEREIGN GRACE

BARRY E. HORNER

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A. INTRODUCTION.

There is a serious problem that pervades all of planet earth. To begin with it concerns the Creator and the rebellion He faces from all of His creation. Man, in choosing to turn from the reign and kindness of His Maker, has contracted a corrupting disorder that has led to the defilement of his soul (Gen. 3:1-7; Rom. 5:12). So David describes the tragic symptoms of this problem: “The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against His Anointed [Messiah], saying ‘Let us tear their [binding] fetters apart and cast away their [restraining] cords from us’” (Ps. 2:2). Here the human race is described as being absorbed with a spirit of rebellion. Now if the Almighty, as the ruler of the universe, were to respond to this uprising according to human nature, as it commonly expresses itself in such circumstances, we might expect a savage response, as if God were quickly to grind humanity into the ground under His heel. But such is presently not the case since we evidently still exist as a human race. So God continues to exhort us: “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. “Come now, and let us reason together,” says the LORD, “Though your sins are as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool” (Isa. 1:16-18). The reason for this divine forbearance is that, “The LORD is gracious and merciful; slow to anger and great in lovingkindness. The LORD is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works” (Ps. 145:8-9).

However, this rebellion of man will not be endured by God forever (Gen. 6:3). There is a day of reckoning ahead or else God is not God. His holy character and absolute reign demand both vindication of His perfect righteousness and His triumph over the proud defiance of man. Such is the certain destiny of our decrepit universe, and the guarantee of this divine settlement at the end of the age especially concerns the sovereignty of God. He is not only omnipotent, having all power, but also He has total authority over mankind, and, as in the past, His exercise of this dominion will result in the just defeat and utter humiliation of the defiant human race. The attempted coup by the nations is simply the greatest imaginable folly. However, the righteous judgment of God in these circumstances presents a surprising revelation. Whereas man, as we have suggested, acts in a revengeful manner when opposed, even as He opposes God, yet God responds with great grace in the face of the most determined resistance. So while confronted with resolute hostility, yet He mercifully invites man to: “Worship the LORD with reverence and rejoice with trembling. Do homage to the Son, that He not become angry, and you perish in the way. For His wrath may soon be kindled. How blessed are all who take refuge in Him” (Ps. 2:11-12).

Nevertheless, if man is indeed rendered impotent in his soul because of sin, as if leprous or dead, and the Bible certainly declares this to be so (Isa. 6:5; Eph. 2:1-3), then how is it possible for any person to be reconciled to God? Or as Job puts it, how is it possible for anyone who is unclean to become clean (Job 14:4; 25:4)? Self-cleansing is out of the question, as history amply demonstrates. Hence the condition of man being hopeless, that is incapable of escape from the human pig-pen or the rails that inevitably lead to perdition, then how is it possible for the grace of God to save in such dire circumstances? After all, man being so besotted with sin, he does not even seem interested in deliverance. The answer is in grace that is sovereign whereby the Son of

God has determined to enter the very pig-pen of this earth and actually rescue the lost, that is detour them from those rails that lead to the infernal regions of judgment. So, “the LORD God will come with might, with His arm ruling for Him. Behold, His reward is with Him and His recompense before Him. Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, in His arm He will gather the lambs and carry them in His bosom” (Isa. 40:10-11). In other words, the grace of God is more than an offer or proposition, if man condescends to be interested; rather it is His determined intervention for the purpose of actually “seeking and saving that which is lost” (Luke 19:10). So Paul declared of his Damascus road experience that, “God called me through His grace and was pleased to reveal His Son in me” (Gal. 15-16). This was sovereign grace, capable of reigning over the dominion of sin that had the “foremost of sinners” in its grips (Rom. 5:21; I Tim. 1:13-15).

B. THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD.

Now we consider the attribute of God’s sovereignty in more detail. Certainly God is sovereign in creation (Gen. 1:1; Isa. 44:24; Rom. 4:17) and providence (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3), though particularly as it relates to the redemption of the individual sinner (Rom. 1:16; Eph. 1:4-6). To begin with the universe we inhabit is God’s universe, and His alone. He is the sole, true, living God beside whom there is none else (Deut. 4:35, 39; Isa. 45:5-6, 14, 18, 22; 46:9). For this reason, “The Lord has established His throne in the heavens, and His sovereignty rules over all” (Ps. 103:19). The whole creation is under His dominion, not only the kingdom of Satan (Job 2:6-12), but also a world wracked with sin (Acts 2:23-24; 4:27-28). Amidst the mystery and reality of evil, especially as we sense it at a personal level, yet the good news is the sovereignty of God being ultimately triumphant over it. Similarly at an individual level, notwithstanding the captivity to sin that man experiences, yet the sovereignty of God rises above the worst that Satan proposes. Of course God is also sovereign over heaven where He dwells with the holy angels and His children. This being so, it should be appreciated that it is His prerogative alone to populate this same heaven as He determines. The entry of man into heaven is solely at the gracious discretion of God. This being the singular basis of entrance according to His determination, it should have great bearing upon the attitude of proud man insofar as His hope of citizenship in heaven is concerned. For the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, when rightly encountered, humbles man and brings him into submission. Such was the case with defiant Jonah who, upon being cast into the ocean and incarcerated in the belly of a great fish, then declared that, “I called out of my distress to the LORD, and He answered me. I cried for help from the depth of Sheol; you heard my voice. . . . Salvation is from the LORD” (Jonah 2:1-2, 9).

The result of such a perspective is that it produces a God-centered world view. The Christian who comprehends God in the glory of His sovereignty is directed by this vision in every step of his life. For instance, in Galatians 4:9 this God-centeredness is evident in Paul who corrects himself as he writes about the conversion of the Christians in Galatia: “But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God.” In other words, as we will later consider in detail, the gospel is about being known by God rather than our knowing God; it is ultimately about God’s sovereign revelation, not human discovery. But further, whether we consider individual or family life, or indeed participation in local and federal government, again our belief in the overriding dominion of God, especially in all of the sovereignty of His grace, governs every breath of every moment we presently live. It is for this reason that Paul concludes, “by the grace of God I am what I am” (I Cor. 15:10). Therefore it is this sovereign reign of grace that so dominates his whole life since, “if God is for us, who is against us?” (Rom. 8:31). Of course on the other hand, for a man of this world the sovereignty of God is not a truth that

he likes to acknowledge. Rather it offends him and the reason for this is penned by the popular humanist cry of William Henley:

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate;
I am the captain of my soul.

In other words since the Fall, above all man has strenuously wanted to maintain his autonomy, whether he believes in God or not. Put more simply, this means that he claims to be a law unto himself. Supposedly, His moral choices, any response he might make toward God, and of course the ultimate destiny of his soul, are all, whether wise or unwise, according to his unassisted choice and determination. Man might consider negotiation with God, as if willing to come alongside of the Almighty and make a deal, but he will definitely not tolerate the thought of God unconditionally reigning over him without necessary consultation. Of course in the face of such arrogance, God is not pleased, and He insists on maintaining His own terms of reconciliation since “the potter does have a right over the clay” (Rom. 9:21). But further, he is adamant that the pompous will of man must first be crushed if rapprochement and usefulness is possible. And such has been His dealing with the likes of Jacob (Gen. 32:24-32), Moses (Exod. 2:15-3:12), Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4:4-37), Jonah (Jonah 1:1-2:9), Peter (Luke 22:31-32), and Paul (Acts 9:1-19) who eventually came to appreciate that God is really and unconditionally righteous in His sovereign reign over man, especially in the realm of salvation. Thus the real problem that the sovereignty of God confronts in relation to man is not so much one of understanding as submission. Thus, of Christ, Israel declared, indeed along with the Gentiles, “We do not want this man [Jesus] to reign over us” (Luke 19:14). So in a sermon entitled, *God’s Sovereignty in the Salvation of Men*, Jonathan Edwards declares:

Let us, therefore, labor to *submit* [emphasis added] to the sovereignty of God. God insists, that his sovereignty be acknowledged by us, and that even in this great matter, a matter which so nearly and infinitely concerns us, as our own eternal salvation. This is the stumbling-block on which thousands fall and perish; and if we go on contending with God about his sovereignty, it will be our eternal ruin. It is absolutely necessary that we should *submit* [emphasis added] to God, as our absolute sovereign, and the sovereign over our souls; as one who may have mercy on whom he will have mercy, and harden whom he will [Rom. 9:18].¹

For this reason, in the historic consideration of the biblical gospel of the saving grace of God, we believe that the Calvinistic view of the sovereignty of God is basically true, though chiefly because this truth is most clearly taught in the Word of God. In other words, we are first of all exegetical Calvinists (Ps. 33:8-11; Isa. 14:24-27; 43:11-13; 44:24-25; 46:9-11; Dan. 4:34-35; Luke 10:22; John 6:37, 44, 65; Acts 2:22-23, 47; 4:27-28; 13:48; Rom. 8:28-30; 9:6-25; 11:33-36; I Cor. 1:26-31; Eph. 1:3-12; II Thess. 2:13-14; II Tim. 1:9-10; 2:24-25; I Pet. 1:1-2). This is most clearly and simply explained by J. I. Packer according to his fundamental declaration of the gospel, namely that “God saves sinners.”

For of Calvinism there is really only *one* point to be made in the field of soteriology: the point that *God saves sinners*. God - the Triune Jehovah, Father, Son and Spirit; three Persons working together in sovereign wisdom, power and love to achieve the salvation of a chosen people, the Father electing, the Son fulfilling the Father's will by redeeming, the Spirit executing the purpose of Father and Son by renewing. *Saves* - does everything, first to last, that is involved in bringing man from death in sin to life in glory: plans, achieves and communicates redemption, calls and keeps, justifies, sanctifies, glorifies. *Sinners* - men as God finds them, guilty, vile, helpless, powerless, blind,

¹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, II, p. 854.

unable to lift a finger to do God's will or better their spiritual lot. *God saves sinners* - and the force of this confession may not be weakened by disrupting the unity of the work of the Trinity, or by dividing the achievement of salvation between God and man and making the decisive part man's own, or by soft-pedaling the sinner's inability as to allow him to share the praise of his salvation with his Savior. This is the one point of Calvinistic soteriology which the 'five points' are concerned to establish and Arminianism in all its forms to deny: namely, that sinners do not save themselves in any sense at all, but that salvation, first and last, whole and entire, past, present and future, is of the Lord, to whom be glory for ever; amen!²

In other words, we cannot yield to the cliché that in becoming a Christian, as some have said, “a man must do his part, and thus exercise his free will” in a bilateral sense, for Paul writes that “by His [God’s] doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, ‘Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord’” (I Cor. 1:30-31). It is God’s choice rather than ours that determines the composition of His family and our destiny. The issue of supposed “free will,” based upon human autonomy overlooks the fundamental truth that man is free only within the realm of his sinful nature. That is, he is free with regard to the arena of his choosing, but he is not free to choose His choices. As a sinner, man has the freedom of his corrupt nature, but he is not free to choose beyond the affections of His nature. You may offer a hungry bear the choice of cheese cake, a ceasar salad, and a pot of honey; he remains free to choose, yet his nature will determine his choice of honey. So sinful man sniffs after sin as a lion prowls after raw meat, as “an ox goes to the slaughter” (Prov. 7:22). This being so, then a person may respond with professed despair: “From what you say, without free will, then there is no hope for man whatsoever, that is except for the pure grace of God!”³ And it is this final conclusion with which we would thoroughly agree with because, since it is impossible for “the Ethiopian to change his skin [and] the leopard to change his spots” (Jer. 13:23), so it is impossible for man to initiate the change of his sinful nature. In a similar vein John has written that we “were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13). James also tells us that: “In the exercise of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth” (Jas. 1:18).

C. THE VAUNTED SOVEREIGNTY OF MAN.

It is true that man was originally made in the image of God, though it is now more a mutilated image that might be likened to a disfigured, beaten up Cadillac (Acts 17:29). There are some remaining marks of nobility, yet they are all warped and twisted, now being more representative of shame and disgrace. Hence, as a result of man becoming infected with a moral, mortal disease, his essential problem concerns his nature; he is not, as is commonly attested, ethically neutral; rather he has an immoral bias due to corruption in his soul (Jer. 17:9). For this reason his affections tilt towards godlessness; he leans in the direction of unrighteousness rather than righteousness. As John writes: “Men loved [agapaō] the darkness rather than the light, for their deeds were evil” (John 3:18). This is not to deny man a realm of freedom here, that is the freedom of his nature, except that this is really, as previously stated, the liberty of the pig-pen without any innate ability by which a man might be considered capable of extricating himself. Man has the freedom of the rails that nevertheless invariably lead to perdition. Of course this racial infection here, being so debilitating, is inclusive of the learned and unlearned, the rich and

² J. I. Packer, *Introduction to John Owen’s The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. Internet sourced.

³ In this regard, refer to Martin Luther’s classic writing *On The Bondage Of The Will*, in which he vigorously maintains that the will of the natural man is bound or captive to sin, in which case, apart from the particular grace of God that emancipates the individual will, it is impossible for any man to be saved.

poor, male and female. So it is the conclusion of Scripture, in a most universal sense, that “both Jews and Greeks are all under sin” (Rom. 3:9). Every hour the media produce abundant evidence that man is not morally good; his pathway is devolving rather than evolving. The social parable of William Golding, *The Lord of the Flies*, well illustrates what the Bible has always taught and parents know all too well, that their darling children are not essentially innocent.⁴ Merely to neglect a child is to allow bad behavior to flourish easily while training in righteousness is a most difficult task. Hence the whole human race is captive under the dominion or servitude of a sinful inclination; it is dominated by an immoral infection that manifests symptoms of considerable variety, that could be designated as either brash or sophisticated, raw or cultured. Notwithstanding the particular style of sinning, the malady has remained essentially the same over centuries of human history. Thus man as a whole, without exception, is in bondage to sin (John 8:34), and unless he is prepared to confess the profundity of his problem, he is neither ready to learn of the only solution, nor of course able to liberate himself from his predicament.

In the whole of the Bible, there is probably no passage that so thoroughly makes the foregoing truth to be emphatically clear as Romans 3:9-20. Paul is not satisfied in simply declaring that “both Jews and Greeks are all under sin,” v. 9. Rather he employs a principle that Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has well stated. We must not simply “tell a man that he is a sinner; rather we must also prove it to him.” So the Apostle attempts to convince man of his profound sinfulness by means of very painful analysis. Paul’s purpose is that at the conclusion of this dissection of the soul, while man is normally so vocal in self-justification, yet his intention is that “every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God,” v. 19.

1. The extremity of the problem, Romans 3:10-12.

At this juncture it becomes abundantly clear that Romans was written, under the superintendency of the Spirit of God, with careful composition and craftsmanship, and certainly not in a racy fashion. So in vs. 10-18 we have a Scriptural montage that draws upon a number of Old Testament passages, mainly from *Psalms* and also *Isaiah*, that is intended to uphold two perspectives with regard to the universality of sin. To begin with, in vs. 10-12 there is an absolute emphasis upon totality, and thus extremity to the four corners of the earth, both negatively and positively. Absolutely, there is not a single human being who is righteous in the sight of God, who understands and seeks after God, and who does good of which God approves. Without exception, all have turned from God.

2. The intensity of the problem, Romans 3:13-18.

However the problem remains that man, in accepting this comprehensive indictment, is nevertheless reluctant to confess his own personal guilt in any profound sense. Under the threat of consignment to hell, he glibly responds that at least he will have a lot of company there! To this Paul responds with the exposure of a man’s individual corruption, namely with regard to his “throat” and “tongue” and lips,” v. 13, his “mouth,” v. 14, his “feet,” v. 15, and his “eyes,” v. 18. Thus he demolishes the popular claim that while man is imperfect, yet his essential goodness remains dominant. The reality is that humankind is

⁴ The basic story is about a group of school children who are marooned on a deserted island and must fend for themselves. Being isolated from the influence of modern society does not result in the more easy development of virtue, as the modern school of behavioral psychology might expect. Quite to the contrary, on being left to themselves, in the realm of moral development these young people degenerate rather than advance; their moral decline is from relative civility to savagery.

not just tainted, but thoroughly polluted; the disease of sin permeates all of a man's being, indeed his very personality, his mental processes, his willing, and his choosing!

3. The finality of the problem, Romans 3:19-20.

So the design of the law (Jer. 11:8; Rom. 5:20; Gal. 3:19), its diagnostic purpose as represented by *Psalms* and *Isaiah*, has been accomplished in the shutting down of human boasting. Here the Scriptural revelation of the righteousness of God has become a merciless and relentless accuser that bludgeons the self-righteous to the ground. To attempt to rise up in proud protest is only to be rightly crushed.

Here is a courtroom scene in which the accused is so confronted with the evidence of his crime, its enormity, ugliness and willfulness, that he knows he is rightly to be condemned. Any protestations are utter foolishness. The head drops, the blush is of shame, the bubble of pride has been shattered (Dan. 9:7). This in fact has been Paul's purpose from Romans 1:18 onward. Man is naturally a prolific talker and boaster. But when the presupposition of the gospel, the bad news, is rightly preached as it ought to be, it so confronts man that his frequently unhinged mouth becomes closed, rendered speechless, on account of incontestable guilt, like Job (Job 40:3-5; 42:1-6).

The evidence is so compelling concerning man's guilt that he is required to answer. But what can he say? He is like a man whose crime is recorded on video tape, and at his trial the recording is played before himself and the judge. So in Luke 12:2-3 we are told, "But there is nothing covered up that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known. Accordingly, whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in the inner rooms shall be proclaimed upon the housetops." Of course the startling truth is that God will have all men to come to this state of condemnation and speechlessness before His bar.

D. THE SOVEREIGN GRACE OF GOD.

While "mercy" is God's relieving love, "longsuffering" is His patient love, and "benevolence" is the welfare of His love, the "grace" of God is distinctively appealing because it is His love that extends to sinners in their proven guilt. It is both His unmerited and demerited favor. Man does not only lack the merit that God acknowledges, but also he presents an abundance of demerit that qualifies him for the judgment of God.

1. The problem of the reign of sin, Romans 5:21a.

"So that, as sin reigned [basileuō] in death." Here the power of sin is portrayed with such despotic force that it takes on personal meaning, as if it were a conquering monarch who, having taken captive a whole nation, employs this slave labor in a wide variety of devilish vocations and pays "the wages of death" (Rom. 6:23). In sin having "reigned," it has held sway over the whole human race, and to such a degree that none have been able, of themselves, to escape such servitude. Man is wholly directed by the inherited nature of Adam (John 8:34). However, concerning the man in the street today, while he acknowledges sin in general as a universal problem in terms of imperfection, he declines to admit his helpless captivity on account of his boasting in autonomy and self-determination.

As a consequence, sin reigned “in death,” that is sin reigned in terms of the inevitable consequence of death. As a sinner, man will debate over the precise nature of sin; but beyond debate in human experience is the inevitability of death as an imposed divine sentence. Although man will speak of death in naturalistic terms, nevertheless his inner fear and loathing of death causes him at the same time to inwardly “consider his ways” (Hag. 1:5, 7), whatever empty bravado he may outwardly express. Thus, in being reminded of our inescapable confrontation with the “wages” of sin, and hence the power of sin, we have a prelude to the greater power of grace. Suddenly grace becomes not simply a theological concept, an abstraction, a mere aid to virtue, but a mighty conquering force.

2. The solution of the reign of grace, Romans 5:21b.

“Even so grace would reign [basileuō] through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” The employment of personification continues, except that now it is with regard to grace as a rival conquering Monarch whose greater power presents the good news and prospect of real emancipation to citizens of the formerly identified captive nation. However, by way of clarification, this reigning grace must be distinguished from other differing uses of the term.⁵ First, according to Unitarianism, there is assisting grace where God in general helps with grace those who help themselves. Second, according to licentiousness, there is immoral grace where God helps blatant scoundrels since He overlooks their sin. Third, according to Roman Catholicism, there is infused grace where the Church mediates grace via the sacraments to the baptized. Fourth, according to Arminianism, there is universal grace where sufficient grace is given to all of mankind so that they might believe, if they will. None of these come close to the glory and majesty of reigning grace.

Now in grace “reigning,” it sovereignly conquers the “reign of death,” including its root, and that individually as well as corporately. Then what precisely does Paul mean here by “grace”? Yes, “unmerited/demerited favor” is surely included yet this is not sufficiently comprehensive as the following context suggests. Surely it must be the totality of the gospel that takes us back to God’s eternal decree and gathers together the gracious saving of God’s elect, as hopeless sinners, by means of the economic working of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is not merely grace on offer, but grace effectively saving and keeping. So John Newton has written:

Grace reigns to pardon crimson sins’
 To melt the hardest hearts;
 And from the work it once begins
 It never once departs.
 ‘Twas grace that called our souls at first;
 By grace thus far we’re come;
 And grace will help us through the worst,
 And lead us safely home.

Thus grace reigns “through righteousness,” that is by means of the vindication of His righteousness (Rom. 3:25-26), and principally here “the gift of righteousness,” v. 17. Whereas sin corrupts through disobedience, the dominion of grace, its effectual working, has absolute holy integrity, according to a “just and justifying God” (Rom. 3:25-26; cf.

⁵ The stimulus with regard to these negative categories comes from Martyn Lloyd-Jones’ own classification at this point. *Romans, An Exposition Of Chapter 5*, p. 317.

1:16-17). But further, it is not only the righteous character of God that is upheld and evident in this gospel of sovereign grace; rather this righteous God gratuitously imputes and imparts His righteousness to unrighteous sinners.

Thus grace reigns “to eternal life,” previously described in vs. 17-18, it having vanquished death. Of course this life is not simply linear and temporal, but rather the indwelling, saving life and “gift of God . . . in Jesus Christ our Lord” (6:23; cf. 2:7; I Tim. 6:12, 19; Tit. 1:1-2; 3:7). So “the last Adam became a life-giving spirit” (I Cor. 15:45; cf. I John 1:1-3; 5:11-12, 20). Here we arrive at the living God’s ultimate purpose, grace through righteousness being the means, namely bringing the dead to life so that they might “glorify Him and enjoy Him forever.”

Thus grace reigns “through Jesus Christ our Lord,” and all of its power, righteousness, and life, are mediated through him. So Robert Haldane comments:

Jesus Christ is that eternal life which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us; and the Father hath given Him power over all flesh, to give eternal life to as many as He hath given Him. ‘My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow me, and I give unto them eternal life.’ The termination, then, of the reign of death over those whom He [Christ] represents, and the establishment of the reign of grace through the everlasting righteousness which He has brought in, are all by Jesus Christ. He hath abolished death. By Him came grace and truth; He brought life and immortality to light. He ‘is the true God, and eternal life.’ And ‘to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that He might be the Lord both of the dead and the living.’⁶

By way of application, Lloyd-Jones concludes:

Thank God for the power of the reign of grace. This is the ground of assurance. It is because of this that we can be certain He will never let us go. Our frail grasp often lets go of Him, but He will never let us go. Hudson Taylor used to translate the statement in Mark 11:22 which in most Bibles reads, ‘Have faith in God’. He said it should be, ‘Hold on to the faithfulness of God.’ . . . Oh, the blessed, the powerful reign of grace! Do you feel it around and about you? Are you aware of its clutches and of its hold? Do you know of your security? It is all in the power of grace. Thank God for it!⁷

Doubtless it is true that Paul intends to stimulate assurance by means of his presentation of the sin and death vanquishing gospel of sovereign grace. However, it would be equally true that the Apostle intends that such understanding stimulate the fervent worship of God as appears to be the case in 11:33-36. Genuine assurance will inevitably respond in this manner, and of course this is what Lloyd-Jones means when he concludes, “Thank God for it!”

E. THE SOVEREIGN GRACE OF GOD ACCORDING TO REVELATION.

We now consider the foregoing from a different perspective that is intended simply to enhance the comprehension of the significance of sovereign grace. When Zophar raised the following enquiries with his friend Job, “Can you discover the depths of God? Can you discover the limits of the Almighty?”, these profound questions seem to have anticipated a negative reply. That is, the assertion that man is not able of himself to discover God. Certainly his next two questions, by way of response, give this impression: “They [the depths of God] are high as the heavens,

⁶ Haldane, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 238.

⁷ Lloyd-Jones, *Romans, An Exposition Of Chapter 5*, pp. 354-5.

what can you do? Deeper than Sheol, what can you know?” (Job 11:7-8). Hence being in agreement with Zophar at this point, we believe that ultimately the knowledge of God by man is according to His sovereign revelation and good pleasure, apart from which man is incapable of discovering and comprehending God. Of course at the same time we also attribute the failure of man’s quest for God to be a result of his spiritual blindness, that is his inability to rightly perceive that which confronts him in terms of both general and special revelation. The reason for this is the polluted lens of his soul that always transmits distorted images. He is like the Emmaus disciples who, on meeting the Lord Jesus, “were prevented from recognizing Him” (Luke 24:15). Though when indeed God does reveal Himself, notwithstanding the clarity of this revelation, He must also enable the spiritually blind to see, even as we are further told of the Emmaus disciples that, later on that Easter Sunday evening, “their eyes were opened and they recognized Him” (Luke 24:31).

Calvin therefore introduces his *Institutes Of The Christian Religion* with the thought that the clarity of God’s self-revelation strips man of every excuse. On the one hand the wisdom of God is displayed for all to see; on the other hand man turns ungratefully against God. There is confusion between the creature and the Creator in the light of His sovereign sway over the life of men. The evidence of God in creation does not profit us. The manifestation of God is choked by human superstition and the error of the philosophers. Consequently, man is without excuse.⁸ As a result then the point is that the true knowledge of God by man can only come about through pure grace. Now we trace this revelation of God in more detail so as to accentuate an appreciation of His sovereign grace in this realm that ultimately leads to His praise and exaltation.

1. The revelation of God, not the discovery of man.

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). Here, incontestably, revelation starts with God according to His sole determination. When Adam and eve first experienced self-consciousness, it was according to sovereign revelation. Then following the Fall, this principle plays out in continuity through the whole of Bible history. Only the constraints of brevity now compel selectivity. Abraham testified that “the Lord . . . took me from my Father’s house and from the land of my birth, and . . . spoke to me . . . and swore to me” (Gen. 24:7; cf. 12:1; 15:7; Josh. 24:3). Concerning Isaac, “the Lord appeared to him” (Gen. 26:1-5, 23-25). So with Jacob, the Lord was revealed to him in a dream at Bethel (Gen. 28:10-17), after which at Peniel, all alone, “a man wrestled with him until daybreak” (Gen. 32:24), who proved to be a theophany or manifestation of God. Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro, the priest of Midian, when at Mt. Sinai “the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush” (Exod. 3:1-2). David was sought out by God from tending sheep (I Sam. 16:1-23). Amos was a shepherd until the Lord revealed Himself to him in visions (Amos 1:1). So with the disciples, such as Peter and Andrew, it was the Lord Jesus who took the initiative in approaching these two active fishermen and then exhorted them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19). Saul, who became Paul, intent on “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,” was thrown to the ground by a brilliant revelation of Christ while traveling to Damascus,. Then this same Lord Jesus addressed him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” (Acts 9:1-4). Here, as through the ages, men are interrupted by God; they do not find God. If a man comes across the truth of God, it is simply according to His encounter with that revelation which God first placed in our way. So when Peter made a

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes Of The Christian Religion*, I, pp. 51-69.

correct declaration of his faith in response to the Lord Jesus' solicitation: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus immediately clarified this situation, lest Peter should think he was worthy of congratulation, by declaring: "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 16:15-17).

2. The revelation of the human condition, not the discovery of human nobility.

Adam having sinned, God comes to him in the garden enquiring, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9). David having sinned, and appearing to be somewhat untroubled concerning his adultery before God, it is only the intervention of God's holy condemnation through Nathan the prophet, yet with reconciliation in mind, that suddenly awakens his soul to guilt with the withering accusation, "You are the [guilty] man!" (II Sam. 12:7). Elsewhere in the history of Israel, it is the prophet of God who repeatedly is the medium by which Israel is confronted with the revelation of the righteousness of God (Isa. 1:1-17; Jer. 2:1-3:10; Ezek. 6:1-8:18; Hos. 4:1-5:15; Joel 1:1-2:17; Mic. 1:1-7; Zeph. 1:1-18; Mal. 1:1-2:17). On the one hand, while the people of God are continually turning from His holy demands, on the other hand He is continually making not only just protestations about their rebellion, but also He takes the initiative by means of promising a gracious, effectual remedy for this leprous condition.

3. The revelation of the Son of God, not the discovery of human advancement.

Now we come to the supreme revelation whereby, "after He [God] spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son" (Heb. 1:1-2). In all of these instances, there is never an indication that man seeks after God in His heaven because of the great predicament upon earth. No, it is God's sovereign, gracious intervention whereby He intends, not so much to break through for the purpose of fierce judgment as to redeem, to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10). Furthermore, this revelation is solely of sovereign grace. So Paul tells us, "when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons" (Gal. 4:4-5). Without consultation with Israel and the nations of the world, God the Father commissioned His Son to condescend in human flesh to visit planet earth. The divine purpose here was not merely with hopeful or potential intent in mind, but rather with the firm objective of effectively saving a people to the glory of God. In the process, God overruled man's feverish, devilish intent for evil (Gen. 50:20). So in the ministry of Jesus Christ there is repeated emphasis upon Him being sent by His Father (5:23-24, 30, 36-37; 6:38-39, 44, 57; 7:16, 18, 28, 33; 8:16, 18, 26, 29; 9:4; 10:36; 11:42; 12:44-45, 49; 13:20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25; 20:21) to accomplish the redemptive will of the Father (John 4:34; 8:29), after which He is destined to return to the bosom of the Father (John 1:18; 13:1, 33; 14:2, 12, 28; 16:5, 7, 10, 17, 28; 17:11, 13). Yet again this visitation was not according to human invitation (John 1:10:11), but wholly divine initiative (Rom. 8:3), apart from which man has no ultimate hope. The human race, being in such a hopeless predicament, has no part in the accomplishment of this plan; it is certainly to be accomplished solely on the grounds of pure sovereign grace.

4. The revelation of the gospel of God, not the discovery of human emancipation.

At the nerve of the gospel is the death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and session of Jesus Christ, which atoning sacrifice was ultimately executed according to divine design, not human devising (John 10:17-18; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28). To be sure, there was responsible human participation in the slaying of the Son of God; nevertheless the great evil that mankind perpetrated, to his own shame, was really response to God's intervention in human affairs. It is abundantly clear from the Word of God that Jesus Christ was born to die. So although His earthly public sojourn encompassed over three years, from the very beginning He anticipated the climax of His death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and session back with His Father. The commencement of His ministry was formally established at His baptism by water and the Spirit, after which John the Baptist announced of his cousin: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). This was an astonishing revelation of Jesus' inevitable, climactic passion. Then moving north to Cana of Galilee, Jesus' first miracle of turning water into wine elicited the mild reproach of His concerned, solicitous mother: "Woman, what does that [lack of wine] have to do with us? My hour has not yet come" (John 2:4). Here, in the midst of a social embarrassment, the Nazarene is mainly concerned with the future hour of His atonement; this prospect was ever His primary concern. So, as John further points out, Jesus continued to focus upon that future hour (7:30; 8:20), which He eventually announces has dawned (12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1). All of which indicates the consecration of Jesus to that which He was destined to accomplish. His prospective encounter with death, even its very timing (Luke 9:51; John 13:27), was something with which even Peter could not be allowed to interfere with (Matt. 16:21-23; John 18:10-11). Why was this so? Because all things divinely ordained pertaining to the gospel and prophesied in Scripture must be accomplished (Luke 12:50; 18:31; 22:37; John 19:28). This being established, it indicates that the gospel of Christ was never instituted as a possibility, but rather as a divine certainty whereby a saving of sinners was sure to be accomplished. In which case the sovereignty of God is inextricably woven with the intent of the gospel. Hence, the gospel which the Lord Jesus embodied and executed is one of sovereign grace, about which the believer can joyfully sing.

Sovereign grace o'er sin abounding,
 Ransomed souls, the tidings swell;
 'Tis a deep that knows no sounding;
 Who its breadth or length can tell?
 On its glories
 Let my soul for ever dwell.

What from Christ that soul shall sever,
 Bound by everlasting bands?
 Once in Him, in Him for ever,
 Thus the eternal cov'nant stands:
 None shall pluck thee
 From the Strength of Israel's hands.

Heirs of God, joint-heirs with Jesus,
 Long ere time its race begun;
 To His Name eternal praises;
 O what wonders He hath done!
 One with Jesus,
 By eternal union one.

On such love, my soul, still ponder,
 Love so great, so rich and free;
 Say, while lost in holy wonder,
 ‘Why, O Lord, such love to me?’
 Hallelujah!
 Grace shall reign eternally

5. The revelation of the kingdom of Christ, not the discovery of human dominion.

The consummation of the aforementioned plan, designed by the Father, executed by the Son, and applied by the Holy Spirit, involves a multitude of God’s promises that are certain to be fulfilled (Rom. 8:19-23). Here the sovereignty of grace will be supremely evident. From an individual perspective, we are assured that “He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6). However with a more universal view in mind, “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Hab. 2:14). Then concerning the people of God from the aspect of present trials and tribulation, there will be instituted “a new heaven and a new earth“ in which “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4). Then, “when all things are subjected to Him [God], then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all” (I Cor. 15:28). Then will it be fitting to sing supremely as Charles Wesley writes:

O for a thousand tongues to sing
 My great Redeemer’s praise,
 The glories of My God and King,
 The triumphs of His grace.

F. THE SOVEREIGN GRACE OF GOD PARTICULARLY APPLIED.

By the sovereignty of grace we mean that the saving power of God is effectively directed toward individual sinners in such a manner that the most rigid opposition to the Lord Jesus Christ is overcome. In other words, this grace is not merely on offer to man subject to his autonomous decision and reception. Rather it so confronts a rebel that his hard heart is melted; his bitter opposition becomes the most eager embrace of the Son of God; his utter detestation of all things Christian gives place to fervent love for the Savior and all things associated with Him. So C. H. Spurgeon elaborates upon this wondrous theme.

Again, the grace of God is *sovereign*. By that word we mean that God has the absolute right to give that grace where he chooses, and to withhold it when he pleases. He is not bound to give it to any man, much less to all men, and if he chooses to give it to one man and not to another, his answer is, “Is thine eye evil because mine eye is good? Can I not do as I will with mine own? I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy” [Matt. 20:15]. Now, I want you to notice the sovereignty of Divine grace as illustrated in the text: “I was found of them that sought me not, I was made manifest to them that asked not after me” [Isa. 65:1]. You would imagine that if God gave his grace to any he would wait until he found them earnestly seeking him. You would imagine that God in the highest heavens would say, “I have mercies, but I will leave men alone, and when they feel their need of these mercies and seek me diligently with their whole heart, day and night, with tears, and vows, and supplications, then will I bless them, but not before.” But beloved, God saith no such thing. It is true he doth bless them that cry unto him but he blesses them before they cry, for their cries are

not their own cries, but cries he has put into their lips; their desires are not of their own growth, but desires which he has cast like good seed into the soil of their hearts. God saves the men that do not seek him. Oh, wonder of wonders! It is mercy indeed when God saves a seeker, but how much greater mercy when he seeks the lost himself! Mark, the parable of Jesus Christ concerning the lost sheep; it does not run thus: "A certain man had a hundred sheep, and one of them did go astray. And he tarried at home, and lo, the sheep came back and he received it joyfully and said to his friends, rejoice, for the sheep that I have lost is come back." No; he *went after* the sheep: it never would have come after him; it would have wandered farther and farther away. He went after it. Over hills of difficulty down valleys of despondency he pursued its wandering feet, and at last he laid hold of it, he did not drive it before him, he did not lead it, but he carried it himself all the way, and when he brought it home he did not say, "the sheep is come back," but, "I have *found* the sheep which was lost." Men do not seek God first; God seeks them first; and if any of you are seeking him to-day it is because he has first sought you. If you are desiring him he desired you first, and your good desires and earnest seeking will not be the cause of your salvation, but the effects of previous grace given to you. "Well," says another, "I should have thought that although the Savior might not require an earnest seeking and sighing and groaning, and a continuous searching after him, yet certainly he would have desired and demanded that every man, before he had grace, should ask for it." That, indeed, beloved, seems natural, and God *will* give grace to them that ask for it; but mark, the text says that he was manifested "to them that asked not for him." That is to say, before we ask, God gives us grace. The only reason why any man ever begins to pray, is because God has put previous grace in his heart which leads him to pray. I remember, when I was converted to God, I was an Arminian thoroughly; thought I had begun the good work myself, and I used sometimes to sit down and think, "Well, I sought the Lord four years before I found him," and I think I began to compliment myself upon the fact that I had perseveringly entreated of him in the midst of much discouragement. But one day the thought struck me, "How was it you came to seek God?" and in an instant the answer came from my soul, "Why, because he led me to do it; he must first have shown me my need of him, or else I should never have sought him; he must have shown me his preciousness, or I never should have thought him worth seeking;" and at once I saw the doctrines of grace as clear as possible. God must begin. Nature can never rise above itself. You put water into a reservoir, and it will rise as high as that, but no higher if let alone. Now, it is not in human nature to seek the Lord. Human nature is depraved, and therefore, there must be the extraordinary pressure of the Holy Spirit put upon the heart to lead us first to ask for mercy. But mark, we do not know anything about that, while the Spirit is operating; we find that out afterwards. We ask as much as if we were asking all of ourselves. Our business is to seek the Lord as if there were no Holy Spirit at all. But although we do not know it there must always be a previous motion of the Spirit in our heart, before there will be a motion of our heart towards him.

Let me give you an illustration. You see that man on his horse surrounded by a body of troopers. How proud he is, how he reins up his horse with conscious dignity. Sir, what have you got there? What are those dispatches you treasure up with so much care? "Oh, sir, I have that in my hand that will vex the church of God in Damascus. I have dragged the fellows into the synagogue, both men and women; I have scourged them, and compelled them to blaspheme; and I have this commission from the high priest to drag them to Jerusalem that I may put them to death." Saul! Saul! have you no love for Christ? Love to him? No! When they stoned Stephen, I took care of the witnesses' clothes, and I rejoiced to do it. I wish I had had the crucifying of their Master, for I hate them with perfect hatred, and I breathe out threatenings and slaughter against them." What do you say of this man? If he be saved, will you not grant that it must be some Divine sovereignty that converts him? Look at poor Pilate, how much there was that was hopeful in him. He was willing to save the Master, but he feared and trembled. If we had had our choice, we should have said, "Lord, save Pilate, he does not want to kill Christ, he labors to let him escape. but slay the bloodthirsty Saul, he is the very chief of sinners." "No," says God, "I will do as I will with mine own." The heavens open, and the brightness of glory descends — brighter than the noon-day sun. Stunned with the light he falls to the ground, and a voice is heard addressing him, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks." He rises up; God appears to him: "Lo, I have made thee a chosen vessel to bear my name among the Gentiles." Is not that sovereignty —

sovereign grace, without any previous seeking? God was found of him that sought not him; he manifested himself to one that asked him not. Some will say, that was a miracle; but it is one that is repeated every day in the week. I knew a man once, who had not been to the house of God for a long time; and one Sunday morning, having been to market to buy a pair of ducks for his Sunday dinner, he happened to see a house of God opened as he was passing by. “Well” he thought, “I will hear what these fellows are up to.” He went inside; the hymn that was being sung struck his attention; he listened to the sermon, forgot his ducks, discovered his own character, went home, and threw himself upon his knees before God, and after a short time it pleased God to give him joy and peace in believing. That man had nothing in him to begin with, nothing that could have led you to imagine he ever would be saved, but simply because God would have it so, he struck the effectual blow of grace, and the man was brought to himself. But we are, each of us who are saved, the very people who are the best illustrations of the matter. To this day, my wonder is, that ever the Lord should have chosen me. I cannot make it out; and my only answer to the question is, “Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight” [Luke 10:21].⁹

G. THE SOVEREIGN GRACE OF GOD REFLECTED.

It common for the doctrine of the sovereignty of grace to be popularly termed as “the doctrines of grace.” The reason is that if the Christian is saved solely by the grace of God, then concerning the various facets of the gospel, it is nevertheless all of grace, including faith and works (Rom. 11:6; Eph. 2:8-10). For once man attempts to modify grace with the addition of some degree of human cooperation, however slight and subtle, then grace is nullified, the saving work of Christ is demeaned, and God is insulted (Rom. 11:6; Gal. 3:1-3). Of course this primacy of grace is in no way intended to minimize the importance of Christian responsibility, that is the need for believers to be “faithful unto death” (Rev. 2:10) and also cultivate “love and good works” (Heb. 10:24). Nevertheless, it is vital that grace and works be appreciated reactively rather than compositely. In other words we uphold the arousing nature of grace unto graciousness while repudiating the thought of grace plus works being requisite, complementary additives. It has been well said that while we are saved by grace alone, yet that same grace does not stand alone, that is in isolation, since it is inherently, effectively productive. Thus grace, when rightly appreciated, brings forth the fruit of the Spirit, virtue, and works of charity. Hence we not only believe in the doctrines of grace, but also the resultant grace of the doctrines.

1. The grace of God received.

At the same time that grace brings justification whereby the believing sinner is declared to be right with God, there is also received that grace which brings sanctification whereby the believing sinner is made alive unto God. Peter describes how “His [God’s] divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. . . . He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust” (II Pet. 1:3-4). Thus the sovereignty of grace is not only associated with particular election leading to conversion, but also subsequent conformity in practical godliness, that is sanctification. The means by which this grace is communicated to the Christian are not channeled through the exclusive authority of the church as Roman Catholicism maintains, but directly, conjointly through the ministry of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit as proclaimed by the local church and the priesthood of believers.

⁹ C. H. Spurgeon, “Sovereign Grace and Man’s Responsibility,” *New Park Street Pulpit*, 207, Ages Software.

2. The grace of God assimilated.

The communication of the “divine nature” to redeemed man means that he participates in certain communicable divine attributes, even if in a minimal degree. These include holiness, love as grace, love as mercy, love as forbearance, love as benevolence, etc. Thus the child of God is to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (II Pet. 3:18). The Greek word for growth here, “auxanō,” is that from which the English “auxin” is derived that describes plant hormone by which vertical growth is stimulated. So the Christian is provided with spiritual growth hormones that are designated as the “grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” More specifically, these means of grace are described by J. C. Ryle, in commenting on II Peter 3:18.

1. One thing essential to growth in grace is *diligence in the use of primary means of grace*. By these I understand such means as a man must use by himself alone, and no one can use for him. I include under this head private prayer, private reading of the Scriptures, and private meditation and self-examination. Here are the roots of true Christianity. Wrong *here*, a man is wrong all the way through! Private religion must receive our first attention, if we wish our souls to grow.

2. Another thing which is essential to growth in grace is carefulness in the use of public means of grace. Under this head I include the ordinances of regular Sunday worship, the uniting with God’s people in common prayer and praise, the preaching of the Word, and the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. I firmly believe that the *manner* in which these public means of grace are used has much to say to the prosperity of a believer’s soul. It is a sign of bad health when a person loses relish for his food; and it is a sign of spiritual decline when we lose our appetite for means of grace.

3. Another thing essential to growth in grace is *watchfulness over our conduct in the little matters of everyday life*. Our tempers, our tongues, the discharge of our several relations of life, our employment of time—each and all must be vigilantly attended to if we wish our souls to prosper. Life is made up of days, and days of hours, and the little things of every hour are never so little as to be beneath the care of a Christian. When a tree begins to decay at root or heart, the mischief is first seen at the extreme end of the little branches. We must aim to have a Christianity which, like the sap of a tree, runs through every twig and leaf of our character, and sanctifies all.

4. Another thing which is essential to growth in grace is caution about the company we keep and the friendships we form. Nothing perhaps affects a man’s character more than the company he keeps. Disease is infectious, but health is not. Now if a professing Christian deliberately chooses to be intimate with those who are not friends of God and who cling to the world, his soul is sure to take harm. Let us seek friends that will stir us up about our prayers, our Bible-reading, and our employment of time—about our souls, our salvation, and a world to come. Who can tell the good that a friend’s word in season may do, or the harm that it may stop?

5. There is one more thing which is absolutely essential to growth in grace—and that is *regular and habitual communion with the Lord Jesus*. I mean that daily habit of intercourse between the believer and his Savior, which can only be carried on by faith, prayer, and meditation. It is a habit, I fear of which many believers know little. It is possible to have “union” with Christ, and yet to have little if any “communion” with Him. The names and offices of Christ, as laid down in Scripture, appear to me to show unmistakably that this “communion” between the saint and his Savior is not a mere fancy, but a real true thing. Between the “Bridegroom” and his bride—between the “Head” and His members—between the “Physician” and His patients—between the Advocate and His clients—between the “Shepherd” and His sheep—between the “Master” and His scholars—there is evidently implied a familiar intercourse, of daily application for things needed, of daily pouring out and unburdening our hearts and minds. Such a habit of dealing with Christ is clearly something

more than a vague general trust in the work that Christ did for sinners. It is getting *close* to Him, and laying hold on Him with confidence, as a loving, personal Friend.¹⁰

3. The grace of God reflected.

When Moses descended from Mt. Sinai, this brief period of drawing near to God resulted in his face shining with a holy glow. So in II Corinthians 3:18 Paul makes application of this truth with regard to the effect upon the Christian of his drawing near to the Lord Jesus through the mirror or gospel reflector that is later described as “the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (II Cor. 4:4). As the Christian continues to behold Christ through the eye of faith, he is “being transformed [metamorphosed] into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.” That is, spiritual osmosis takes place when we continue to behold Christ. In other words, when we walk in His steps, we learn to “die to sin and live to righteousness” (I Pet. 2:21-24). Thus the grace of God received is reflected back to He who sovereignly, graciously adopted us. When Moses descended from Mt. Sinai, while he himself was unaware of the holy shine on his face, yet “when Aaron and all the sons of Israel saw Moses, . . . they were afraid to come near him” (Exod. 34:30). However, as Moses continued to be more distant from the glory of God, so the visible transformation diminished. So Frances Ridley Havergall has written:

“From Glory unto Glory!” O marvels of the Word!
 “With open face beholding the glory of the Lord,”
 We, even we (O wonder!) “are changed into the same,”
 The image of our Savior, to glorify His Name.
 Abiding in His presence, and walking in the light,
 And seeking to do always what is “pleasing in His sight”;
 We look to Him to keep us “all glorious within,”
 Because the blood of Jesus is cleansing from all sin.

H. QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GRACE.

We note that the apostle Paul was often faced with challenging questions associated with the gospel of the sovereign grace of God (Rom. 3:1, 3, 5, 8, 31; 4:1; 6:1, 15; 9:14, 19). Nevertheless he answered them quite forcefully, especially from the divine perspective concerning the right of the Creator over the creature.

1. Does not emphasis upon the sovereignty of grace reflect an imbalance concerning only one of God’s many characteristics?

From the perspective of knowing all about God, that is with regard to the totality of his attributes, this is a valid point. There are those who lopsidedly enthuse and promote the sovereignty of God more than His other characteristics, such as His holiness. From the perspective of both the sovereignty of God and human responsibility, those who are eager to promote the former can, at the same time, be negligent in the promotion of the latter. That is, in telling the sinner that salvation is a work of sovereign grace, there can be neglect in pressing home the invitation and responsibility to believe, even as the Bible does. From

¹⁰ J. C. Ryle, *Holiness*, pp. 92-94.

the perspective of sin in this universe and its present sovereignty over man, the vital question concerns its confrontation and ultimate demise before the triumph of the grace of God. In this regard, we believe emphasis upon the sovereignty of God is vitally important.

Remember that Lucifer's desire was to be independently sovereign, to be equal with God: "I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High" (Isa. 14:14). Will he autonomously prevail? The Bible emphatically denies such a possibility (Eph. 4:7-11). Remember that at the Garden of Eden, the serpent's appeal to Eve was that she and Adam would be as their Creator: "For God knows that in the day you eat from it [the forbidden fruit of the tree of life] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). While fallen man may be jealous of many of God's attributes, e.g. omniscience, yet it is that perfection of sovereignty that he especially craves since it establishes sovereign autonomy apart from God. Yet the sovereignty of God's gospel grace will prevail over this rebellion (Gen. 3:15).

In devoting a whole book to the subject of the sovereignty of God, Arthur Pink makes the following defense of his emphasis:

Probably 95 per cent. of the religious literature of the day is devoted to a setting forth of the duties and obligations of men. The fact is that those who undertake to expound the responsibility of man are the very writers who have lost 'the balance of truth' by ignoring, very largely, the Sovereignty of God. It is perfectly right to insist on the responsibility of man, but what of God? - has He no claims, no rights? A hundred such works as this are needed, ten thousand sermons would have to be preached throughout the land on this subject, if "the balance of truth" is to be regained. The "balance of truth" has been lost, lost through a disproportionate emphasis being thrown on the human side, to the minimizing, if not the exclusion, of the Divine side. We grant that this book is one-sided, for it only seeks to deal with one side of the truth, and that is the neglected side, the Divine side.¹¹

2. Does not the doctrine of sovereign grace tend to portray man as a robot at the beck and call of a capricious, arbitrary God?

To begin with, let us assert that if God be God, He has the right to be arbitrary with regard to His creation, of course in agreement with His holy character. Hence, "our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases" (Ps. 115:3). When man becomes offended with this truth, it tends to indicate his proud dissatisfaction with his creatureliness. The implied suggestion here is that man should have some degree of independence from God, especially in the realm of his possessing so-called "free will," otherwise love from man to God becomes coerced rather than spontaneous. However, to begin with, does God have this same quality of "free will"? We think not, otherwise we admit the possibility of Him sinning according to His supposed freedom of choice. That is, if God has this so-called "free will," defined in terms of moral neutrality, then His choosing to act sinfully is a potential reality. However God's freedom is limited according to His holy and impeccable nature whereby, within this sphere of His perfect righteousness, He always chooses to love righteously. Thus there are things which it is impossible for God to do (Num. 23:19; Tit. 1:2; Heb. 6:18). Of course there is a very real sense in which man is in bondage to sin (John 8:34; Rom. 6:17, 20) so that although not identical with being robotic, yet he is a slave to his corrupt nature. From one perspective, when an unbeliever becomes a Christian, He is transferred from the liberty that exists within the kingdom of Satan to the liberty that exists within the kingdom of Christ. From another perspective, when an unbeliever

¹¹ Arthur Pink, *The Sovereignty of God*, p. 11.

becomes a Christian, He is transferred from bondage to sin to bondage to righteousness. Thus, “though you 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. 6:17-18). However, how did this transference to a new realm of bondage and liberty take place? Certainly not by means of independent, intrinsic human ability. The only biblical answer is the sovereign grace of God whereby Jesus Christ “gave the right/authority to become children of God, even to those who believe in His [Jesus’] name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12-13).

3. While the sovereignty of grace obviously aligns with the particular election of sinners unto salvation (I Thess. 1:4), “to the praise of the glory of His grace” (Eph. 1:3-14), is not this election based upon the foreknowledge of God (I Pet. 1:1-2), or His foresight of faith?

To put the question here very simply, does God choose individual elect sinners and consequently foreknow that these will assuredly believe, or does God foreknow who will believe and therefore designate these as His elect because of their faith. In other words, does election guarantee faith, or does faith establish election? We suggest that the former propositions are biblical and true; God is more than a good predictor! Hence God predicts because He foreordains that which He knows will happen. Hence, by its very nature, particular election unto salvation is of the essence of sovereign grace. So in John Bunyan’s *A Confession Of My Faith* he provides an excellent seven-fold summary of this doctrine.¹²

- a. Election is free and permanent, being founded in works-excluding grace and the unchangeable will of God (Rom. 11:5-6; Eph. 1:11; II Tim. 2:19).
- b. Election was before the foundation of the world and thus before the elect had any being (Rom. 4:17; Eph. 1:4; II Tim. 1:9).
- c. Election excludes foreseen works, though it does result in holiness and the graces of the Spirit (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:4; 2:10; 3:8-11; II Tim. 1:9).
- d. Election is always considered in Jesus Christ, and without him there is neither election, grace, nor salvation (Acts 4:12; Eph. 1:5-7, 10).
- e. Election cannot be impeded or frustrated; nothing can negate or effectually oppose it (Jer. 51:5; Acts 9:12-15; Rom. 8:30-35; 9:7).
- f. Election can only be known by an individual according to his particular calling (Hos. 2:23; Rom. 9:24-25).
- g. Election does not exclude means which God uses to bring us to Christ, grace, and glory (II Thess. 2:13; I Pet. 1:12; II Pet. 1:10).

However what of those passages, such as I Peter 1:1-2, that relate election to foreknowledge? Sometimes in Scripture “foreknowledge” means knowing in advance as with simple prescience (II Pet. 3:17). But often the context indicates a different and much more profound meaning. In Scripture, “to know” often means more than bare, factual

¹² Bunyan, *Works*, II, pp. 598-9.

cognition. Rather it can speak of intimacy of relationship (Gen. 4:1; Amos 3:2 NKJV; Matt. 7:23; John 10:14-15, 27; I Cor. 8:3; II Tim. 2:19). So in Romans 11:2, “foreknowledge” means “intimate knowledge before,” or “love before time,” or “forelove,” and not mere awareness in the past. Hence, “foreknowledge” in Romans 8:29 is best understood as “prior distinguishing, determining love,” since Paul writes, “For *whom* [emphasis added] He foreknew,” without any suggestion of foreseen faith. So John Murray translates, “[for] whom he knew from eternity with distinguishing affection and delight.”¹³ Jeremiah 1:5 expresses the same thought: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.” Similarly James Small has written in his well known hymn:

I’ve found a Friend; O such a Friend!
 He loved me ere [before] I knew Him;
 He drew me with the cords of love,
 And thus He bound me to Him.
 And round my heart still closely twine
 Those ties which naught can sever,
 For I am His and He is mine,
 For ever and for ever.

Likewise in I Peter 1:1-2, “foreknowledge” precedes God’s election since it is that preceding love which moves Him to choose sinners, so that they might be “sprinkled with His [Christ’s] blood.” It is significant that while the NASB accurately translates *proginōskō*, in I Peter 1:20 as “[Christ] *foreknown* [emphasis added] before the foundation of the world,” yet the KJV translates “[Christ] *foreordained* [emphasis added] before the foundation of the world.”

Reason also indicates that foreknowledge understood as foreseen faith is an unreasonable explanation of biblical election. By way of illustration, imagine arriving at a birthday party uninvited declaring that because you are there you are invited! However, a legitimate guest only arrives having been previously invited. So God elects, then grants faith, and as a consequence has foreknowledge of what is predestined to occur. Election based upon foreseen faith establishes man as the arbiter concerning the determination of God’s elect. It is in fact election after the fact or postordination!

4. What is the role of faith since it is so frequently exhorted in the Bible?

Certainly the Bible tells us that faith is a gift (Acts 16:14; Eph. 2:8-9); on the other hand, from a logical perspective, the Bible never tells the unbeliever to seek the gift of faith. Rather man in general, and often in particular, is simply yet directly, indiscriminately exhorted to believe. As with other aspects of Bible truth where finite man attempts to grasp hold of the infinite, the answer is found more often in paradox than sequential reasoning that can lead to an unbiblical conclusion. Certainly the point is that faith is not some response of autonomous man that is quite independent of the influence of the particular grace of God. In response to a popular misconception, faith is not “man’s part” which cooperates with “God’s part.” Rather faith is non-meritorious linkage that attaches the sinner to His Savior. This being so, then the efficacy of faith is ultimately determined by the power of its saving object, even as it solicits and generates faith. While faith may be weak or strong, ultimately it is the potency of faith’s object that results in the fulfillment of the promises of God in the lives of those who believe (Mark 9:24). Thus the strongest faith

¹³ Murray, *Epistle to the Romans*, I, pp. 315-318.

in the world will be quite fruitless when it is directed toward an impotent object. This strength of faith may result in some psychological and cathartic results in the believer, but they will not be the work of God in an authentic saving sense. Furthermore, faith is not “a leap in the dark,” so to speak, but rather a “leap in the light.” In other words, faith lays hold of a body of truth concerning which there is personal comprehension, conviction and commitment. To be sure, faith does not need to know all of the facts in a given situation; but it is persuaded of sufficient truth, especially concerning the reliability of the object of faith in mind, and thus is prepared to commit one’s soul’s destiny to it. In other words, saving faith proceeds from comprehension about the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ to conviction and personal application about this same truth. However authentic faith must also then proceed to personal commitment to this same truth. Hence all of this work of faith is essentially a particular, derivative work of the Spirit of God rather than human generation (Matt. 16:16-17; I Thess. 2:13; II Thess. 2:13; I Pet. 1:1-2).

5. Is the gospel to be offered freely and genuinely?

Some have argued from logic that since man is dead in trespasses and sins, and therefore unable of himself to respond to the call of the gospel, then it is wrong, indeed impossible to make a genuine yet indiscriminate offer of the gospel and invitation to men in general. However, we again maintain that the Bible employs paradox here whereby it genuinely offers the gospel to mankind in general (Matt. 11:28; John 7:37; I Cor. 9:18) which at the same time is incapable of responding apart from particular enabling grace. In other words, in universally soliciting faith, God calls upon man to do that which it is impossible for him to do, except He receive individual, gracious assistance. Yet man is responsible for his helpless condition, like a person jumping into a pit from which he cannot escape. The call of God for such a man to escape from this pit is intended to convince him of his hopeless condition, though many contrive foolish schemes by which they think they can extricate themselves. However, for those in the pit who confess their impotence, their inability to save themselves, and cry to God for deliverance, He, in the person of His Son, climbs down into the pit and carries the helpless sinner out Luke 15:4-6).

6. Does not the sovereignty of grace tend to minimize the responsibility of the Christian to live virtuously? If the salvation of the elect is inevitable, are not also their works?

Yes, the salvation of the elect is inevitable (Eph. 1:3-14), and their works are inevitable (Eph. 2:8-10), yet at the same time the Bible clearly teaches the elect will give evidence of their election by means of their pursuit of virtuous living. Indeed the elect are commanded to do so. Hence in John 15:17 Jesus declared: “These things I command you in order that you may be loving one another.” Here is the disciple’s “Friend” (John 15:14-15) making a strong, authoritative plea; it is the exhortation of He who is demonstrably “full of grace and truth” (1:14), which is so gloriously described in terms of His friendship unto death for His disciples and His prior election of them (John 15:15-16). So for Paul, having declared that “by the grace of God I am what I am,” he continues to explain the inevitable result of this grace. “[A]nd His grace toward me did not prove vain [empty/fruitless]; but I labored even more than all of them [the other apostles], yet not I, but the grace of God with me” (I Cor. 15:10). In other words, Paul, the object of elective grace (Gal. 1:11-16), was inevitably the incomparable exponent of working grace. So this is the expectation of Peter for, in exhorting his addressees, “be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you” (I Pet. 1:10), he encourages stimulation of the fruit of this election and calling. This involves “applying all diligence , [so that] in your faith supply moral

excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly-kindness, and in your brotherly-kindness, love” (II Pet. 1:5-7). So this is also the expectation of Jesus. “We love because He first loved us” (I John 4:19). That is: “We are gracious because He first showered grace upon us.” We are to be choice in our deportment on account of our being chosen.