



# FOUNDATIONS OF GRACE

1400 BC AD 100

A LONG LINE  
*of* GODLY MEN

VOLUME ONE

STEVEN J. LAWSON

*foreword by* JOHN MACARTHUR \* *afterword by* R.C. SPROUL

“Dr. Steve Lawson is one of the most committed and capable biblical expositors of this generation. The intensity and clarity of his commitment to biblical preaching—to true expository preaching—is the hallmark of his ministry. Beyond this, Steve Lawson understands that the text of the Bible presents a consistent witness to God’s sovereignty and the panoramic display of God’s glory. All this is evident in his preaching ministry and in his writing ministry as well. Dr. Lawson is a remarkable man driven by a remarkable passion.”

— DR. R. ALBERT MOHLER, JR., President  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Faithful pastor Steve Lawson, in *Foundations of Grace*, traverses the rich and varied terrain of the Bible to introduce you to the one true God and his sovereign saving love from the whole of Scripture, in ways that you may never have fully appreciated before. The doctrines of grace and the sovereignty of God are joy-giving, life-changing, Christ-exalting, God-glorifying, missions-motivating, evangelism-encouraging, and discipleship-promoting truths. If you think that the teaching of God’s sovereignty in sinners’ salvation is a man-made idea, you’ll think again after you’ve walked through the Bible with Dr. Lawson. But beware, this truth, when understood and embraced, is soul-transforming, heart-animating, and life-altering. Dr. Lawson himself is a man changed by this truth. He has boldly and bravely and gladly proclaimed it, at great personal cost, but much to the glory of God, the good of the church, and the joy of sinners who have been found by the amazing grace of God. Prepare to delight in the lovingkindness of the Lord, which lasts forever!”

— DR. J. LIGON DUNCAN III, Senior Minister  
First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Miss.

“The doctrines of grace are often misunderstood and mischaracterized. This helpful new book explains them thoughtfully and well. May God use it for His glory and others’ good.”

— DR. D. JAMES KENNEDY, Senior Minister  
Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.

“We live in an age in which the church has once again fallen under Martin Luther’s sharp critique of his contemporary, Erasmus: ‘Your God is too man-like. . . . Let God be God!’ Grippled in mind and heart by the twin truths of God’s total sovereignty and His amazing grace, Steve Lawson compellingly traces these themes from the beginning to the end of Scripture. There is no better way than this to learn theology, and no other way to learn to hold the truth of Scripture with the balance of Scripture and in the spirit of Scripture. *Foundations of Grace* shows, in a multitude of ways, that the Scriptures are useful ‘for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness.’ May it help the contemporary church to rediscover that glorious divine *quadrivium!*”

— DR. SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON, Senior Pastor  
First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, S.C.

“Steven Lawson clearly and comprehensively lays the scriptural groundwork for the doctrines of grace.”

— DR. JOHN MACARTHUR, Pastor-Teacher  
Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, Calif.  
(from his foreword)

“As Dr. Steve Lawson’s reconnaissance of this matter so clearly shows, God’s sovereignty is manifest throughout sacred Scripture. . . . When you finish reading this book, I would wonder and worry if you continue to persist in denying the full measure of God’s sovereignty in our salvation. Dr. Lawson has shown so clearly and conclusively that salvation is of the Lord and of His sovereign grace that he dusted off the spot where the opponents of this doctrine once stood. I, for one, am grateful for this labor of love, and for the elucidation and hope that those who read it will take to heart.”

— DR. R.C. SPROUL, Minister of Preaching and Teaching  
Saint Andrew’s Chapel, Sanford, Fla.  
(from his afterword)

A LONG LINE  
*of* GODLY MEN

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VOLUME ONE

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1400 BC - AD 100

FOUNDATIONS  
OF GRACE

*by*

STEVEN J. LAWSON



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To the memory of  
Dr. S. Lewis Johnson  
—distinguished professor, eminent theologian, precise expositor—  
who shocked my world with the doctrines of grace.

During my formative years, Dr. Johnson faithfully preached the Word of God—and, specifically, the doctrines of grace—at Believer’s Chapel in Dallas, Texas. Although I initially resisted these truths, the Lord graciously prevailed and opened my eyes to His glorious sovereignty in the salvation of lost sinners. Sunday by Sunday, Dr. Johnson brought masterful exposition of the Scriptures with theological precision. My view of everything was dramatically changed, and I have never been the same. I shall always be grateful to Dr. Johnson for his clear and compelling preaching about our sovereign God.

*“For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things,  
To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”*

(Romans 11:36, NASB)

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## PREFACE

# THE CONTINENTAL DIVIDE OF THEOLOGY

**T**hrough the western regions of North America, there runs an imaginary geographic line that determines the flow of streams into oceans. It is known as the Continental Divide. Ultimately, precipitation falling on the east side of this great divide will flow into the Atlantic Ocean. Likewise, water falling on the western slopes of this line will surge in the opposite direction until it finally empties into the Pacific Ocean. Needless to say, a vast continent separates these immense bodies of water. It is seemingly far-fetched to ponder that a raindrop falling atop a mountain in Colorado will flow to the Pacific, while another drop, falling but a short distance away, will flow into the Atlantic. Nevertheless, once the water pours down on a particular side of this great divide, its path is determined and its direction is unchangeable.

Geography is not the only place we find a great divide. There is a high ground that runs through church history as well—a Continental Divide of theology. This great divide of doctrine separates two distinctly different streams of thought that flow in opposite directions. To be specific, this determinative high ground is one's theology of God, man, and salvation. *This* is the highest of all thought, and it divides *all* doctrine into two schools. Historically, these two ways of thinking about God and His saving grace have been called by various names. Some have identified them as *Augustinianism* and *Pelagianism*. Others have named them *Calvinism* and *Arminianism*. Still others have defined them as *Reformed* and *Catholic*, while others have used the terms *predestination* and *free will*. But by whatever name, these streams are determined by the Continental Divide of theology.

This metaphorical divide differs from the geographical Continental Divide in one key respect. Whereas streams flowing west and east of the Rocky Mountains descend gradually to the plains and lowlands where they meet the oceans, the terrain on the two sides of the doctrinal divide is quite different. On one

side we find solid highlands of truth. On the other side there are precipitous slopes of half-truths and full error.

Over the centuries, seasons of reformation and revival in the church have come when the sovereign grace of God has been openly proclaimed and clearly taught. When a high view of God has been infused into the hearts and minds of God's people, the church has sat on the elevated plateaus of transcendent truth. This lofty ground is Calvinism—the high ground for the church. The lofty truths of divine sovereignty provide the greatest and grandest view of God. The doctrines of grace serve to elevate the entire life of the church. The great Princeton theologian Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield, writing more than a century ago, perceptively noted, “The world should realize with increased clearness that Evangelicalism stands or falls with Calvinism.”<sup>1</sup> At first glance, this stunning statement may appear to be an exaggeration, even hyperbole. But the more it is weighed, the more one discerns that evangelicalism—that part of the body of Christ that rightly adheres to the inerrancy of Scripture, the total depravity of man, and the sovereignty of God in all aspects of life—always needs the doctrines of sovereign grace to anchor it to the high ground. For without the theological teachings of Reformed truth concerning God's sovereignty in man's salvation, the church is weakened and made vulnerable, soon to begin an inevitable decline into baser beliefs, whether she realizes it or not.

Whenever the church becomes increasingly man-centered, she begins the downhill slide, often without recovery, and always to her detriment. Once yielding the high ground of Calvinism, a self-absorbed church puts its full weight onto the slippery slope of Arminianism, resulting in a loss of its foundational stability. Tragically, however, the descent rarely stops there. Historically, man-centered doctrine has served only as a catalyst for an even greater fall.

Rappelling down the slippery slopes of Arminianism, one is soon to find the church sinking deeper and deeper into a murky quagmire of heretical ideas. Such a descent inevitably gives way to liberalism, the utter rejection of the absolute authority of Scripture. From liberalism—given enough time—the church always plunges yet lower into ecumenism, that deadly philosophy that embraces all religions as having some part of the truth. Continuing this downward spiral, the church plummets into universalism, the damning belief that all men eventually will be saved. Yet worse, universalism gives way to agnosticism, a degenerate view that one cannot even know whether there is a God. Finally, the church falls into the deepest abyss—the hellish flames of atheism, the belief that there is no God.

The presentation of the high truths of biblical Calvinism in this book is an attempt to re-establish the church's firm footing upon the high ground she once held. The following chapters are strategically designed to secure her feet upon the apex of all God-centered truth, the doctrines of grace. In each section of Scripture, we will look at what historically have been identified as the five points of Calvinism: radical depravity, sovereign election, definite atonement, irresistible call, and preserving grace. We will examine virtually every biblical text teaching each of these principal doctrines and, in doing so, fortify our own convictions and consider their life-changing power for the believer. We will weigh carefully how they drastically elevate ministries, expand missions, and, subsequently, alter the course of history.

Never has the need been greater for the truths of sovereign grace to be firmly established in the church. Her thinking about God desperately needs to be flowing in the right direction. As the church thinks, so she worships; and, as the church worships, so she lives, serves, and evangelizes. The church's right view of God and the outworking of His grace gives shape to everything that is vital and important. The church *must* recapture her lofty vision of God and, thereby, be anchored to the solid rock of His absolute supremacy in all things. Only then will the church have a God-centered orientation in all matters of ministry. *This*, I believe, is the desperate need of the hour.

Let us now embark upon this God-exalting, Christ-honoring pursuit. Ultimately, our view of God is at stake. It will affect everything. May we elevate Him in our hearts to the highest place, which belongs exclusively to Him. To God alone be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

—Steven J. Lawson  
Mobile, 2006

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<sup>1</sup> B.B. Warfield, quoted in Arthur C. Custance, *The Sovereignty of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1979), 83–84.

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I want to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. John MacArthur. For twenty-five years, Dr. MacArthur has sharpened my mind and fed my soul through his God-centered exposition of the Scriptures. His foreword for this volume, “Divine Immutability and the Doctrines of Grace,” is, I believe, priceless.

I also want to thank Dr. R. C. Sproul, whose personal influence upon my life has been profound. During the years of my doctoral study, I sat under his direct influence, and every class session is vividly etched upon my mind. That he contributed an afterword to this volume is humbling and gratifying.

A special group of people helped make *Foundations of Grace* a reality. First, I must mention the men of Christ Fellowship Baptist Church, who met with me every Friday morning for an entire year to study the truths of these chapters. Their commitment to the doctrines of grace has greatly encouraged me.

Tim Dick, the president of Ligonier Ministries, saw the value in these studies becoming the text of this book. It was also his vision to make this a five-book series that will trace the proclamation of these great doctrines throughout church history. Greg Bailey, the director of publications for Ligonier’s Reformation Trust imprint, lent his careful eye and skillful hand to the manuscript, enhancing its accuracy and readability. Chris Larson, the creative director for Ligonier, is responsible for the attractive graphics and appealing look of this book.

My son, James Lawson, did considerable research for this book. Keith Phillips, Chuck Finster, Chris Barksdale, and Rick Holland and his students at The Master’s Seminary all made helpful contributions. Kay Allen, my executive assistant, played an especially significant role by typing this entire manuscript and coordinating everything from beginning to end.

Most important, I want to thank my wife, Anne, and our four children, Andrew, James, Grace Anne, and John, for their unfailing love in supporting me in my preaching of these God-exalting truths.

*Soli Deo Gloria.*

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*The Calvinist is the man who has seen God, and who, having seen God in His glory, is filled on the one hand with a sense of his own unworthiness to stand in God's sight as a creature, and much more as a sinner, and on the other hand, with adoring wonder that nevertheless this God is a God who receives sinners.<sup>1</sup>*

*—Benjamin B. Warfield*

## Chapter Two

# WHERE THE LONG LINE BEGINS

## THE LAWGIVER MOSES: GENESIS

Standing squarely at the head of this long line of godly men, those who have faithfully taught the doctrines of grace, is the first author of Scripture, Israel's first great leader and lawgiver—Moses. This one-time prince of Egypt became Israel's first prophet and, in so doing, became the lead standard-bearer for the banner of truth of God's sovereign grace. To be sure, the message of the sovereignty of God's grace did not originate with Moses. Such a lofty, God-entranced theology never could have arisen from within the depths of a sinful man. Neither could such a transcendent worldview have emerged from the decadent culture of Egypt in which Moses was raised. To the contrary, this supreme truth of God's unrivaled supremacy had to have been supernaturally revealed to him from above. A message so God-exalting could have come *only* from God Himself. God made known to Israel's first prophet the truths of His majestic sovereignty, especially in matters of divine grace.

As the first author of Scripture, Moses laid the first stones in the biblical foundation of sovereign grace. Over time, these cornerstones of divine sovereignty, recorded in Genesis through Deuteronomy, would be built upon by the rest of the Old Testament, in the books of Joshua through Malachi, and then by the New Testament, Matthew through Revelation. Through the teaching of Israel's kings and prophets, then of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and, climactically, of His apostles, the doctrinal truths of God's saving grace would be more fully developed. But these truths were taught in their most basic form in the opening pages of the Pentateuch by Israel's lawgiver, Moses.

This gradual unfolding of biblical truth is called progressive revelation, a concept that recognizes the deliberate development and explanation of the truths taught early in the Scriptures. Such a continuous unveiling of truth was certainly operative in the case of the doctrines of grace. What Moses taught in the first five books of the Bible, also known as the Law, simply laid the foundation that would be enlarged upon by the biblical authors who would follow. What a firm foundation God laid at the outset of Scripture through Moses!

The design of this chapter is to survey the doctrinal truths of God's sovereignty in man's salvation as written in Genesis. The long line of godly men, the procession of standard-bearers for sovereign grace, commences here with Moses, the first courier of these precious truths. Here we consider Moses and the first book of Scripture that he penned.

## THE LAWGIVER MOSES

### "TEACHER OF GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY"

Moses (1525–1405 BC) stands at the forefront of this sacred parade as the first author of Scripture. Jesus Himself affirmed that Moses wrote the five lead books of the Bible (Matt. 19:8; Mark 12:26; John 5:46–47; 7:19), and so did Paul (Rom. 10:5). As Moses penned Genesis through Deuteronomy, he was the first to record the doctrines of grace. He was trained in "all the wisdom of the Egyptians" (Acts 7:22), having received his education in the household of Pharaoh. Nevertheless, Moses did not write from a pagan viewpoint. Rather, he recorded divine wisdom such as can come only from above, a God-given insight to reality that was not of this world. He wrote inspired words from God that unveiled an eternal perspective. Moses was the God-appointed deliverer of Israel in the Exodus, the leader of the Hebrew nation through the forty-year wilderness wanderings, the receiver of the Law on Mount Sinai, and the author of the Pentateuch. As would be expected, he wrote clearly of the sovereignty of God and the depravity of man.

### THE BOOK OF GENESIS: "GOD, THE SOVEREIGN CREATOR"

The first inspired book penned by Moses is Genesis, the "Book of Beginnings." This account of Creation and the beginning of human history unmistakably features the supreme rule of God over all the works of His hands. God's sovereignty in Creation, election, regeneration, and salvation is

displayed in Genesis. The book records that God does *as* He pleases, *how* He pleases, and *when* He pleases, and not only in the physical realm but in His spiritual kingdom. In all the spheres of His creation, God *alone* is sovereign. Most specifically, God is revealed to be absolutely supreme in bestowing His saving grace upon a chosen people.

*Why* did God create? Certainly not because He needed someone to love. Throughout all eternity past, God enjoyed perfect love and intimate communion within His own being. The three persons of the Godhead—Father, Son, and Spirit—enjoyed perfect relationships and completely fulfilled one another. Thus, God was not inwardly lonely or personally empty; He was entirely self-satisfied, self-content, and self-contained. So God did *not* create because of some limitation within Himself. Instead, He created everything out of nothing in order to put His glory on display for the delight of His created beings and that they might declare His greatness. Albert Barnes is right: “The reason or end for which all things were formed . . . is to promote His honor and glory. . . . It is not to promote His happiness, for He was eternally happy; not to *add* anything to Him, for He is infinite; but that He might act as God, and have the honor and praise that is due to God.”<sup>2</sup> The book of Genesis records God’s extraordinary display of sovereignty in speaking creation into being—and in saving it.



DOCTRINE IN FOCUS:

### DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY

In Genesis, Moses first recorded the stunning demonstration of God’s sovereignty in Creation. God did *not* look down the tunnel of time and see the universe evolve out of nothing. He did *not* foresee a big bang and then adopt the chaotic results as His eternal plan. To the contrary, God intentionally spoke into being everything out of nothing. He was under no coercion to create. There was no external pressure upon Him. Rather, His act of Creation magnificently displayed His imperial sovereignty. No outside restraints can be placed upon God’s supreme authority, not by Satan and his fallen angels, and certainly not by mere men.

A. W. Pink writes with thought-provoking wonder of the extraordinary sovereignty of God *before* Creation: “In the great expanse of eternity, which stretches behind Genesis 1:1, the universe was unborn and creation existed only in the mind of the great Creator. In His sovereign majesty God dwelt all alone. We refer to that far distant period before the heavens and the earth were created.

There were then no angels to hymn God's praises, no creatures to occupy His notice, no rebels to be brought into subjection. The great God was all alone amid the awful silence of His own vast universe. But even at that time, if time it could be called, God was sovereign. He might create or not create *according to His own good pleasure*. He might create this way or that way; He might create one world or one million worlds, and who was there to resist His will? He might call into existence a million different creatures and place them on *absolute equality*, endowing them with the same faculties and placing them in the same environment; or, He might create a million creatures each *differing* from the others, and possessing nothing in common save their creaturehood, and who was there to challenge His right? If He so pleased, He might call into existence a world so immense that its dimensions were utterly beyond finite computation; and were He so disposed, He might create an organism so small that nothing but the most powerful microscope could reveal its existence to human eyes. It was His sovereign right to create, on the one hand, the exalted seraphim to burn around His throne, and on the other hand, the tiny insect which dies the same hour that it is born. If the mighty God chose to have one *vast graduation* in His universe, from loftiest seraph to creeping reptile, from revolving worlds to floating atoms, from macrocosm to microcosm, *instead of making everything uniform*, who was there to question His sovereign pleasure?"<sup>3</sup>

God's dazzling display of sovereignty in Creation was a primer on His right to rule in matters of salvation. God, who commanded the light to appear on day one of Creation, soon would order gospel light to shine into the darkened hearts of spiritually blind sinners. God, who separated the waters on day two, would cause an infinite chasm to separate Himself from sinners. God, who gathered the waters together on day three, would gather sinners to Himself. God, who created the sun, moon, and stars on day four, would omnipotently create saving faith. God, who began to create the animal kingdom on day five, would graciously send His Son to be the Lamb of God to take away sin. God, who created Adam and Eve on day six, would soon re-create sinners into His image. His free grace would perform the *second* Genesis in the salvation of lost men and women.

**1. Day One: "Let There Be Light."** On the first day of Creation, God, by the sheer exercise of His will, spoke light into being, which extinguished the darkness. This was an extraordinary display of divine sovereignty:

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And*

*the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.* —Genesis 1:1–3

All was dark until God commanded light to appear out of nothing—and it was so. This light “most clearly reveals and most closely approximates God’s glory (cf. Dan. 2:22; 1 Tim. 6:16; James 1:17; 1 John 1:5).”<sup>4</sup> Like God Himself, light illumines and makes all else known. Without light, all creation would be cold and dark. God’s creation of light was an effortless act of His sovereignty. There could be no hindrance or resistance. This same omnipotence is displayed in God’s acts of salvation. In the day of His saving power, God commands spiritual light to appear and supernaturally illumine the darkened mind of man (2 Cor. 4:4). Concerning this first act of grace, J. C. Ryle writes, “A sense of sin, guilt, and poverty of soul is the first stone laid by the Holy Ghost, when He builds a spiritual temple. He convinces of sin. Light was the first thing called into being in the material creation (Gen. 1:3). Light about our own state is the first work in the new creation.”<sup>5</sup> God’s sovereign will causes His people to see the truth of the gospel and become new creations in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

**2. Day Two: “Let There Be an Expanse.”** On the second day of Creation, God again exercised His divine sovereignty, dividing the waters by creating the sky:

*And God said, “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so.* —Genesis 1:6–7

God commanded the waters to separate, placing a great firmament between those that remained on the earth and those above the expanse.<sup>6</sup> There could be no resistance to His sovereign command. The irresistible voice of God called into being what previously did not exist, then ordered and put into place what He had created. So it is in the salvation of His elect. The effectual calling of God is equally irrevocable and equally invincible. As in His work of Creation, God acts in the spiritual realm in saving lost sinners. He speaks and calls, and it comes to pass. In due time, He separates His chosen ones from the world, summoning them unto Himself. At the appointed time, they come in response to His irresistible call.

**3. Day Three: “Let the Earth Sprout.”** The third day of Creation brought still another display of divine sovereignty, as God commanded plant life to come forth:

*And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. . . . And God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth." And it was so.*  
—Genesis 1:9–11

God determined that the water in the atmosphere should be gathered together. Further, He caused a cataclysmic upheaval of the earth's surface, directing the waters to fill the low places, forming seas, rivers, and lakes. The continents, mountains, and islands took shape. Vegetation, with seed already in it, began to grow. The principle of reproduction was established, like producing like. Each seed began to produce life after its own kind, all by divine appointment. The same display of divine sovereignty is seen in the regeneration of sinners. The exercise of God's supreme will creates spiritual life in spiritually dead hearts. This is the miracle of the new birth. When the seed of God's Word is planted in the soil of men's hearts, God causes it to germinate unto eternal life. Only God can create life out of nothing, whether it be physical or spiritual life.

**4. Day Four: "Let There Be Lights."** On day four, God freely created the sun, moon, and stars, putting the celestial bodies into their rightful places:

*And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth." And it was so.*  
—Genesis 1:14–15

The creation of the heavenly bodies was not a joint effort between God and anyone or anything else. God was not dependent upon the cooperation of angels or men for this work to succeed. In fact, no man even existed at this point. God *by* Himself and *for* Himself merely spoke and it was so. This autonomous act of God showed His independent will and infinite power to be irresistible. This same sovereign power is displayed in the divine causation of the new birth, a work of the Holy Spirit unaided by human effort or cooperation. This is known as *monergism*, the truth that the Holy Spirit is the *only* agent who effects the regeneration of the elect. God's regenerating grace works independently of man's cooperation, causing the spiritually dead sinner to believe.

**5. Day Five: "Let There Be Animals."** On the fifth day, God again demonstrated His supreme authority by beginning to create the animal kingdom in its great variety, balance, and beauty:

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*The doctrines known as Calvinism are not something that emerged late in church history, but rather are that which takes its origins in the teachings of Jesus.<sup>1</sup>*

*—James Montgomery Boice*

## Chapter Ten

# THE MOUNT EVEREST OF THEOLOGY

### THE LORD JESUS CHRIST: THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

**T**owering above the mountain peaks of Scripture looms the highest summit for the doctrines of grace—the Mount Everest of theology—the gospel of John. From atop this lofty peak, one can most clearly see the sovereign grace of God in salvation. All that has been said in the Old Testament on this subject, as well as in the first three gospels, has constituted the lower foothills, rising gradually upward to the higher altitude of this gospel, the grandest pinnacle of the doctrines of grace. Here in the fourth gospel, the sovereign grace of God is revealed in most breathtaking fashion.

This book, says John MacArthur, is “the most theological of the Gospels.”<sup>2</sup> It stands apart from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, being “more didactic,” with more “discourse material in proportion to narrative”<sup>3</sup> than the Synoptic Gospels. Recognizing this distinctive emphasis by John, Robert W. Yarbrough notes, “John’s Gospel implicitly and explicitly asserts God’s choosing, His election, of lost sinners to eternal life.”<sup>4</sup> In this fourth gospel, he writes, divine election “holds a prominent place as the drama of redemption unfolds.”<sup>5</sup> Yarbrough argues that John’s gospel “lays great stress on divine initiative in salvation”<sup>6</sup> and “affirms the primacy of divine election in human redemption.”<sup>7</sup> *The Reformation Study Bible* underscores the same point. It recognizes that the gospel of John emphasizes “our total dependence on God for salvation. Just as our physical birth was not the result of our own effort or will, so our spiritual birth is not due to us, but to God’s will and the power of His Spirit (1:12–13; 3:5–8). Sinful men and women are unable to come to Jesus for salvation unless they are

drawn by the Father (6:44). But when they come to Jesus, they have ‘eternal life,’ and do not ‘come into judgment’ (5:24); they belong to the Father, and He will not let them die (10:27–29).”<sup>8</sup>

## LUTHER’S GENERAL: THE APOSTLE JOHN

In the heat of the Reformation, Martin Luther drew attention to this emphasis upon sovereign grace in the gospel of John. The German Reformer wrote his all-time classic, *The Bondage of the Will*, as a powerful polemic against an earlier work by the Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus, titled *The Freedom of the Will*. After dismantling Erasmus’ feeble “free will” arguments, Luther turned his attention to the biblical view of the bondage of the human will in sin. He asserted, “We come now to the last part of this book, in which, as I promised, I am to bring into the field my own resources against ‘free-will’. Not that I shall bring them all; who could do that in this small book, when the entire Scripture, every jot and tittle of it, stands on my side? . . . Out of a host of armies, I shall bring into the fray two generals, with a few of their legions only—I mean, Paul and the evangelist John.”<sup>9</sup> After explaining some of the verses written by Paul, Luther wrote, “Now let us come to John, who is also an eloquent and powerful scourge of ‘free-will.’”<sup>10</sup> The Reformer then proceeded to establish his case upon the inspired record of the fourth gospel—an overwhelming apologetic! In his famous treatise, Luther expounded selected verses in the gospel of John to formulate an insurmountable case for sovereign grace.

Let us now set out to do the same. And as we go, let us remember who speaks these transcendent truths to us. It is none other than the One who proclaims the very words He heard from the Father in His presence—Jesus Christ Himself.

## THE GOSPEL OF JOHN:

### “JESUS, THE SOVEREIGN GOD”

The gospel of John was written primarily to present Jesus Christ as the Sovereign God. The first three gospel writers emphasized the humanity of Christ: Matthew wrote to reveal the Lord to be the Sovereign King, Mark the Sovereign Servant, and Luke the Sovereign Savior. The apostle John, however, highlighted Jesus’ full deity. Admittedly, John did address the humanity of Christ, even as the Synoptics alluded to His divinity. Nevertheless, John underscored the supreme authority of Christ. For instance, this gospel con-

tains the seven “I Am” statements of Christ, each staking an unmistakable claim to deity. And John carefully recorded the teaching of the Lord Christ on the sovereignty of God in salvation. More so than the other three, John’s gospel was uniquely designed to showcase Christ’s teaching on the doctrines of grace.



DOCTRINE IN FOCUS:

### RADICAL DEPRAVITY

As recorded in the gospel of John, the Lord Jesus emphatically taught that the human race in its unconverted state is radically corrupted by sin. Sin has affected the whole person, down to the very core of man’s being. All of man’s inner faculties—mind, emotion, and will—are polluted and perverted. Jesus taught that mentally, man is blinded by sin; emotionally, he is bankrupt in sin; and volitionally, he is bound in sin. Simply put, Christ relentlessly expounded the complete ruin of the entire human race by sin.

**1. Spiritual Blindness.** Jesus taught that all men are born spiritually blind. In other words, they have a complete inability to understand the truths of God’s kingdom:

*Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”* —John 3:3

Christ forcefully stated that the unregenerate cannot “see” the kingdom of God. Being blinded by sin, they simply cannot comprehend eternal truths. A. W. Pink writes, “The word for ‘see’ in the Greek is ‘*eidon*,’ which means ‘to know or become acquainted with.’ The full force, then, of this first word of Christ to Nicodemus appears to be this: ‘Except a man be born again he cannot come to know the things of God. . . . How true it is that ‘the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned’ (1 Cor. 2:14), and in order to have spiritual discernment a man must be born again. Till then he is blind, unable to see the things of God.”<sup>11</sup>

**2. Spiritual Alienation.** Jesus affirmed that every person enters this world outside the kingdom of God. That is, all people are born alienated from God and therefore excluded from His kingdom:

*Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”* —John 3:5

Jesus explained that man must be born again in order to enter the kingdom of God. The implication in this statement is that sinful man is born separated from the holy God, utterly estranged from Him. Explaining this truth, Pink writes, “By his first birth man enters this world a sinful creature, and because of this he is estranged from the thrice Holy One. Of the unregenerate it is said, ‘Having the understanding darkened, being *alienated from the life of God* through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart.’ Unspeakably solemn is this. When Adam and Eve fell they were banished from the Paradise, and each of their children were born outside of Eden. That sin shuts man out from the holy presence of God.”<sup>12</sup> All unconverted people are born and live outside the kingdom of God.

**3. Spiritual Death.** Jesus taught that unconverted people are spiritually dead in their sin. They have an empty existence in this world, being without spiritual life:

*“Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.”*

—John 5:25

In this text, Jesus stated that fallen man is spiritually dead in sin. Affirming this teaching, Boice asserts, “Here the reference to the ‘dead’ is to those who are spiritually dead.”<sup>13</sup> In this state, unregenerate people are completely unresponsive to the things of God. Just as a corpse cannot see, hear, or make choices, one who is spiritually dead cannot properly respond to the things of God. John Calvin writes, “It is generally agreed that Christ is referring to spiritual death here. . . . Christ shows that we are all ‘dead’ before he gives us life. This makes clear what man contributes towards his salvation.”<sup>14</sup> What is clear is that a spiritually dead sinner contributes *nothing*—except his sin—to His salvation, not even his faith.

**4. Spiritual Inability.** Jesus taught that it is absolutely impossible for spiritually dead sinners to exercise saving faith. They are marked by a volitional inability, having no free will with which to exercise faith toward Christ:

*“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. . . . It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail. . . . This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.”*

—John 6:44a, 63–65

In no uncertain terms, Christ declared the bondage of the unregenerate human will. He announced that no man can come to Him—meaning no one can believe upon Him—apart from a sovereign work of God. In itself, the human will lacks the capacity to choose Christ. When Jesus said, “No one *can* come to me,” He intentionally used the word *can* as opposed to *may*. This significant distinction indicates the difference between man’s *ability* to believe and his *permission* to come to Christ. In these verses, Jesus is saying that no unregenerate person has the inherent ability to believe upon Him. He may come to Christ—he has *permission* to do so. But he cannot do so—he lacks the *ability*. Pinpointing this truth, Pink writes, “These words of Christ make manifest the depths of human depravity. They expose the inveterate stubbornness of the human will.”<sup>15</sup> Leon Morris adds, “People like to feel independent. They think that they come or that they *can* come to Jesus entirely of their own volition. Jesus assures us that this is an utter impossibility. No one, no one at all, can come unless the Father draws him.”<sup>16</sup>

**5. Spiritual Slavery.** Jesus further taught that the unregenerate heart is entirely enslaved to sin. As a slave is bound to obey his master, a lost sinner must always choose to obey sin:

*Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.”*  
—John 8:34

Jesus proclaimed that the lost sinner’s true master is sin. The unconverted man *must* do what sin commands. The entirety of his sinful nature—mind, emotion, and will—is fast bound in sin. Without equivocating, Calvin writes, “Here Christ declares that all who are not freed by Him are in slavery, and that all who derive the contagion of sin from corrupted nature are slaves from birth.”<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, no man can liberate himself from the power of sin. William Hendriksen explains, “Such a man is here called a slave of sin (cf. Rom. 6:16; 11:32; 2 Pet. 2:19). He is a slave, for he has been overcome and taken captive by his master, sin, and is unable to deliver himself from this bondage. He is as truly (nay, *more* truly) chained as is the prisoner with the iron band around his leg, the band that is fastened to a chain which is cemented into the wall of a dungeon. He cannot break the chain. On the contrary, every sin he commits draws it tighter, until at last it crushes him completely. That is the picture which Jesus draws here of sinners as they are by nature. Do the Jews regard themselves as free men? In reality they are slaves without any freedom at all. They are prisoners in chains.”<sup>18</sup> It is clear that committing acts of sin is the inevitable result—not the cause—of being enslaved to sin.

**6. Spiritual Bondage.** Jesus announced that all unsaved people suffer an even greater bondage, being enslaved to Satan. Bound in his kingdom of darkness, the unconverted are under the restricting control of the Devil, being induced to perform his deeds of rebellion:

*“You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me.”* —John 8:44–45

Jesus pronounced that the spiritual father of every unsaved person is the Devil himself. To be “of your father the devil” means to belong to Satan and be held captive by him to do his will. Every unbeliever suffers this dreadful enslavement. Boice writes that the unconverted religious leaders whom Jesus addressed “thought they had it made because they were descended from Abraham physically. Jesus pointed out that God is interested in a spiritual relationship and that their actions indicated that they were actually children of the devil.”<sup>19</sup> Morris adds, “They take their origin from the devil, their father. Consequently they set their will on doing his evil desires. They voluntarily choose to do his will.”<sup>20</sup> Every aspect of one’s inner being is in bondage to Satan, including the will.

**7. Spiritual Deafness.** Jesus taught that the unconverted sinner is spiritually deaf, being unable to hear and thereby comprehend the essential truths of the gospel message. All who are *not* of God—that is, all who are unregenerate—do *not* hear the words of God:

*“Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. . . . Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.”* —John 8:43–47

By these words, Jesus affirmed that fallen man cannot hear so as to understand the spiritual truths of God’s Word. A failure to hear the Word of God indicates an inability to comprehend the bare essence of the divine message. Lost sinners are “not of God,” Jesus said, and, thus, are deaf to what the Lord is saying. Their spiritual ears are incapable of receiving the truth. Morris writes, “The Jews do not hear Jesus’ teaching. They are so wrapped up in their preconceptions that they cannot perceive its truth. It repels them. . . . Jesus is speaking basically of spiritual incomprehension, not of any failure of intellect. . . . Because

## AFTERWORD

# MANIFEST SOVEREIGNTY

I have never heard a Christian declare that he or she does not believe in the sovereignty of God. It is virtually universal among Christians to affirm God's sovereignty. It is good and proper that they should affirm it, for as Dr. Steve Lawson's reconnaissance of this matter so clearly shows, God's sovereignty is manifest throughout sacred Scripture.

When we consider the sovereignty of God, however, we must divide the subject, like Gaul, into three parts. The first way in which Scripture speaks of God's sovereignty has to do with His sovereign power and authority over all of creation. The universe exists solely on the basis of God's sovereign decree and imperative. He ordered the world into being; by His sovereign fiat it came into existence. He sovereignly dictates the structure of all things in nature and rules sovereignly over the storm, the fire, the flood, and the earthquake. Yet there are some Christians who, though they say they believe in sovereignty, retract that affirmation when asked about God's involvement in what we call catastrophes of nature or of disease. At this point, they begin to backpedal and deny that God orders all things.

The second area in which the Bible makes clear that God is sovereign is in His law. He is the Creator of human beings, the author of all human life, and with that authorship comes all authority. God has the supreme right to impose obligations upon His creatures. He alone has the ultimate right to say, "Do this and do that because I say so." God alone can bind the consciences of mortal beings absolutely. This is a reflection of His moral sovereignty. If a Christian denies that God has the sovereign right to command what He will of us, a deep shadow is cast on the credibility of that person's profession of belief. One cannot be a Christian and deny God's right to impose His rule upon His creatures. At another level, every time we sin we belie our profession of confidence in God's sovereign authority to rule our lives. When we sin, we grasp for our own, the right to do as we please. At the same time we do that, however, we know as Christians that it is sinful to do so and that we are going against God's moral, sovereign authority.

The overwhelming majority of professing Christians grants that God is sovereign over nature and that He is sovereign over human behavior. The affirmation of divine sovereignty starts to disappear, however, when Christians begin to struggle over the third area in which the Scriptures affirm God's sovereignty—His grace. Somehow the idea that God reserves to Himself eternally and absolutely the right to manifest His saving mercy on some individuals and to withhold it from others is an act we adjudge to be unfair. The apostle Paul anticipated this human reaction to divine sovereignty in salvation when he raised the rhetorical question, "Is there injustice on God's part?" (Rom. 9:14b). Such a question has never been raised about Arminian or semi-Pelagian schemes of salvation. The suggestion of unrighteousness in God comes only in response to the affirmation of the absolute sovereignty of God in His saving choice to elect some and not others.

That this is the biblical teaching of God's way of salvation and of His grace is the great value of this book. From Genesis to Revelation, Dr. Lawson has demonstrated overwhelmingly that God's grace is sovereign and that He elects whom He will. He has supreme mercy on some, and to the others He gives justice. God, however, is never unjust in His actions or in His saving decrees. No one will be able to shake his fist in the face of the Almighty on the judgment day and say to Him, "You were unjust toward me."

When you finish reading this book, I would wonder and worry if you continue to persist in denying the full measure of God's sovereignty in our salvation. Dr. Lawson has shown so clearly and conclusively that salvation is of the Lord and of His sovereign grace that he dusted off the spot where the opponents of this teaching once stood. I, for one, am grateful for this labor of love, and for the elucidation and hope that those who read it will take to heart.

—*R. C. Sproul*  
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**D**r. Steven J. Lawson is the senior pastor of Christ Fellowship Baptist Church in Mobile, Alabama, having served as a pastor in Arkansas and Alabama for twenty-five years.

He is a graduate of Texas Tech University (B.B.A.), Dallas Theological Seminary (Th.M.), and Reformed Theological Seminary (D.Min.)

Dr. Lawson is the author of twelve books, his most recent being *Psalms, Volume II* (Psalms 76–150) in the Holman Old Testament Commentary Series. His other books include *Famine in the Land: A Passionate Call to Expository Preaching*; *Psalms, Volume I* (Psalms 1–75) and *Job* in the Holman Old Testament Commentary Series; *Made in Our Image*; *Absolutely Sure*; *The Legacy*; and *Faith Under Fire*. His books have been translated into various languages around the world, including Russian, Portuguese, Spanish, and the Indonesian language.

He has contributed several articles to *Bibliotheca Sacra*, *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, *Faith and Mission*, *Decision* magazine, and *Discipleship Journal*, among other journals and magazines.

Dr. Lawson's pulpit ministry takes him around the world, most recently to Russia, Ukraine, Wales, England, Ireland, Germany, and many conferences in the United States, including The Shepherd's Conference and Resolved at Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California.

He is president of New Reformation, a ministry designed to bring about biblical reformation in the church today. He serves on the Executive Board of The Master's Seminary and College, teaches expository preaching at The Master's Seminary in the doctor of ministry program, and teaches in The Expositor's Institute at Grace Community Church. Dr. Lawson has participated in the Distinguished Scholars Lecture Series at The Master's Seminary, lecturing in 2004 on "Expository Preaching of the Psalms." He also serves on the Advisory Council for Samara Preachers' Institute & Theological Seminary in Samara, Russia.

Dr. Lawson and his wife, Anne, have three sons, Andrew, James, and John, and a daughter, Grace Anne.



## Reformation Trust

P U B L I S H I N G

*Reformation Trust Publishing* was established by Ligonier Ministries in 2006 to produce books that are true to the historic Christian faith and the doctrines recovered during the Protestant Reformation.

Dr. R.C. Sproul, founder and chairman of Ligonier Ministries, has articulated the vision behind the name of this new publishing arm:

“The word *Reformation* defines the theological perspective we’re committed to propagating at Ligonier—that recovery of biblical Christianity in the sixteenth century. We want to produce materials that are consistent and faithful to that. *Trust* involves a kind of fidelity and the idea of a legacy. We seek to perpetuate a tradition, but not a tradition of men. The Bible is the divine tradition. Our legacy, our trust, is to be faithful to that tradition.”

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From the lawgiver Moses to the apostle John, and from the early church fathers to modern defenders of the faith, there has marched onto the stage of human history a long line of godly men, a triumphant parade of spiritual stalwarts who have upheld the doctrines of grace.

Beginning with *Foundations of Grace* and continuing in four subsequent volumes, Dr. Steven J. Lawson surveys this line of men and the biblical truth they proclaimed. Look for these titles from Reformation Trust Publishing:

### **VOLUME ONE: *FOUNDATIONS OF GRACE***

1400 BC – AD 100

From the first biblical author, Moses, to the last, the apostle John, the writers of Scripture recorded one standard of salvation in the doctrines of grace. From Genesis to Revelation, more than forty authors over a period of fifteen hundred years wrote the transcendent truths of God's sovereignty in man's salvation. As a result, the Bible in its entirety teaches that God saves sinners—the Father choosing His elect, the Son redeeming these chosen ones, and the Spirit calling, regenerating, and preserving them throughout all the ages to come.

### **VOLUME TWO: *PILLARS OF GRACE***

2<sup>ND</sup> – 16<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES

Standing squarely upon the Scriptures, the early church fathers—among them Irenaeus, Jerome, and Augustine—writing in the second through fifth centuries, affirmed the biblical truths of sovereign grace. The proclamation of these doctrinal distinctives quieted somewhat in the medieval church, but it was renewed during the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century through such stalwarts as Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, and the members of the Synod of Dort. Europe was suddenly ablaze with the doctrines of grace.

## **VOLUME THREE: *FORCES OF GRACE***

16<sup>TH</sup> – 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES

The Reformation reached Scotland with John Knox and influenced England under the English Reformers and the heroic martyrs during the reign of Bloody Mary. In their struggle with the Church of England in the seventeenth century, the English Puritans—the Westminster divines, the Scottish Covenanters, Particular Baptists, and Independents—mightily upheld the biblical distinctives articulated in Reformed theology. Scotland and England burned brightly with the truth of sovereign grace.

## **VOLUME FOUR: *PROGRESS OF GRACE***

17<sup>TH</sup> – 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES

The history-altering impact of the Reformation soon crossed the Atlantic with the Pilgrims. In America, the truths of God's sovereign grace were proclaimed by the American Puritans, who witnessed the Great Awakening under the influence of Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and others. The Second Great Awakening followed, with Timothy Dwight and Asahel Nettleton. Nineteenth-century America also saw the emergence of Princeton Seminary, with Charles Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield, and the Southern Baptist Convention, with James P. Boyce. Distinguished Presbyterian figures such as Robert L. Dabney, James H. Thornwell, and William G. T. Shedd also stood tall. These godly men infected the American consciousness with biblical Calvinism.

## **VOLUME FIVE: *TRIUMPH OF GRACE***

19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY – THE PRESENT

Emboldened by the truths of sovereign grace, strong Calvinists such as William Carey launched the modern missions movement to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth. In the nineteenth century, England, Scotland, and Holland became Reformed strongholds for powerful proclaimers of grace such as Charles H. Spurgeon, J. C. Ryle, Charles Simeon, Robert Murray McCheyne, and Abraham Kuyper. In more recent times, a resurgence of the doctrines of grace has come through the prolific pulpits and pens of men such as A. W. Pink, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, James Montgomery Boice, R. C. Sproul, John Piper, and John MacArthur. Through these eminent expositors, the long line of godly men has extended triumphantly to this present hour.