

PILLARS OF GRACE ENDORSEMENTS

“This book will ignite and impassion your heart for the gospel and the doctrines of grace that undergird it. Dr. Lawson has done something for which we will forever be grateful—he demonstrates conclusively that the truths of Calvinism and the Reformed faith are rooted in the history of the church, from the apostles to the emergence of Martin Luther in the sixteenth century. We have, of course, always suspected this to be true, but few attempts have been made to demonstrate it, and none with such infectious zeal as is to be found in these pages. Few writers can marry church history, exposition, and sound doctrine in such a manner as this. Do not start reading this book unless you are prepared to find that you are unable to put it down. It is that good.”

—DR. DEREK W. H. THOMAS

*Professor of systematic and practical theology, Reformed Theological Seminary
Minister of teaching, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi*

“Reading Steven Lawson’s *Pillars of Grace* is like taking a helicopter tour of a mountain range—a breathtaking survey of a series of majestic peaks all pointing upward to heaven. Each chapter offers an informative, fascinating, and accessible look at a significant teacher of God’s glorious grace, from Clement to Calvin. Read this book and discover that to be Christian and Reformed is to be rooted in the church through the ages.”

—DR. JOEL R. BEEKE

*President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary,
Grand Rapids, Michigan*

“Steve Lawson’s research takes us into the controversial and somewhat neglected area regarding the development of the doctrines of grace before John Calvin. Of special value is his large collection of quotations, which show that, yes, there were indeed a few notable TULIP flowers in the church garden before the Reformation blossomed. I especially like his challenge to imitate these heroes. I am pleased to recommend this volume and look forward to the next in the series.”

—DR. CURT DANIEL

*Pastor, Faith Bible Church, Springfield, Illinois
Author, The History and Theology of Calvinism*

“Bringing witness after witness to the stand, Steve Lawson marshals testimony about the sovereign grace of God from twenty-three specific exemplars, from Clement of Rome to Calvin of Geneva. Following a masterful overview, with the weight of original sources and helpful context from these witnesses, both clarity and unity result. Steve Lawson is to be commended for assembling such a superb cast, arranged in such useful parts—road-tested in a men’s group from his own congregation—to sing such a deep and moving chorus. Each study is useful for local church studies and libraries, for pastoral enrichment or officer training, or as fodder for illustrations, gathered by an experienced shepherd. We can rejoice over this excellent work that truly exhibits that which has been believed everywhere in all ages of true and vibrant Christianity. I join Dr. Lawson in praying that this book will cultivate a new generations of pillars.”

—DR. DAVID W. HALL
*Senior pastor, Midway Presbyterian Church,
Powder Springs, Georgia*

“Dr. Lawson has produced a veritable *tour de force* with this historical survey of the church’s witness to the sweet doctrines of divine sovereignty. Not since the voluminous Dr. Gill has this really been attempted, and Gill’s study is seriously dated in many ways. Hence the need for this winsome and judicious work, in which Lawson shows the reader the way these golden threads of grace have wound their way through the church’s life in the Patristic, medieval, and Reformation eras. Contrary to popular thought, it can be seen that the eras prior to the Reformation were not devoid of powerful witnesses to these great truths. This is a must read for anyone interested in the way these biblical truths have been received by the church.”

—DR. MICHAEL A. G. HAYKIN
*Professor of church history and biblical spirituality,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky
Director of the Andrew Fuller Center for Baptist Studies*

“Thank you, Dr. Lawson, for your labors in pulling together this rich treasury of biblical teaching on the doctrines of grace over the centuries from faithful men whom Christ appointed and the Spirit endowed for the building up of the saints for the work of service. We are your grateful debtors.”

—DR. J. LIGON DUNCAN III
*Senior minister, First Presbyterian Church,
Jackson, Mississippi
From his Foreword*

“In this important book, Dr. Lawson has documented the teachings of many of the most important theologians, churchmen, and Christian thinkers of these centuries, showing that these men did indeed have much to say about God’s saving grace—and much that will be of great encouragement to evangelicals today.”

—DR. R. ALBERT MOHLER JR.
*President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary,
Louisville, Kentucky
From his Afterword*

A LONG LINE OF GODLY MEN
VOLUME TWO
AD 100 – 1564

PILLARS
OF GRACE

STEVEN J. LAWSON



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To R.C. Sproul—
formidable theologian, distinguished professor,
prolific author, beloved pastor,
guardian of the gospel.

For the past half-century, Dr. Sproul has brought the profound truths of Reformed theology from the halls of academia to everyday people in the pew. He has been the preeminent figure used by God in this generation to usher in the present resurgence of biblical Calvinism. Having studied under Dr. Sproul, I owe an enormous debt to him in many ways. From systematic theology and expository preaching to pastoral ministry and Christian living, his influence has been indelibly stamped upon me for good. In due time, I believe that history will reveal him to be the Martin Luther of our day.

*“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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Foreword

FROM FOUNDATIONS IN THE BIBLE TO PILLARS IN CHURCH HISTORY

As you pick up this book and begin to become familiar with its purpose, you might be tempted to think that Dr. Steven J. Lawson is simply showing what uninspired men taught over the course of the first fifteen hundred years of church history, but that does not prove that the Bible teaches the sovereignty of God in salvation. If that is the case, here is my advice: Find a copy of Dr. Lawson's *Foundations of Grace*, the first volume in his *A Long Line of Godly Men* series, and read it.

Foundations is a *tour de force* of whole-Bible study demonstrating that “God saves sinners.” In it, Dr. Lawson piles up 577 pages of Scripture exposition, thoroughly documenting the Bible’s teaching on salvation by sovereign grace. He traverses the rich and varied terrain of the Bible to introduce readers to the one true God and His sovereign, saving love from the whole of Scripture. He shows not only that the doctrines of grace are unassailably biblical, but that they are joy-giving, life-changing, Christ-exalting, God-glorifying, missions-motivating, evangelism-encouraging, and discipleship-promoting truths.

J. I. Packer has made the point that all the tenets of Calvinism—that faithfully biblical system of theology that joyfully embraces the rich, comforting, God-exalting, self-abasing, Christ-honoring, scriptural message of the sovereignty of God in salvation and all things—reduce to one overarching claim: “God saves sinners.”¹ Each of these words is important for understanding what the Bible teaches about salvation. First, *God* saves sinners. God, not man, saves. We do not save ourselves. Only *God* can save. Second, God *saves* sinners. He does not make us potentially savable. He does not enable us to save ourselves. He saves. Third, God saves *sinners*. He saves a multitude that no man can number out of a world of human beings who are dead in sin and in opposition to His kind and sovereign rule. He saves people who once hated

Him, ignored Him, and resisted Him. In salvation, God does not help those who help themselves, because no sinner can help himself. We are not “basically good” and in a position to “get by with a little help” from God. We are “without hope save in his sovereign mercy.”² Packer concludes: “This is the one point of Calvinistic soteriology which the ‘five points’ are concerned to establish . . . 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.”³

In *Foundations of Grace*, Dr. Lawson shows us this truth—“God saves sinners”—from the Old and New Testaments, from the Law and the Prophets, from the Gospels and the Letters, from Genesis to Revelation.

Allow me to give just one example of this Bible truth so amply demonstrated in *Foundations*. In Ephesians 2:8–10, the apostle Paul wants us to understand that God Himself has saved us. He puts this forcefully and strikingly: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” In these three verses, Paul manages, in six distinct ways, to tell us that our salvation is not because of us but is all of God. Notice how he does it:

First, he emphasizes that *we are saved by God’s grace*. That is, the cause of our salvation is God’s free saving favor to us despite our sinfulness, which leaves us deserving of judgment. Notice that Paul juxtaposes “by grace you have been saved” with “not your own doing.” This is his way of saying that salvation comes from God, not from us. “Do you want to understand the source, the cause of your salvation?” Paul asks. “Don’t look at yourself. Don’t look within. Look up to God. Look at the unmerited favor God has shown to you. That is what and who saved you—not something in you, something about you, or something that you did.” We do not deserve God’s saving mercy. We disqualified ourselves from communion with God by our rebellion against Him, our insurgency against Him, our alienation from Him, our indifference to Him, our walking according to the world, the flesh, and the Devil. And yet, the Lord saves us by grace and lavishes His forgiving favor on us.

Second, Paul says that *we receive our salvation by faith*. “For by grace you have been saved through faith.” Salvation is not something we attain by doing; rather, it is something we receive by believing. Paul is emphasizing our passive reception of something from God. We do not get salvation because we pull

ourselves up by our bootstraps and grab it. It is not something we accomplish by our own might and main, by staying up late at night and keeping our noses to the grindstone. We simply receive it from God. We receive our salvation by faith rather than by doing something. In other words, we are saved through the instrument of trust. We simply trust God. We have to throw our hands up and say, “Lord God, there is nothing I can do.” In the words of the great hymn “Rock of Ages,” we have to say, “Nothing in my hands I bring; simply to Thy cross I cling.” Simply put, we are saved not by our doing and not by our worthiness, but by God’s grace, and we simply, humbly, joyfully receive that salvation *by trust, by faith, by believing God’s promise*.

Third, if he has not been clear enough already, Paul next declares that *our salvation is God’s gift*. We must understand salvation as a gift from God, not as a right, an obligation, or a payment due us from God for our performance. Look at how he puts this: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; *it is the gift of God*. . . .” Paul’s point of emphasis is this: the whole of our salvation is God’s gift to us—not our gift to ourselves but God’s gift to us; not something we deserve but a free bestowal. He asks, “Do you want to know how you obtained salvation?” He answers, “It was by gift, by grant, by God’s grace.” So we who by grace trust in Christ need to view our salvation as a free gift from God, one we simply receive by faith.

Fourth—and this is very important for us to note, especially in light of the exegetically unsound and theologically errant views of the so-called new perspective on Paul—the apostle goes on to emphasize that *our salvation is not the effect of works in any way*. It is, he says, “not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” Paul is saying, in effect, “By the way, just in case you are missing my point, let me say the same thing again, this time in the negative—your salvation is not due in any way to your works, your doings.” In other words, if we want to see how we are saved, we should not look at ourselves, our works. We are not saved by our own efforts, deeds, or actions.

Fifth, Paul says in verse 10, *our salvation is the product of God’s workmanship*. “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works. . . .” What an extraordinary statement. The point is this: Salvation is not the product of our workmanship; rather, it is the product of God’s workmanship. We are not saved by what we do, but by what He did. In fact, we not only are not saved *by* our good works, we are saved *in order to do* good works. We are not saved *by* doing what is right in the sight of God, but we are saved *unto* doing, with joy and gladness in gratitude for God’s free grace, all that He created us

to do originally in paradise. Indeed, the very possibility of our doing anything to be saved is utterly precluded by Paul's language of "creation." We can be created *for* work. But we cannot create ourselves *by* work. Indeed, we cannot create ourselves at all. So by speaking of salvation as a work in which God creates us anew in Christ Jesus, Paul is affirming in the strongest possible way the divine sovereignty and monergistic power at work in our salvation. Our works may and do result from God's saving work, but they do not and cannot cause it. The order of salvation is not "do this and live," but "live and do this."

Sixth, lest we make the erroneous deduction that God looked into the future and foresaw our belief in Christ and our subsequent good works, and thus based His salvation of us on foreseen faith and obedience, Paul tells us that *God saves us by grace and creates us in Christ (not by our works) in order that we should do the works He foreordained for us to do from eternity past.* "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." Paul is saying that even the good works we now do were prepared beforehand by our gracious God for us to do. He doesn't save us because He foresees that we will do good works. No, the message is far more glorious and comforting than that. Indeed, it is far more staggering, even mind-boggling, than that. God saves us to "walk" in good works, to do righteousness, to live in godliness, to practice a holiness to which He predestined us from before the world itself ever existed. So our righteousness is not the means, the instrument, or the way of our salvation, it is part of God's goal in His salvation of us. God created us to be His image, to be like Him. That image was marred in our fall into sin. In glorification, that image is fully restored, and so John can say that at the coming of our Lord, "We shall be like him" (1 John 3:2). Thus, these good deeds in which we walk, far from being the cause of our salvation, are instead its goal, its aim. Our doing of good is itself part of God's predestined plan for us. Paul explains this in Ephesians 1:4 by saying that God chose us in Christ "before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him." So Paul emphasizes that our whole salvation is the sovereign, eternal work of God.

There we have it. Six times in three little but hugely important verses, Paul stresses that we are saved by God's grace alone. Our salvation is wholly because of His saving, forgiving, transforming, undeserved, and unearned power and favor. We receive that saving favor through trust (and even that trust is the result of God's Spirit at work in us). We do nothing to earn salvation or merit it; we simply trust God to give us something we do not deserve. It is God's

gift given freely to us, not a debt He owes us. Salvation is not accomplished by us, nor does it result from our works. Instead, we ourselves are God's work and are saved by God's work (rather than saved by God because of our works). Even our Christian lives, our walking in good works as saved sinners, are the result of God's workmanship, the consequence (not the cause) of something that God pre-appointed, foreordained, predestined "before the mountains were brought forth" (Ps. 90:2).

Paul's point is that salvation is all of grace. The totality of our salvation is from God. Understanding this is absolutely essential for healthy Christian life, ministry, and experience. This is the truth that Dr. Lawson demonstrates, voluminously, in his earlier book.

What, then, is the purpose of *this* book? What is it about and what is it for? In *Foundations of Grace*, Dr. Lawson shows us how the doctrines of grace are firmly rooted in the teaching of all the Bible. In this volume, *Pillars of Grace*, he begins to walk us through the halls of church history to show us that the church, at its best, has understood that God's grace is sovereign in salvation.

There are at least four benefits of joining Dr. Lawson in this scintillating study. First, there is the simple and obvious opportunity to improve our knowledge of our own Christian family history. Western Christians in our day are not world famous for their grasp of the history of the church. Protestants know little about the history of the church prior to Martin Luther's nailing of his Ninety-five Theses to the door of the Wittenberg church on Oct. 31, 1517. Americans, in particular, lack knowledge of and love for history in general. We are the poorer for this ignorance. But if we will walk with Dr. Lawson through the lives and writings of great Christians from Clement of Rome to John Calvin, we will be enriched with a new appreciation for the treasures that have been bequeathed to us as members of the family of the living God. Dr. Lawson helps us remedy our poverty in this well-written, easy-to-read tour from the second to the sixteenth centuries.

Second, as Dr. Lawson highlights some of the Church Fathers' comments on the sovereignty of God, radical depravity, sovereign election, definite atonement, irresistible calling, preserving grace, and more, and as we see the church's theology of grace develop across the boundaries of time, place, and culture, we gain a greater appreciation that the doctrines of grace are not the invention of the sixteenth, seventeenth, or nineteenth century, or the product of one narrow branch of the Christian tradition. Rather, they are part of a common

and catholic (or universal) theological legacy. Yes, they were not always fully understood. Yes, they sometimes were obscured or ignored. But the cumulative testimony of history is a powerful witness to their universality.

Third, studying the doctrines of grace via the writings of the greatest Christian teachers of the ages helps us check and confirm our own understanding of Scripture. Let me explain. Protestants do not believe that any period of church history is finally authoritative for faith and practice, unlike our Roman Catholic friends. We highly value the witness, testimony, and lessons of church history, but we hold, emphatically, that Scripture alone is our supreme rule of faith and life. Nevertheless, the study of church history, or of the church's growth in understanding of the teaching of Scripture (what professionals call "historical theology"), is very helpful and important to us. Why? Not because any writer or era of Christian history is infallible or unerringly authoritative, but because studying historical theology allows us to learn what other Christians in other times thought the Bible taught. This in turn can serve to confirm and test our own understanding of Scripture. I love the way Hughes Oliphant Old (a towering scholar of Christian history and worship) puts this: "We need to be interested in them [the Church Fathers] not in themselves but . . . because of what they point out to us about Scripture."⁴

Fourth, since the formulation of Christian doctrine has always been advanced in controversy, and since theological disputes require the participants to sharpen and clarify their doctrinal articulations and to work out more fully the ramifications of the doctrine under discussion, our study of church history can help us understand Bible doctrine better and more fully appreciate its devotional and practical significance. So, for instance, when we read the writings of Augustine related to the Pelagian controversy, we cannot help but grow in our knowledge of the issues at stake, become more familiar with the questions and categories of the doctrines of grace, and see more clearly the eternal consequences of truth and error in connection with this vital subject.

My brilliant friend Carl Trueman, professor of church history at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, sees great value in reading the Church Fathers (what scholars call "Patristics"). In a post on the reformation21 weblog, he offered four reasons why we ought to read the writings of the earliest teachers of the church. Here are his wise words:

1. The doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation are basically hammered out in the early church. By tracing the controversies,

we can learn how and why the creedal formulation of these doctrines is important.

2. The pre-Constantinian context of much patristic theology offers a paradigm of how Christians can operate as a minority in a hostile or indifferent society. I am often struck by the difference between the early church apologists' approach to the Roman Empire ("don't persecute us because Christians actually make the best citizens") and the modern approach of "don't mess with us, we're Christians," where Christianity can sometimes look like little more than a cultural idiom for protesting Communism, secularism, etc.
3. The very alien nature of the world in which the Fathers operated challenges us to think more critically about ourselves in our own context. We may not, for example, sympathise much with radically ascetic monasticism; but when we understand it as a fourth-century answer to the age-old question of what a committed Christian looks like at a time when it is starting to be easy and respectable, we can at least use it as an anvil on which to hammer out our own contemporary response to such a question.
4. As Protestants, we cannot claim to understand the historical development of our own tradition unless we come to terms with patristic theology: Luther, Calvin, Owen, and company were deeply read and heavily influenced by patristic writings.⁵

For these reasons and a dozen more, your investment of time and attention in reading through *Pillars of Grace* will be amply repaid.

Let me mention one last point. Dr. Lawson taught through this material with the men's group in his own congregation before he gave it to the larger church for our benefit and edification. As a fellow pastor, that piques my interest. Just think what a blessing it would be to have a congregation whose officers and male leaders are steeped in the knowledge of the truth, the Bible, and church history that Dr. Lawson provides here. Fellow pastors, by all means use this material for your own growth in knowledge and grace. Pillage it for illustrations and content in your preaching. Encourage your women's

Bible studies and small groups to consider using this material for their edification. But do not neglect to teach your men, and especially your officers, the truth contained herein. Your whole congregation will rise up and call you blessed for doing so, for godly men, gripped by grace and truth, will serve their wives, children, parents, and fellow members so well that all will be blessed together with them.

Thank you, Dr. Lawson, for your labors in pulling together this rich treasury of biblical teaching on the doctrines of grace over the centuries from faithful men whom Christ appointed and the Spirit endowed for the building up of the saints for the work of service. We are your grateful debtors. Dear reader, join me now on an epic journey of edification guided by this faithful shepherd of souls.

—*J. Ligon Duncan III*
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Jackson, Mississippi
August 2010

NOTES

- 1 J. I. Packer, "Introductory Essay," in John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (London: Banner of Truth, 1959), 4.
- 2 Presbyterian Church in America, *The Book of Church Order*, 6th Ed., first membership vow (Atlanta: Committee for Christian Education and Publications, 2009), 80.
- 3 Packer, "Introductory Essay," 4–5.
- 4 Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: Reformed According to Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 171.
- 5 Carl R. Trueman, "The Fathers," <http://www.reformation21.org/blog/2007/04/the-fathers.php> (accessed April 21, 2010).

UPHOLDING THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE

At the height of the Roman Empire, a series of magnificent temples punctuated the landscape of the Mediterranean region. Built prominently atop high hills, these architectural masterpieces were among the wonders of the ancient world. The most prominent feature of these splendid buildings was their pillars, a series of columns carved from beautiful marble, studded with costly jewels, and inlaid with pure gold. Such a colonnade would arrest the attention of Roman citizens and foreign travelers entering one of the temples.

However, the primary purpose of the pillars was not cosmetic but functional. Resting securely on a firm foundation, these sturdy posts supported the whole temple structure. From the overhead beams and stone arches to the high-rising walls, vaulted ceiling, and pitched roof, every part of the temple, in one way or another, was upheld by these cylindrical blocks of marble. The entire edifice was bolstered by their strength. If the columns stood firm, the temple held fast. As a result, these ornate pillars came to be a symbol of stability and strength.

This is precisely the imagery used by the biblical authors to portray the strongest leaders in the early church—these men were *pillars*. The apostle Paul described Peter, James, and John as “pillars” in the church at Jerusalem (Gal. 2:9). These strong men, empowered by God’s might, helped stabilize the first-century church by upholding God’s Word, thereby strengthening the household of faith. In fact, Paul wrote that the entire church was to be the “pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). This is to say, the mission of the church, like a sturdy colonnade, is to stand for the truth of the Christian faith. Jesus Christ also used this image, saying that all believers are “pillars” in the heavenly temple (Rev. 3:12)—permanent, immovable, and secure.

In keeping with this biblical metaphor, the central thrust of this book—*Pillars of Grace*—is to show that key leaders of the early church and beyond acted as pillars, standing firm on the foundation of Scripture and upholding the truth. Specifically, each of these sturdy men upheld the doctrines of sovereign grace in his hour of history. These stalwarts formed a colonnade, century by century, in support of the truth of God’s supreme authority in man’s salvation. This long line of godly men began with the Church Fathers and extended through the Monastics, Scholastics, Pre-Reformers, and, eventually, the Reformers themselves. Among them was a wide variety of men, including faithful pastors, godly preachers, brilliant apologists, gifted theologians, prolific writers, and even gallant martyrs. Each pillar was strategically placed by the sovereign Architect and Builder of the church for his appointed time.

As men saturated with Scripture, these “pillars of grace” supported the living temple of God. They were the most formidable teachers in their day and the most faithful defenders of Christian orthodoxy against the many heresies confronting the church. There were many such individuals, but we will focus on the key figures who took the lead in holding forth the poignant truths of sovereign grace. Their commitment to this biblical teaching deserves our careful study as we trace the progression of their lives and ministries within the larger framework of the first sixteen centuries of church history.

This book is the second volume of a set titled *A Long Line of Godly Men*. It is designed to demonstrate that those figures who were most used in the early and medieval church, to one degree or another, held to the truths of sovereign grace that were later taught in the Reformation. From the first century through the sixteenth, the dominant figures in the church were strong men committed to this strong teaching. That is the witness of history and the central premise of this book.

Who were the key figures who joined this parade of spiritual stalwarts that marched with the doctrines of grace? Who took their divinely appointed places immediately after the last authors of Scripture? Who were these early church leaders? Who were these medieval voices? Who were the Pre-Reformers and first Reformers? What did they teach regarding the sovereign grace of God in salvation? This volume is devoted to tracing this triumphant procession of godly men from AD 30, with the birth of Clement of Rome, to 1564, with the death of John Calvin in Geneva.

A SUMMARY OF THE BIBLICAL TEACHING

Before we begin this journey, we need to remind ourselves of what was put forward in Volume One of this series, *Foundations of Grace*. There, the biblical case for the sovereignty of God in salvation was clearly—and, I believe, convincingly—made. From the lawgiver Moses in the first books of the Bible to the apostle John in the last book, we noted that there advanced onto the stage of human history an illustrious procession of faithful men who recorded the teachings of sovereign grace throughout Scripture.

Their names comprise the roll call of a great cloud of witnesses. The long line began with the first leaders of Israel—notables such as Moses, Joshua, and Samuel. It continued with other gallant men, such as Ezra and Nehemiah, and extended to the poets of the Wisdom books, revered authors such as Job, David, and Solomon. To a man, they carefully articulated in the inspired text of Scripture the sovereignty of God in the salvation of men.

This advancing column then was joined by the major prophets of Israel, who also taught the supreme authority of God in the redemption of sinners—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Each writer heralded the same standard of truth, that is, the eternal purposes of God in His supreme will to save. The minor prophets also were recruited for this cavalcade of biblical authors, notables such as Hosea, Amos, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. They, too, held to the determinative will and definite work of God in His saving grace.

The New Testament reveals the same. From Matthew through Revelation, there is a continuation of this succession, each biblical writer recording sovereign grace in salvation. All four of the Gospel writers—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—joined this array as they recorded the profound truths that came from the lips of Jesus Christ. His teaching gave unquestionable testimony to the doctrines of grace. Thereafter, the apostles were divinely commissioned to write yet more of the inspired text. Peter, Paul, and John soon found themselves in this parade of sovereign grace teachers. The remaining biblical authors—the author of Hebrews, James, and Jude—also took their God-appointed places in this long line of godly men.

Beginning with Moses in the wilderness and stretching to John on the island of Patmos, Scripture speaks with one voice in trumpeting the sovereignty of God in salvation. It upholds one standard of truth. It teaches one way of salvation. It asserts the one divine operation by which saving grace is

applied to spiritually dead sinners. The various aspects of this glorious truth are known collectively as the doctrines of grace, and all of Scripture teaches these unfathomable riches of God's sovereign grace.

THE BEDROCK DOCTRINE: DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY

The sovereignty of God is not a secondary doctrine that is relegated to an obscure corner in the Bible. Rather, this truth is the very bedrock doctrine of all Scripture. This is the Mount Everest of biblical teaching, the towering truth that transcends all theology. From its opening verse, the Bible asserts in no uncertain terms that God is and that God reigns. In other words, He is *God*—not merely in name, but in full reality. God does as He pleases, when He pleases, where He pleases, how He pleases, and with whom He pleases in saving undeserving sinners. All other doctrines of the Christian faith must be brought into alignment with this keystone truth.

The sovereignty of God is the free exercise of His supreme authority in executing and administering His eternal purposes. God must be sovereign if He is to be truly God. A god who is not sovereign is not God at all. Such is an imposter, an idol, a mere caricature formed in man's fallen imagination. A god who is less than fully sovereign is not worthy of our worship, much less our witness. But the Bible proclaims for all to hear that "the LORD reigns" (Ps. 93:1). God is exactly who Scripture declares He is. He is the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth, whose supreme authority is over all. This is the main premise of Scripture.

Nowhere is God's sovereignty more clearly demonstrated than in His salvation of the lost. God is free to bestow His saving mercy on whom He pleases. God says, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy" (Ex. 33:19b; Rom. 9:15). He is not obligated to extend His grace to any undeserving sinner. If He were to choose to save none, He would remain perfectly just. He might determine to save a few and still be absolutely holy. Or He could choose to save all. But God is sovereign, and that means He is entirely free to bestow His grace however He will—whether on none, few, or all.

From beginning to end, salvation is of God and, ultimately, for God. The apostle Paul writes, "From him and through him and to him are all things" (Rom. 11:36). In this comprehensive verse, God is declared to be the divine source, the determinative means, and the designated end of all things. This is most true in salvation. According to this text, every aspect of the operation

of saving grace is God-initiated, God-directed, and God-glorifying. Every dimension of salvation is from Him, through Him, and to Him. This is to say, salvation originates from His sovereign will, proceeds through His sovereign activity, and leads to His sovereign glory.

THE SOLIDARITY OF THE TRINITY

Moreover, divine sovereignty in salvation involves each of the three persons of the Godhead—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All three work in perfect unity to rescue the same undeserving sinners. Within the Trinity, there is one saving purpose, one saving plan, and one saving enterprise. Those whom the Father chooses are precisely those whom the Son redeems and those whom the Spirit regenerates. The persons of the Godhead act as one Savior. The Trinity is not fractured in its saving activity. It is not divided in its direction and intent, as if each person of the Godhead seeks to save a different group of sinners. Instead, each member of the Trinity purposes and irresistibly proceeds to save one and the same people—God’s chosen people.

Sadly, many believe otherwise. They insist that the Father saves only the few sinners whom He foresees will believe in Christ, thus mistakenly confusing foreknowledge (Acts 2:23; Rom. 8:29–30; 1 Peter 1:2, 20), which means “forelove,” with mere foresight. They also imagine that Christ hypothetically died for all sinners—a different group from that which the Father saves—naively assuming there is only one meaning for the scriptural words *world* and *all*. They further claim that the Spirit saves yet another group, that is, some sinners whom He woos. Sadly, they mistake His internal, saving call (1 Cor. 1:2, 9) for a general, non-saving conviction (Heb. 6:4–5). According to this leaky scheme, the three persons of the Godhead are purported to be pursuing three different groups of individuals—*few*, *all*, and *some*. Thus, the persons of the Godhead are sorely divided in Their saving activity. Even worse, the sinner—not God—reigns as determinative in his or her salvation.

But the Bible teaches otherwise. Scripture reveals a perfect unity within the Trinity, a perfect oneness between the Father, Son, and Spirit in Their saving activities. God’s Word teaches that the Godhead acts as one Savior in saving one people. The truth is that man is not sovereign in salvation—God is. All three members work together with absolute sovereignty and unwavering resolve to save the very same people for Their own glory. This is accomplished through the free exercise of the supreme authority of all three members of the Trinity. Consider the part that each plays in this cohesive salvation.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF THE FATHER

Before the foundation of the world, God chose individuals—undeserving and unworthy though they are—to be the objects of His saving grace (2 Tim. 1:9). The apostle Paul writes, “He chose us in him before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4a). That is to say, He chose His elect by Himself and for Himself—a sovereign choice not based on any foreseen good works or faith on their part. This divine election originated within Himself, by His own gracious choice (Rom. 9:16). For reasons known only to God, He selected whom He would save.

Having chosen His elect, the Father gave them to the Son before time began to be His royal inheritance. This gift was an expression of the Father’s love for the Son (John 6:37, 39; 17:2, 6, 9, 24). These chosen ones were selected for the highest purpose—that they would praise the Son forever and be conformed to His image (Rom. 8:29). The Father then, in eternity past, commissioned the Son to enter the world to purchase the salvation of the elect. Further, the Father directed the Holy Spirit to regenerate these same chosen ones. Thus, their salvation was foreordained and predestined by the sovereign will of God before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:5). The names of the elect were then written in the Lamb’s book of life (Rev. 13:8; 17:8). Under the direction of the Father, all three persons of the Godhead irrevocably agreed to execute the salvation of these chosen people. This is the sovereign grace of God the Father in eternity past.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF THE SON

Having long ago received from the Father the individual names of the elect, Jesus Christ came into this world to purchase their salvation. With a singular intent, Christ purposed to die for His true church—those given to Him by the Father in eternity past. He declared, “I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:15). Bound by devotion to His chosen bride, Christ “loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25b).

With this definite design in the cross, Jesus purchased with His own blood all those who were predestined to believe in Him (Acts 20:28). He did not merely make salvation possible. He did not make a hypothetical redemption. Rather, He actually saved. Christ was not shortchanged at Calvary, but acquired all those for whom He paid. Jesus truly secured eternal life for His sheep. Not one for whom He died will ever perish. This is the sovereign grace of God the Son two thousand years ago in His saving death.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF THE SPIRIT

Moreover, the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit into this world to apply the saving death of Christ to all the elect. As the gospel is proclaimed, the Spirit issues a special inward call to these chosen ones, those elected by the Father and redeemed by the Son. The Spirit powerfully regenerates their spiritually dead souls, raising them from the grave of sin to saving faith in Christ (Eph. 2:5–6). Jesus asserted, “All that the Father gives me will come to me” (John 6:37a). This saving enterprise is unalterably certain because God “draws” (6:44) all these “given ones” to Christ. The Spirit grants them repentance (2 Tim. 2:25) and authors saving faith within them (Phil. 1:29; 2 Peter 1:1).

In this effectual act, the Spirit opens the spiritually blind eyes of the elect to see the truth (2 Cor. 4:6). He opens their deaf ears to hear His voice (John 10:27). He opens their closed hearts to receive the gospel (Acts 16:14). He activates their dead wills to believe the saving message (John 1:13). The Spirit overcomes all resistance and triumphs in the hearts of the elect. This is the sovereign grace of God the Holy Spirit within time.

FOREVER KEPT BY SOVEREIGNTY

Once converted, all the elect are kept by the power of God forever. None of the Father’s chosen ones will ever be lost (Titus 1:1–2). None for whom the Son died will ever perish (Rom. 8:33–34). None who are regenerated by the Spirit will ever fall from grace (Titus 3:5–7). All the recipients of the saving grace of God will be ushered into glory forever (Rom. 8:29–30). This broad sweep of salvation reaches back to eternity past and stretches forward into eternity future. Salvation is one indivisible work of grace. Those chosen by God before time began will remain saved forever. All the elect will be preserved throughout the ages to come. God Himself will guard them and cause them to stand faultless before His throne (Jude 24). This view of sovereign grace is breath-taking, awe-inspiring, soul-humbling, and joy-producing.

Above all else, this view is God-glorifying. In each of the doctrines of grace, the glory of God is central. Only a salvation that is from Him and through Him can be to Him. Electing grace redounds “to the praise of his glorious grace” (Eph. 1:6a). Redeeming grace promotes “the praise of his glory” (1:12b). Regenerating grace is “to the praise of his glory” (1:14b). This is because all saving grace is sovereign grace. It is this view of salvation that brings greatest glory to God alone.

Humbled by this lofty truth, Jonathan Edwards wrote, “Those who have

received salvation are to attribute it to sovereign grace alone, and to give all the praise to Him, who makes them to differ from others.”¹ Should not this be our response as well? May we all fall to our knees and affirm that “salvation and glory and power belong to our God” (Rev. 19:1). May the truth of God’s sovereignty in our salvation cause highest praise to be given to Him. “To him be glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36).

PILLARS RISE FROM STRONG FOUNDATIONS

As stated above, this is a summary of the biblical teaching that was carefully laid out in Volume One, *Foundations of Grace*. The scriptural case was presented that the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, teaches the sovereignty of God in salvation. Virtually every biblical author, as well as Jesus Christ Himself, explicitly teaches these cardinal truths of God’s sovereign grace in saving sinners according to His eternal purposes. The Bible speaks with one voice, declaring that “salvation belongs to the LORD” (Ps. 3:8a).

The doctrines of grace—radical depravity, sovereign election, definite atonement, irresistible call, and preserving grace, plus the umbrella doctrine of divine sovereignty and the necessary antithetical doctrine, divine reprobation—are the cornerstone truths of our Christian faith. When forged together, these doctrines form the bedrock of what we have called the “foundations of grace.”

Sturdy pillars must rest on a strong foundation. So it is that this volume is titled *Pillars of Grace*. Here we will seek to discover the core convictions of those men, from the Church Fathers to the Reformers, whose message embraced the teaching of the biblical authors. Century by century, these leaders in the church ministered the Word of God and upheld the truth of sovereign grace. It is the intention of this book to demonstrate that the primary leaders of the early and medieval church believed the doctrines of grace in rudimentary but increasingly consistent form. Beginning with the Apostolic Fathers in the first and second centuries and proceeding through the Reformers in the sixteenth century, these men held to these truths and expressed them in their pulpits and with their pens. The dominant figures in the early history of the church were strong men with an understanding of sovereign grace.

Who were the godly men who formed this long line? They were the first pastors and theologians of the Christian era. They were the philosophers and apologists of the embryonic centuries of the church, defenders of the truth who resisted heretical teachings. They were the faithful men who took their

stand on the sure foundations of sovereign grace. They were the saints who were most gripped with a high view of God. They were the pillars of grace.

Before we begin this journey, I want to thank many people who have helped make this book a reality. I must express my gratitude to Dr. R. C. Sproul and Ligonier Ministries, who see the importance of this material being put into print; it is to Dr. Sproul that this volume is dedicated. I also want to thank the elders of Christ Fellowship Baptist Church, godly men who have supported me in my book writing and my preaching ministry beyond our church. Greg Bailey, my editor at Reformation Trust, provided excellent counsel and skilled editing. Mark Hassler contributed exceptional research with the quotations and endnotes. Dr. Michael A. G. Haykin and Dr. Curt Daniel read the manuscript, offering invaluable historical and theological input. Kent Barton did a masterful job of rendering sketches of each of these pillars of the faith. John Innabnit, a fellow pastor at Christ Fellowship, also read the manuscript and made many helpful suggestions.

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Let us now trace the flow of the doctrines of grace through church history, from the first to the sixteenth century. We will see that even in the face of much adversity and opposition, God remains faithful to His cause, establishing the truth of His Word in the hearts of His people.

—Steven J. Lawson
Mobile, Alabama
October 2010

NOTE

- 1 Jonathan Edwards, "The Sovereignty of God in Salvation," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. II* (1834; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), 854.



Clement of Rome



Ignatius of Antioch



Justin Martyr



Irenaeus of Lyons



Tertullian of Carthage



Cyprian of Carthage



Athanasius of Alexandria



Basil of Caesarea



Gregory of Nazianzus



Ambrose of Milan



Augustine of Hippo



Isidore of Seville



Gottschalk of Orbais



Anselm of Canterbury



Bernard of Clairvaux



Thomas Bradwardine



John Wycliffe



John Hus



Martin Luther



Ulrich Zwingli



William Tyndale



Heinrich Bullinger



John Calvin