

# Grace to Be Holy

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(April, 2004; December 31, 2004)

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## I. Introduction

### *A Problem Practical and Theological*

Over the past few years my awareness of the natural depravity of my own heart has deepened. One observation in particular stands out: My heart is fickle. There have been days when I have at one moment had tears streaming down my uplifted face as I yielded in complete surrender to the Lord. And yet, on some such days, just hours or even minutes later, I have knowingly walked into deliberate sin, heedless of the destruction being wreaked on my soul.

This sort of experience has led me to face a disturbing question: If my heart can be so fickle, my will so inconsistent, then how can I have any confidence that the sanctification I am experiencing today will continue into the future? Indeed, what assurance do I have that I will even *want* to be sanctified in the future? My “want to” seems to swing so easily at times from one extreme to the other, from wanting to love and obey God at one moment, to wanting to love and serve the flesh at another moment. How can this be? Haven’t believers in Christ been “set free from sin” so that sin should “no longer have dominion” over us (Romans 6:7, 14; English Standard Version)? Has not God provided us with “every spiritual blessing” in Christ (Ephesians 1:3) and with “all things that pertain to life and godliness” (1 Peter 1:3)? Why, then, do I continue to face this struggle with a wayward will? Is there no hope of stability and consistency in my Christian faith and walk?

By way of clarification, I do not mean that I am seeking an *absolute* assurance that I could *never* fall away from the faith, for I understand that the Bible presents

the willful “shipwrecking” of faith (1 Tim 1:19) to be a possibility against which believers must remain on guard. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 10:12, “Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (see the essay “Deliberate Sin Erodes Faith” for more discussion). Yet, surely God offers us something more than the erratic, fear-prone stance toward sin that has too often been my experience. Clearly, the Bible presents as normative a stable, confident, and hopeful stance toward our sanctification (e.g., Phlp 1:6; 2 Pet 1:10-11). On what basis can we achieve this?

This question has profound theological implications, especially for those like myself who recognize an integral role for the exercise of human free will in both salvation and sanctification. Those within the theological tradition of Arminianism teach that salvation cannot be obtained apart from the authentically-free exercise of an individual’s will to embrace Christ in faith, not because God has unilaterally determined that the individual must exercise such faith, but instead because the individual freely chooses to do so.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, most within the Arminian tradition further insist that salvation cannot continue for an individual apart from that individual’s intentional perseverance in the faith, again involving the authentically-free exercise of his will. Within this context, the believer’s faith-fight against sin involves an ongoing series of free choices to resist evil and draw near to God for continued sanctification. Indeed, many who hold to Arminian teaching, most notably many of those in the Wesleyan tradition, stress that consistent victory over deliberate sin is not only possible but normative, according to the teaching of the New Testament.<sup>2</sup>

The problem for the Wesleyan-Arminian view is this: How can a Christian have any reasonable assurance that he will in fact persevere in the faith, not to mention experience consistent victory over deliberate sin, given the integral role played by human free will within the Arminian system? As I noted above, the human will is notoriously fickle and inconsistent, and to the extent that its cooperation is required for success in the struggle with temptation, it is hard to see what hope there is of any reliable progress, not to mention perfection, in the spiritual war in which believers find themselves. In my own Christian experience I have been shocked more times than I care to remember at how easily my firm intentions to avoid a given sin have crumbled in the face of seemingly irresistible temptation. Addictive behaviors in particular reveal the weakness and corruption of the human

will. The Bible gives ample justification for concern in this regard: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9) "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing." (Romans 7:15, 18-19)

This question regarding the unreliability of the human will is actually just one aspect of a broader concern commonly raised against Arminian theology, namely, that by emphasizing the role of human free will Arminianism is overly man-centered and not sufficiently God-centered. Critics of Arminianism argue that any emphasis on authentic human free will leads to theological ruin in at least two ways: (a) by detracting from the glory due God for his role in bringing about our salvation and sanctification, and (b) by leading to perpetual instability for the Christian who perceives his salvation and sanctification as being dependent in some critical sense on the performance of his own unpredictable will.

The first of these objections I have responded to at length in the essay "Does Arminianism Diminish God's Glory?" I concluded there that when the nature of divine sovereignty and divine glory are each properly understood in biblical terms, then the Arminian attention to human free will may actually *increase* rather than detract from God's glory. Lest the reader misunderstand, however, let me add here that true Arminian teaching does not place human free will on a par with divine grace, contrary to popular opinion. As will become clearer below, biblically-informed Arminianism teaches that it is divine grace which makes possible the function of authentic free will in the first place, and it is divine grace which should be the ultimate desire of free will once the latter has been engendered. Indeed, the essence of the human role in both salvation and sanctification is no more than a response to the initiating grace of God. As important as the recognition of authentic human free will may be, no Arminian theology will stand unless the *grace of God*--not human free will--forms its centerpiece.

The second objection above echoes the concern just raised at the opening of the present essay, namely, "How can we have any confidence in the future

continuation of our sanctification and perseverance in the faith given the inconstancy of the human will?" I believe that the answer to this problem is found in the nature of the grace of God and in the interplay of this divine grace with the human will in the process of our sanctification. I have come to the firm conviction that divine grace and human free will, far from standing in necessary contradiction or irresolvable tension, may in fact work in tandem without compromising the integrity of either, and this in a way often missed by those within the Calvinist and Arminian traditions alike. The practical applications for our sanctification in Christ that arise from this theological understanding of the interplay of grace and free will have proven to be among the most precious truths I have ever personally encountered in God's Word.<sup>3</sup> I will attempt to share this understanding and its practical applications with you below.

### *Sanctifying Grace*

By way of preview, the interplay of grace and free will that characterizes the biblical pursuit of holiness can be encapsulated as follows:

Grace enlightens, inspires, and enables free will;  
and, in turn, enabled free will casts itself in utter dependence back upon  
grace.

As will be seen below, what I refer to above as enlightening, inspiring, and enabling grace in important ways parallels the traditional theological concept known as *prevenient* grace. Whereas, however, theologians often limit prevenient grace to God's preparatory work in the hearts of individuals to draw them to salvation, I will argue that the same sort of divine grace is essential to the believer's *sanctification* as well. Because my usage of this concept is broader than traditionally envisioned, I will use the term *preceding grace* below to distinguish mine from the traditional usage. I will argue that preceding grace in Scripture exhibits a threefold function: (a) the *enlightening* of our minds to understand God's will, (b) the *inspiring* (or motivating) of our hearts to continue loving and obeying him, and (c) the *enabling* of our wills to obey God's will. It is these functions of preceding grace, I will argue, that make possible our growth and perseverance in holiness as we cooperate with the divine initiative in our hearts and cast ourselves in reliance back upon God for yet more grace to

become fully conformed to the image of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

The inspiring or motivating function of God's preceding grace (i.e., point (b) above) is perhaps the one function most particularly relevant to the problem noted above concerning how we may be confident of perseverance in sanctification. God has promised to maintain in every believer's heart a spark of holy desire sufficient to make victory over deliberate sin *consistently* possible. It is this infusion of divine grace, not any imagined fortitude of my own corrupted will, that supplies me with the only possible basis for assurance of continued sanctification and perseverance in the faith. Though at times this God-induced motivation within my heart may appear only as a flicker in comparison to the flame of rebellion threatening to rage in my spirit, even that flicker of holy desire is enough to make victory over sin possible. For, once I perceive and welcome the presence of the longing for holiness that God has placed within me, this spark of holy desire can function as a catalyst leading me to cry out for *more grace*, grace by which:

- a) my mind may be renewed, so that I am able to penetrate the foggy deception of sin's appeal,
- b) the integrity of my will may be restored, so that I can genuinely and earnestly embrace the will of God,
- c) my hardened spirit may be softened and quickened, so that I may once again prize Christ as a treasure above all else,
- d) my faltering resolve may be strengthened, so that the deeds of the flesh may by the power of the Spirit be put to death within me, leading to continued sanctification and perseverance in faith.

Over against the fickleness and inconstancy of my own human will, then, stands the constant inflow of the grace of God to me as a believer in Christ. By this grace God enlightens, inspires, and enables my will, and I, in turn, exercise this enabled will not by going my own way or fighting the faith-battle in my own strength, but rather by casting myself back upon God in absolute reliance, trusting in his faithfulness and power to sanctify me. This ever-present grace of God provides what I have been seeking: a basis for assurance of future sanctification. Though not irresistible, this grace is yet always *sufficient* to meet the need of the moment. It motivates without coercing. It enables without determining. It spurs me to cast myself upon God for additional grace if only I will drop my resistance and invite

God to grant it so. Ultimately, this grace provides an objective anchor outside of myself on which my sanctification and perseverance in the faith depend.

### *Plan of the Present Essay*

Before examining the three functions of God's preceding grace in detail it will be necessary to first discuss more generally the nature and necessity of divine grace. This I will do at some length in Section II below. My discussion will distinguish between two broad types of grace that God grants to humans: preceding and subsequent grace. I will give special attention to the need for preceding grace in light of the corruption and impotence of the human will, followed by a number of observations about how and to whom God dispenses this grace, drawing on various scriptures throughout to support my conclusions. I will discuss the differences between preceding and subsequent grace, noting, however, that the two often overlap in practice. I will also devote a subsection to exploring the related phenomenon of hardening, or the withdrawal (or withholding) of preceding grace. In Section III, afterward, I will elaborate on the three functions of preceding grace, beginning with the enlightening and enabling functions. I will save the inspiring or motivating function of God's grace for last due to its particular relevance to the question of our perseverance in sanctification. In the final section (Section IV) I will discuss the ramifications of these functions of grace (particularly the inspiring or motivating function) for our perseverance in sanctification and our victory over sin.

## II. The Nature of Divine Grace

Let us begin with a discussion of the nature of divine grace from a theological perspective, drawing on relevant biblical data as we go. Theologically speaking, we may distinguish between two broad types of grace that God grants to humans: *preceding* and *subsequent* grace. I will consider both below, as well as the related concept of *hardening*.

First a note about grace in general: Perhaps the most common definition of grace in evangelical circles today is that of "unmerited favor." This is sometimes

narrowly equated to forgiveness of sin or forensic justification. Unfortunately, such an understanding of grace is too limited and misses an important thrust of the biblical conception of grace: Grace does not refer merely to a change in God's attitude toward us (i.e., forgiveness, pardon), though it certainly may include this important element. More broadly, divine grace is the *power of God at work in our lives* to lead us from darkness to light, from death into life, from utter corruption of will to full obedience to the will of God and conformity to the image of Christ. Consider, for example, the Lord's well-known words to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). Grace in this context refers not so much to forgiveness or imputed righteousness but to the *provision of power* for Paul to be strong for Christ in the midst of his weakness. Likewise, in 1 Cor 15:10 Paul asserted that he "worked harder than any" of the other apostles, after which he clarified, "though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me." Again, grace here is viewed as a dynamic force enabling Paul to accomplish his service for the Lord. (See also; Heb 4:16; 13:9; Acts 6:8; 2 Tim 2:1; 1 Pet 4:10.) Grace is thus an active concept; its goal is not only to justify us (as important as this may be) but to *transform* us by the truth and life found in Christ. Ultimately, the goal of grace is nothing less than complete holiness unto the Lord, and grace is itself the power of God unleashed in us to realize that goal. Grace is thus eminently relevant not only to our salvation but to our sanctification in Christ.

With this preliminary understanding of grace in mind, we can now consider the first category of divine grace, which is also the major focus of this essay, namely, preceding grace.

## *Preceding Grace*

### ***Definition of Preceding Grace***

*Preceding grace* expresses the *divine initiative* and refers to all the ways, both inward and outward, by which God seeks to lead or provoke humans to faith and obedience. In short, preceding grace is God's pursuit of man. (For representative verses showing God's initiative toward humans, see Deut 7:6-8; Ps 19:1-6; Is 45:22; 65:12; 66:4; Jer 7:13; 35:15; Zech 7:11-12; Mt 5:45; Jn 1:9; 6:44; Acts 14:17; Rom 1:19f; 2:14-15; 5:6-10; 10:21; Eph 2:5; Tit 2:11; Jms 1:17; 1 Jn 4:10, 19).

As noted earlier, what I have here termed preceding grace closely parallels what theologians (particularly those within the Arminian tradition) have traditionally called *prevenient* grace (from the Latin *prae+venire*; lit. 'before+come,' referring to grace that antecedes or comes before). However, my characterization of preceding grace is broader than what is typically envisioned for *prevenient* grace. Whereas theologians have often defined *prevenient* grace almost exclusively in reference to conversion (as God's grace that comes *before conversion* and draws humans to faith in Christ),<sup>5</sup> I use the term preceding grace to refer to the divine initiative in *all* of God's dealings with humans, both prior to, at the point of, and following conversion (see below). What preceding grace "precedes" in any given case is not (necessarily) salvation but *the exercise of the person's moral free will*, not only the exercise of that will in the case of saving faith, but the exercise of moral free will in *every* instance in which--by an act of will--the person is drawn in any measure either closer to or farther from God, throughout the whole of a person's lifetime. This includes any apprehension, desire, or implementation of any form of moral truth, goodness, obedience, faith, or the like.

### ***Necessity of Preceding Grace***

Why should grace precede free will in this way? Because without grace moral free will cannot function in fallen humanity. That is, the antecedent relation of preceding grace to human free will is more than merely temporal in nature. God supplies preceding grace for the very purpose of *enabling* the free exercise of the human moral will, thus making possible--without determining or otherwise guaranteeing (see discussion below)--a positive volitional response. Without such enabling by God, an individual's moral will is not truly free. This enabling function is reflected in what is probably the most well-known verse about preceding grace in the Bible, John 6:44: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (see the extensive discussion of this verse below). As the verse suggests, preceding grace is absolutely necessary because apart from it humans in their corrupt, fallen state would be entirely unable and unwilling to make any motion toward God.

This last point, sadly enough, sometimes goes unrecognized or is not given the prominence it deserves within Arminian circles, perhaps because the doctrine of

total inability may seem to smack of Calvinism. Those who follow closely Arminius' own theology, however, not to mention the biblical teaching, will stress the necessity of divine preceding grace in preparing and enabling the human response to the divine offer of mercy. In his "Public Disputations," for example, Arminius stated clearly that in man's corrupt state, the powers of "the Free Will of man towards the True Good . . . are not only debilitated and useless unless they be assisted by grace, but [free will] has no powers whatever except such as are excited by Divine grace" ("Disputations on Some of the Principal Subjects of the Christian Religion," *The Works of James Arminius*, London Ed., Vol. 2, trans. James Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, Pub. Dis. XI, Sec. VII p. 192). Of regenerate man, Arminius similarly insisted that his ability to resist sin is only "through the assisting grace of God" ("Certain Articles to Be Diligently Examined and Weighed," *ibid.*, Art. XX, p. 724) and that "whatever [there] may be of knowledge, holiness and power, is all begotten within him by the Holy Spirit" ("Disputations," *ibid.*, Sec. XII, p. 195).<sup>6</sup>

Arminius, like other Reformed theologians, based this doctrine of total inability on numerous familiar verses in Scripture indicating that without Christ humanity is "dead" in "slavery" to sin, lacking any desire for God apart from the wooing influence of the Spirit. Representative verses include Titus 3:3 ("For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another"), Romans 3:9-10 (" . . . we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one"), Romans 8:7-8 ("For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God"), 1 Corinthians 2:14 ("The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned"), and John 6:44 (quoted above; see also Mt 7:18; Mt 12:34; Mt 15:19; John 15:5; Rom 1:21,22; 6:20; 7:5; Eph 4:17, 18; 5:8; 2 Tim 2:26; Jer 13:10; 17:9; Ezek 36:26). The clear force of these and similar verses is that fallen humanity lacks any innate, self-induced attraction to God. Consequently, any responsiveness to God that humans do exhibit must be fostered by God himself through the gift of preceding grace.

Again, this preceding grace of God is extended to a person prior to that person's

response to God, prior to the exercise of the person's will. Though it would go beyond the scope of the present essay to do so, it could well be argued that preceding grace of this sort is God's *modus operandi* in his dealings toward human beings. As a rule, God initiates and man responds. This human response reflects an authentically-free exercise of the will only in so far as it has first been engendered and made possible by God.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Sanctification and Preceding Grace***

It must be emphasized that the grace being characterized here is not static, limited simply to one past event (e.g., an individual's initial conversion experience). Instead, preceding grace is characteristic of all of God's interactions with a person, both before and after conversion. For this reason, Peter could pray that God's grace would be "multiplied" to believers (1 Pet 1:2; 2 Pet 2:2) and that they would "grow" in grace as a means of guarding against apostasy (2 Pet 3:17-18). It is unfortunate that theologians have sometimes failed to link the concept of what I am here calling preceding grace to the doctrine of sanctification, for in reality preceding grace is just as necessary for sanctification as it is for salvation (cf. 1 Thess 5:23; 2 Pet 1:3). The continuity between salvation and sanctification in this regard follows from the fact that sanctification is in essence the "working out" of one's salvation (Phlp 2:12) as one perseveres in saving faith and expresses that faith through one's thoughts, words, and actions (for related discussion, see the essay "Faith and Works").<sup>8</sup> This continuity between salvation and sanctification is demonstrated by the very fact that both are facilitated by faith, which is the essence of the response that God desires from man (cf. Acts 26:18; Rom 1:17; 2 Cor 5:7; Gal 3:2-7; 5:6; Col 2:5-7; 1 Pet 1:5; 1 Jn 5:3-4).

The same continuity is seen as well in the fact that the goal of salvation and sanctification is identical, namely, holiness unto the Lord through conformity to the image of Christ. As John Oswalt has stated,

"Here then is the goal of salvation: that God's people should be holy, that they should share in his character. . . . The goal of salvation is not that people should be free of physical and spiritual bondage in order to live as they choose. The goal of salvation is fellowship with God within the parameters of his character and nature. This has been God's goal since the

tragedy of Genesis 3 and it remains so in the Christian era. The thought that the primary purpose of the Cross is forgiveness is misguided at best.” (John N. Oswalt, *Called to be Holy: A Biblical Perspective*, Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 1999, p. 33)

Preceding grace characterizes God’s initiative in sanctification just as much as in salvation. In each of these cases, God extends grace not merely to relieve us of suffering, whether this be physical, mental, or physical. Nor is the *ultimate* end of grace to save us from destruction. Instead, in both salvation and sanctification God extends his grace to us for the wider goal of *bringing us out of corruption and into holiness*. It is this holiness of life that brings the highest and greatest glory to God from his creatures, when they reflect in themselves God’s own beautiful nature. To this end, preceding grace includes the ability granted by God to believers wherein they may “put to death the deeds of the flesh” by the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:13). Preceding grace is the wisdom, boldness, and purity of mind given to believers to carry out the work of spiritual service (Eph 4:12; 6:19; Heb 9:14; 1 Pet 4:11). It is the love that God has poured out in our hearts (Rom 5:5), manifested in the multifarious gifts and fruit of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:4-11; Gal 5:22-23). More broadly, it is “the power at work within us” (Eph 3:20), the resurrection life-force that flows from God upon his children to conform them corporately to the image of Christ (Eph 1:19-23; Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18). This conformity to Christ is the ultimate goal of all preceding grace, as it is the ultimate goal of our salvation.

Understanding the relevance of preceding grace to the believer’s sanctification places the traditional notion of “means of grace” in a new light. Traditionally, the means of grace as understood by Protestant theologians have included the Scriptures and the preaching and study thereof, prayer, fellowship with other believers, and participation in the sacraments (cf. P. E. Hughes, “Means of Grace,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by Walter A. Elwell, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, p. 482). More broadly, we can view any channel by which God can communicate preceding grace to an individual as a means of grace. For example, music may function as a powerful means of grace (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16). My pastor, Vernon Bauer, suggests that having a favorite spiritual song ready to sing at the onset of temptation can be an effective way to break the temptation’s spell over the mind, allowing time for one to clear one’s thinking and embrace God’s grace to overcome the temptation. The song, in this case, is a

channel of preceding grace from God, grace to overcome the temptation and persevere in sanctification. Another sometimes overlooked means of grace that is particularly effective in aiding believers to overcome recurring sins is intentional, mutual accountability (Jms 5:16). The brothers or sisters in Christ holding each other accountable in such a situation and exhorting each other to perseverance in the faith function as channels of preceding grace. Of course, music, mutual accountability, or any other means of grace will provide a lasting benefit to the recipient only if that recipient chooses to be open and responsive to the grace so received.

### ***Resistibility and Irresistibility of Grace***

It is important in this regard to understand that, whether in reference to salvation or sanctification, preceding grace does not *determine or guarantee* a particular response by the recipient. Instead, as was alluded to earlier, the infusion of preceding grace from God *makes possible* a response by which the person may voluntarily yield to God *if he then so chooses*. There is no contradiction here. Grace *enables* the human will to choose and act freely, without *compelling* (in the absolute sense) any one outcome of that choice. Traditionally, this has been referred to as the *resistibility* of grace.<sup>9</sup> Whether this terminology is correct depends on which aspect of the working of grace one has in mind. Preceding grace itself is properly considered irresistible in terms of its initial reception, at which point the human mind and will receive a measure of awakening and--for that moment at least--are lifted above their present level of spiritual ignorance and impotence and made able to respond to God.

“Those who are obedient to the vocation or call of God, freely yield their assent to grace; yet they are previously excited, impelled, drawn and assisted by grace: And in the very moment in which they actually assent, they possess the capability of not assenting. . . . In the very commencement of his conversion, man conducts himself in a purely passive manner; that is, though, by a vital act, that is, [*sensu*] by feeling, he has a perception of the grace which calls him, yet he can do no other than receive it and feel it: But, when he feels grace affecting or inclining his mind and heart, he freely assents to it, so that he is able at the same time to with-hold his assent” (“Certain Articles to be Diligently Examined and

Weighed,” *The Works of James Arminius*, London Ed., Vol. 2, trans. James Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, Art. XVII, p. 722).<sup>10</sup>

Though it can be argued that preceding grace is irresistible in terms of its initial reception (i.e., the recipient is “purely passive,” in Arminius’ words above), the fruit of that irresistible, enabling influence is the ability to either welcome *or resist* (i.e., reject, or refuse to seek) any continuing grace from God. This ability of man to refuse the grace offered by God is stated or implied in numerous passages of Scripture. Consider, for example, Stephen’s indictment of the Jewish religious leaders that they “always *resist the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 7:51; cf. Gen 6:3; 2 Cor 6:1; Gal 2:21; Heb 10:29; 2 Pet 2:1), or the statement of Jesus to the Jews who were seeking to kill him, “yet *you refuse to come to me* that you may have life” (Jn 5:40). The latter verse implies that Jesus’ offer to them of life was attainable if they were willing to receive it (cf. 5:34, ‘I say these things so that you may be saved’).<sup>11</sup> Yet, clearly they had thus far successfully resisted his offer.

Another interesting passage showing the resistibility of the results of preceding grace is found in Luke 13:6-9. This passage records Jesus’ parable of the barren fig tree:

“And he told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, “Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?” And he answered him, “Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”’” (Luke 13:6-9)

This parable, of course, served as a warning to the Jewish nation that time was running out for them to repent (cf. Hos 9:10). Of particular interest are the words of the vinedresser that preparations would be made to give the barren tree one more chance to produce fruit. These preparations (viz., cultivating and fertilizing) can be viewed as expressions of preceding grace designed to foster the production of fruit (i.e., repentance) in the tree (i.e., the nation of Israel). Note, however, the contingent nature of the outcome: “*if* it should bear fruit . . . but *if* not . . .” The clear import of this contingency is that the preparations, or

expressions of preceding grace, though methodically planned with a specific goal in mind, were none the less resistible. The desired outcome was in no way guaranteed.

Such passages of Scripture indicate the resistibility of the results of preceding grace in the human spirit. Once the momentary enabling of will that preceding grace makes possible is in effect, any subsequent flow of grace from God can be rejected. Of course, God desires that the recipients of preceding grace will respond positively and reach upward for more grace, “that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and [by his grace] find him” (Acts 17:27). However, though God fosters the achievement of this end through the liberal supply of preceding grace, he does not dictate the final outcome (though see the discussion of hardening below).

### ***Recipients of Preceding Grace***

One other important issue regarding preceding grace that has received much attention by theologians in the past (under the heading *prevenient grace*) is whether divine grace granted prior to conversion for the purpose of wooing its recipients to faith in Christ is extended only to *particular* individuals or is instead extended *universally* to all. Those within the Calvinist tradition adopt the former position, which is indeed a corollary of their belief that such grace (subsumed under the “effectual call”) is necessarily efficacious in its outcome. Those within the Arminian tradition have generally adopted the latter position, as following from the Arminian conviction that God’s desire for all people to be saved constrains him to extend to all people an authentic opportunity to respond in faith to him.

I believe the evidence to be compelling that preceding grace is dispensed universally such that all people are granted the opportunity to respond to that same grace and thus receive yet more grace by which they may ultimately be brought to conscious faith in Christ for salvation. The evidence for this position is extensive in Scripture,<sup>12</sup> but let me focus here on just one passage, Romans chapters one and two. In Romans 1:19-20 Paul said that God has “made evident” to all men “His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature” through the world that he has made. In 1:21 Paul further said that by means of this revelation all people “knew God,” while in 1:25 Paul said that they had access to

“the truth of God,” and in 1:32 that they “know the ordinance of God.” Moreover, in 2:15 Paul said that even the Gentiles have “the work of the Law written in their hearts.” This self-revelation of God to all humanity through nature and through the human conscience is sufficient to leave people “without excuse” for their sin (1:20; 2:1). Not only this, but Paul’s words in 1:21 strongly suggest that this universal dispensing of what I have termed preceding grace provides *all* people with a basic ability to exercise faith if they so choose.<sup>13</sup> In that verse Paul said, “For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened” (1:21). The activities mentioned here of *honoring God* and *giving thanks* both presuppose the exercise of faith. Paul’s mention of these activities in this context implies that all people are supplied with a *real capacity* to respond to God’s self-revelation in these ways (i.e., to respond in faith), but that they fail to do so, choosing rather to “suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (vs. 18). As a result, their already “foolish heart” is further “darkened” (vs. 21) and they bring themselves under God’s just condemnation and wrath (vs. 18a).

This interpretation of universal preceding grace as enabling a true faith response for all people is further confirmed by Paul’s wording in Romans 2:4, where he chided those who commit the same sins of which they judge others: “Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?” (2:4). God’s *kindness, forbearance, and patience* mentioned here are all expressions of his universally dispensed preceding grace, by which he delays the full manifestation of his wrath upon sinners in order to give them additional opportunity to repent (cf. 2 Peter 3:9). Importantly, Paul said that such kindness on God’s part is meant to “lead” such sinners “to repentance.” This expression “leads . . . to repentance” in verse 2:4b suggests that such repentance on the part of any person is genuinely possible--not just in theory, but *actually*, just as the expressions of faith mentioned in 1:21 are truly possible for any person. Moreover, this repentance is made possible only under the influence (“leading”) of God’s kindness, that is, by the enabling of God’s preceding grace.

I conclude, then, that preceding grace is dispensed universally to all people in order to draw them to the truth and ultimately to Christ.<sup>14</sup> This does not mean, however, that preceding grace is dispensed to each person in equal measure or to

an equal extent. The evidence is strong in Scripture that beyond the basic opportunity afforded to all people as described in Romans 1-2, God may discriminate in his additional dispensing of preceding grace to some people but not to others. As one example, Paul identified the physical descendants of Israel as special recipients of grace not given to other peoples (Rom 3:1-2; 9:4-5). Moreover, this grace was clearly preceding in nature, designed to ready them for faith in Christ. This is one reason Paul's anguish is so great in Romans 9:2-3, precisely because of *all* people they, who had been the special recipients of so many privileges pointing them to Christ (vss. 4-5), should have been most ready to believe in him (cf. Gal 3:24; Rom 3:31; 7:7, 12; 11:28-31).<sup>15</sup> In the essay "Election in Romans Chapter Nine" I argued that it is God's prerogative to discriminately dispense preceding grace of this sort in different forms to particular individuals (or groups of individuals, as the case may be) on a unilateral, unconditioned basis, without reference to any will, merit, or other criterion to be found in the recipient. Given the length and complexity of the arguments involved, I refer the interested reader to that essay.

Though God retains the prerogative to dispense preceding grace in differing measures to particular individuals or groups of individuals, it must be kept in mind that he has pledged never to withhold additional grace from those who are open and responsive to the preceding grace already given to them. This is in accordance with the principle stated in Matthew 13:12, "To the one who has, more will be given" (see discussion of subsequent grace below).<sup>16</sup> This principle is true in an especially solemn sense with those who are God's own children through an active faith in Christ. God binds himself to abundantly supply these with grace sufficient to conform them to the image of his son. As noted earlier, the Bible assures us that God has provided his children with "every spiritual blessing" in Christ (Ephesians 1:3) and with "all things that pertain to life and godliness" (1 Peter 1:3). As believers in Christ we are blessed with a constant inflow of grace upon grace from God, all given for our growth in holiness and service to the Lord, all for the glory of God.

### ***Preceding Grace as Grace***

One additional point deserves special emphasis. We must never forget that preceding grace, regardless the form it takes or to whom it is dispensed, is first

and foremost *grace*. Too often when discussing theological concepts such as preceding grace, the terms easily become dry and abstract, as though they were items merely to be analyzed. To maintain a proper sense of what preceding grace is, however, we must fix in our minds that this grace is an expression of pure love, springing from the great heart of a sovereign God. When God dispenses preceding grace, he does so not reluctantly but passionately and liberally because he *loves* us. As a lover woos his beloved, so God seeks to win the free love of our hearts by the infusion of his grace. As the unworthy objects of God's love we bathe in a continual flow of divine favor and provision in all its multitudinous forms from the giver of "every good gift and every perfect gift" (Jms 1:17).

### ***Section Summary***

To summarize what has thus far been said about preceding grace, preceding grace represents all the expressions of God's initiative toward humanity, God's pursuit of man. More specifically, preceding grace is that working of God in the human heart by which man's fallen, corrupt will is enabled to choose freely in the moral realm, so that the recipient of such grace is free to draw near(er) to truth, goodness, and ultimately to Christ, free to choose faith and obedience--both before, at the point of, and following conversion. This includes the often overlooked fact that preceding grace is essential to the working out of our salvation in the process of sanctification. All preceding grace is irresistible in its initial reception, though the fruit of such grace is the ability to resist or reject the divine offer of further grace by which one may draw nearer to truth and nearer to conformity to Christ. This preceding grace is granted to all people in sufficient measure to draw them to Christ if they will respond positively to the grace so granted. At the same time, God retains the prerogative to dispense preceding grace in differing measures to particular individuals or groups of individuals, though he has pledged never to withhold additional grace from those who are open and responsive to the preceding grace already given to them. In regard to those who are his own children through an active faith in Christ, God binds himself in a most solemn way to abundantly supply them with sufficient grace to conform them to the image of his son. Ultimately, all preceding grace is an expression of the passionate, liberal love of God.

So far in this essay we have focused on divine grace that precedes the exercise of

human moral free will. What happens, however, on the *other* side of an act of enabled free will, as a result following the exercise of that will? There are two broad possibilities: *subsequent grace* (in the positive case) or *hardening* (in the negative case). Let us look at these two concepts in turn.

### *Subsequent Grace*

As noted above, if indeed the recipient of preceding grace proves to be open and responds favorably to the divine offer, then additional grace will be granted (in accordance with the principle, “To the one who has, more will be given,” Matt 13:12; cf. Jn 7:17). In the words of James, “Draw near to God, *and he will draw near to you*” (Jms 4:8; cf. 2 Chron 15:2; Zech 1:3; Mal 3:7). The term *subsequent grace* can be used to refer to this grace that God dispenses *after* or *in response to* the exercise of human free will, in particular, in response to a positive volitional act of faith and obedience.<sup>17</sup> In this favorable case, there is an infusion of divine grace both prior to and following the responsive exercise of the human will.

As with preceding grace considered above, the act of faith or obedience to which subsequent grace pertains may be the initial faith-act of salvation but more broadly may be *any* moral expression of human free will, both of humans in their pre-conversion state (as God seeks to draw them to what is true and good and, ultimately, to Christ) as well as of post-conversion believers engaged in the process of sanctification.<sup>18</sup> As it occurs in sanctification, subsequent grace may be seen as a *renewing* grace by which the heart is purified of unclean motives, the mind is released from bondage to harmful attitudes and behaviors, and those aspects of an individual’s will which have been hardened by the commission of deliberate sin are softened and made tender once again toward God.

I will not dwell here on the varieties of subsequent grace in view of the fact that subsequent grace (under other names) has received considerably more attention than has preceding grace in the theological literature. Before leaving the topic entirely, however, it should be noted that the distinction between preceding and subsequent grace, though perhaps clear in theory, becomes somewhat blurred in practice. This is so because one and the same act of grace on God’s part may function both as *subsequent* grace with respect to an antecedent act of human volition and yet also as *preceding* grace with respect to a later act of human

volition still to follow. To take one simple, if somewhat controversial example, the regenerating, saving grace that (many theologians would argue) follows as a divine response to a person's initial faith in Christ also serves as a catalyst preparing that same new believer for greater depths of submission to Christ. This saving grace is, in this view, both *subsequent* to the person's initial faith-act and *preceding* with respect to the person's continuing acts of surrender. What is a divine *response* to one volitional act of faith, then, is at the same time a divine *initiative* making possible additional acts of volition on the part of the recipient of this grace. The result (in the paradigmatic case) is an alternating sequence of divine grace and human volition, the infusion of preceding grace at each step enabling the next act of free will on the part of the human recipient, which in turn draws a divine response (subsequent grace) that itself functions as fresh preceding grace for the next step in the process.<sup>19</sup>

### *Hardening: The Withdrawal of Preceding Grace*

#### ***The Nature of Hardening***

What happens if the recipient of preceding grace chooses to exercise his enabled free will and *reject* the divine offer of further grace? As I have discussed at some length in the essay "Election in Romans Chapter Nine," though God is moved by love to extend preceding grace to all of humanity, it is possible for God in his wisdom to withdraw or withhold a measure of preceding grace when an individual resists the grace that has been offered him. This is the biblical phenomenon known as "hardening," and, as we will see later, it is a potential danger both for unbelievers (Jn 12:37-40; Rom 11:7) and believers (Heb 3:12-4:11) alike.

This definition of hardening as the withdrawal of preceding grace follows from the definition of and rationale for preceding grace discussed earlier, and from the descriptions provided in the Bible of those who are hardened. Recall that preceding grace is that divine initiative by which God excites and enables the human spirit (yet resistibly so) to choose truth, goodness, and ultimately faith in and obedience to Christ himself. Apart from this preceding grace, fallen humanity shows no concern for the things of God and is entirely unable and unwilling to make any motion toward God.

This characterization of humanity's plight in the absence of preceding grace corresponds well to the biblical description of those who are hardened. Those with hardened hearts are described as:

(a) *unable and/or unwilling to perceive spiritual truth* (e.g., the disciples of Jesus, who "did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened," Mk 6:52; the unbelieving Gentiles, who are "darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart," Eph 4:18; cf. also Mk 8:17; Jn 12:40; Is 6:10; Mt 13:14-15; Rom 11:7-10; 2 Cor 3:14-16),

(b) *stubborn and obstinate toward the will of God* (e.g., Pharaoh, who due to his hardness of heart, "would not listen" to Moses' warnings, Ex. 7:13, inter alia; Sihon king of Heshbon, whose heart God "made obstinate," Deut 2:30; cf. also 2 Chron 17:14; Jer 7:26; Ez 3:7),

(c) *proud* (e.g., Nebuchadnezzar, whose "spirit was hardened so that he dealt proudly," Dan 5:20; cf. Neh 9:16),

(d) *rebellious and disobedient toward God, and unwilling to turn to him for salvation* (e.g., Zedekiah, who "stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the Lord," 2 Chron 36:13; the Jewish nation, who "stiffened their neck and did not obey [God's] commandments," Neh 9:16; cf. also Neh 9:17, 29; Is 63:17; Eph 4:19; Heb 3:13),

(e) *prone to test the Lord through unbelief* (e.g., the people of Israel at Meribah, Ex 17:7; cf. Num 20:13; Ps 95:8; Acts 19:9),

(f) *absent the fear of God* (e.g., Prov 28:14; Is 63:17).

These biblical descriptions of those whose hearts are hardened indicate a lack of receptivity toward God, a blindness and impotence in regard to the things of God, and a resistance to the grace of God. In short, a hardened heart is one that is absent the benefits of preceding grace.

### ***Two Dimensions of Hardening***

To be more precise, however, we need to distinguish between two dimensions of hardening: a *self-induced* element (e.g., Rom 1:18; Ps 95:8) and a *divinely-induced* element (e.g., Rom 1:26, 28; 11:7). Consider first the self-induced element. This human element of hardening refers not so much to the withdrawal of preceding grace (after all, only God not humans can dispense or withdraw preceding grace) as it does the *resistance* to divine grace and the direct effect of that resistance on an individual's inner nature. One verse that comes to mind in this regard is Romans 13:14, where we are told to "make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." To paraphrase, one is not to feed, supply, or support his flesh in any way, for to do so is to strengthen the flesh's grip over one's will and to introduce corruption into one's mind (Gal 6:8; 2 Eph 4:22; 2 Pet 1:4). This is a self-induced damage to one's own spirit brought about by choosing the way of self-sufficiency rather than dependence on divine grace.

Such self-induced hardening need not be complete all in one instance. Indeed, as a matter of course hardening is a progression, a result of a repeated, ever deepening refusal to be open to the flow of regenerating power offered by God through divine grace. This gradual nature of hardening is suggested, for example, in Hebrews 3:12-15:

*"Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. As it is said, 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.'" (Hebrews 3:12-15)*

There is a distinct sense in this passage that a particularly sinister characteristic of self-induced hardening is that it might come about unnoticed if not for the diligent observation of the church, who must exhort each other "every day" (NASB "day after day") to guard against it. Hardening is pictured here as having a gradual, creeping effect, rather than as occurring in one fell swoop. Each deliberate decision to resist the grace of God, regardless how minor or small the particular issue in view at that moment may seem, has a hardening effect on the human spirit. This measure of hardening resulting from a moment of rebellion may

become one brick in a larger wall of spiritual deadness that the soul thus constructs between itself and God.

In response to an individual's self-induced hardening in the above sense, God may apply a divinely-induced element of hardening. In this event God withdraws or withholds preceding grace (or some measure thereof) from the individual. For his part, God never hardens an individual arbitrarily, but always in response to human sin and willfulness. That is, divinely-induced hardening, when it occurs, always follows some degree of prior self-hardening on the part of an individual. In one of his responses to those who argued from verses such as Romans 9:18 that God shows mercy or else hardens without respect to human sin (i.e., supralapsarian Calvinist theologians), Arminius noted that the very expressions involved "imply the preexistence of sin. For no one can 'have mercy' (*misereri*) on any but the 'miserable' (*miseri*): but no one is miserable except the sinner. 'Hardening' also has sin for its cause, nay, contumacious perseverance in sin" ("Examination of Perkin's Pamphlet," *The Works of James Arminius*, London Ed., Vol. 3, trans. William Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, pp. 345-346; cf. also discussion on p. 312).

Among other passages cited by Arminius in support of this position is Psalm 81:11-12: "But My people did not listen to My voice; and Israel did not obey Me. So [i.e., for this reason] I gave them over to the stubbornness of their heart, to walk in their own devices." The same causal relationship is plainly seen in Romans chapter one, where in reference to the unrighteous (cf. 1:18) Paul says three times that God "gave them over" *because of* their sin:

"they did not honor Him as God . . . *Therefore* God gave them over . . . (1:21, 24)

"they exchanged the truth of God for a lie . . . *For this reason* God gave them over . . . (1:25-26)

"*Just as* they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over . . ." (1:28)

Further evidence of this sort can be found in the Exodus narrative of Moses' encounter with Pharaoh. In this narrative, as some scholars have noted, God is explicitly said to have hardened Pharaoh's heart (9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8,

17) only *after* Pharaoh is said to have hardened his own heart (8:15, 32; 9:34), indicating that God hardened Pharaoh's heart in response to Pharaoh's prior self-hardening.

### ***Objection and Response Regarding Pharaoh***

Reformed theologian Robert Reymond has raised an objection to the above understanding of the Pharaoh account that merits our attention for a few moments. In a discussion of hardening found in his popular systematic theology, Reymond stated that

"God twice declared to Moses, even before the series of confrontations between Moses and Pharaoh began, that he would harden Pharaoh's heart 'and [thereby] multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt' (Exodus 4:21; 7:3). The first time then that it is said that Pharaoh's heart was hard, the text expressly declares that it was so 'just as the Lord had spoken' (Exodus 7:13), clearly indicating that Pharaoh's hardness of heart had [come] about due to God's previous promise to harden it. And the first time it is said that Pharaoh 'made his heart hard,' again we are informed that it was so 'just as the Lord had spoken' (8:15; see also 8:19; 9:12, 35)" (Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1998, p. 359).

However, as my pastor Vernon Bauer brought to my attention (personal communication, August 16, 2003), Reymond has failed to carefully consider the context of the phrase "just as the Lord had spoken." Consider below the full text of Exodus 7:13-14, along with the other four verses in the Exodus account (Ex 8:15; 8:19; 9:12; 9:35) in which the phrase "as the Lord had said/spoken" is used in reference to God's earlier prediction of Pharaoh's intransigence:

"Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened, *and he would not listen to them*, as the Lord had said. Then the Lord said to Moses, "Pharaoh's heart is hardened; *he refuses to let the people go.*" (Ex 7:13-14)

"But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart *and would not listen to them*, as the Lord had said." (Ex 8:15)

"Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God." But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, *and he would not listen to them*, as the Lord had said." (Ex 8:19)

"But the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, *and he did not listen to them*, as the Lord had spoken to Moses." (Ex 9:12)

"So the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, *and he did not let the people of Israel go*, just as the Lord had spoken through Moses." (Ex 9:35)

In these five passages we encounter examples of hardening with an unspecified agent (7:13-14; 8:19; 9:35), an example of self-hardening (8:15), and an example of divine hardening (9:12). Yet, in each of these cases, notice that the phrase "as the Lord had said/spoken" is immediately preceded not by the statement of hardening itself but instead by the phrase, "*and [Pharaoh] would not listen to them*," or the related phrase "*he did not let the people [of Israel] go*." Moreover, Pharaoh's intransigence in this regard was explicitly referred to using the precise same wording in the two key predictive passages cited by Reymond:

"And the Lord said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, *so that he will not let the people go*." (Ex 4:21)

"But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, *Pharaoh will not listen to you*. . . ." (Ex 7:3-4a)

These facts suggest that the intended antecedent of the phrase "as the Lord had said/spoken" in Ex 7:13-14, 8:15, 8:19, 9:12, and 9:35 may be not the *agency* of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart at all, but instead the *result* of that hardening, namely, that Pharaoh would not listen to Moses and allow the Israelites to go worship in the wilderness. If so, then Reymond's argument collapses, for his argument hinges on the assumption that all of the later references to hardening in the Exodus narrative, including those with unspecified agents (as in 7:13-14, 8:19, and 9:35) and even those characterized as self-hardening (e.g., 8:15), may ultimately be subsumed under the category of divine hardening by virtue of the

presumed link with the statements of divine agency in 4:21a and 7:3. If the phrase “as the Lord had said/spoken” instead refers back merely to the predicted *result* (not agency) of the hardening, then the link on which Reymond’s argument depends is broken.

I conclude, then, that there remains strong evidence both in the Exodus narrative and in the various other passages surveyed earlier that divinely-induced hardening (i.e., the withdrawal or withholding of preceding grace) should never be viewed as a divine act that is somehow abstracted away from human sin, as though God would choose to harden individuals without reference to their status as sinners. It is true in the absolute sense that God is under no compulsion to either harden or not harden (Rom 9:18; see “Election in Romans Chapter Nine”), but when he does harden it is always, as it was with Pharaoh, a response to the free intransigence of the human heart.

### ***Hardening and the Believer***

I mentioned earlier that hardening may occur in the life of a believer. For some readers, the notion that a genuine believer in Christ may become hardened, even by his own doing, signals a contradiction. Would God really allow this to happen given his stated commitment to remain ever loyal to his followers (e.g., Rom 8:38-39; Phlp 1:6)? This question touches on such weighty issues as apostasy, security, and election. Whatever we decide about this question, we will need to deal straightforwardly with the fact that the Bible clearly warns against the possibility of hardening for believers. Consider again the passage from Hebrews quoted earlier:

"Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' *that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin*. For we share in Christ, *if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end*. As it is said, 'Today, if you hear his voice, *do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.*'" (Heb 3:12-15)

One thing to note about this passage that helps answer the question raised above is that the hardening referred to appears to be self-induced, not divinely-induced.

“Do not harden your hearts,” the writer says, by willingly succumbing to the “deceitfulness of sin.” Whenever a believer engages in deliberate sin he has in some measure accepted a lie, a deceit, to the effect that the sinful attitude or action in question is in some sense necessary, benign, and/or inevitable (see the essay “Three Lies About Sin”). This is a deception in which the victim is a willing participant, for God promises to always supply sufficient preceding grace for a believer to resist the doubt and unbelief on which the deception is based and to thereby avoid succumbing to temptation (1 Cor 10:13). When an individual fails to utilize the protective power of this grace, the sin and resulting hardening of heart is his own doing.

A self-induced understanding of the hardening of believers mentioned in Hebrews 3:12-15 makes more sense than a divinely-induced hardening, based on what we know of God’s covenant with those who are in the faith, namely that God binds himself with a solemn oath to supply them with abundant preceding grace in the form of “every spiritual blessing” (Eph 1:3) and “all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Pet 1:3). God could not, therefore, harden a believer *so long as he is a believer* and at the same time remain faithful to his promises to that believer. However, if a believer were to begin exercising his enabled free will to embrace sin’s deceit, make provision for the lusts of his flesh, and doubt the sufficiency of divine preceding grace (i.e., begin hardening *himself*), that believer could in time become confirmed in this deception and cease to fight the “good fight of the faith” (1 Tim 6:12). At some point in this process, if the self-hardening were to continue unchecked, the person would no longer properly be considered a “believer,” having abandoned and “made shipwreck of [his] faith” (1 Tim 1:19), having “wandered” entirely from it (6:10), and having “disregarded” God, the one who supplies preceding grace through his Holy Spirit (1 Thess 4:8). It then becomes a valid question whether God might not rightly further harden and withdraw preceding grace from such a one (i.e., now an unbeliever) who has “outraged the Spirit of grace” (Heb 10:29).

Note that in the passage from Hebrews chapter three quoted earlier, self-induced hardening of the sort described above corresponds to a failure to persevere or remain steadfast in the faith. The writer to the Hebrews said in 3:14 that the Hebrew believers would avoid becoming hardened if they were *to hold their original confidence firm to the end* (i.e., persevere in it). The writer thus equated

the avoidance of hardening (vs. 13) to perseverance in the faith (vs. 14; cf. 3:6). The link here between hardening and perseverance suggests that other passages which stress the importance of steadfastness and emphasize the danger of apostasy (e.g., Col 1:21-23) can also be viewed as warnings against becoming hardened to the grace of God.

Warnings against apostasy in the New Testament tend to fall into two categories: (1) warnings against apostasy through the pursuit of deliberate, willful sin (e.g., 1 Tim 1:18-20; 6:9-12; Heb 3:13; 10:26-27), and (2) warnings against apostasy through acceptance of heretical teaching (e.g., 1 Tim 4:1; Gal 5:2f; 2 Pet 3:17). Hardening may be particularly identified with apostasy via deliberate sin (as in Heb 3:13 above). It is important to recognize, though, that the two areas of deliberate actions and teachings or beliefs are closely related. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that at the root of the pursuit of deliberate sin is a shift in one's core belief system, so that one no longer treasures Christ above all else.<sup>20</sup> This "despising" of the things of God (cf. 2 Sam 12:9) both reflects and makes possible the pursuit of willful sin. It is here where the intimate association between faith and works is seen in its negative expression, for just as works of righteousness in the believer are meant to be tangible expressions of the believer's faith (such works constituting "faith-acts" by which the believer is justified; see Jms 2:24; cf. the essay "Faith and Works"), so the pursuit of deliberate sin is a tangible expression of *unbelief* (cf. Heb 3:12, "unbelieving heart"), the despising or devaluing of the Christ whom one may formerly have prized.

The two avenues to apostasy mentioned above (i.e., through heretical teaching or through deliberate sin) are succinctly captured in Paul's exhortation to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:16: "Keep a close watch on *yourself* and on *the teaching*. *Persist* in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers." In this verse Paul called Timothy to persistence (i.e., perseverance or steadfastness) in two areas, first in regard to his *life* (i.e., the practice of godliness and renunciation of willful sin) and second in regard to his *teaching* (i.e., the apostolic faith as delivered by Christ and the Holy Spirit). As Timothy maintained due diligence in these two areas, he would be able to guard against the apostasy that might otherwise wreak destruction on himself and on his hearers. In the language of Hebrews 3:12, by his diligence in this matter Timothy would be "taking care" that neither he nor those under his teaching become candidates for hardening.

## ***Section Summary***

In this section I have explored what may happen when an individual resists the divine offer made through preceding grace. In such a case, instead of receiving further, subsequent grace, the person may experience hardening, or a divine withdrawal of (some measure of) the preceding grace that had been previously given, along with a withholding of additional grace. Such a withdrawal of preceding grace may occur gradually over time, as the individual repeatedly resists the initiatives of the Holy Spirit within his heart. When preceding grace is thus withdrawn, the soul is left with no resource except its own moral ignorance and impotence, without motivation or power to move toward God. This process involves both a self-induced human dimension, which I identified with the willful embracing of deceptions and the strengthening of flesh patterns through the commission of deliberate sin, and a divinely-induced dimension, which I identified with the divine reaction to this human resistance, namely, the withdrawal of preceding grace. I argued against a proposal by Reymond that the divine hardening logically preceded the self-induced hardening of Pharaoh in the Exodus account. I also explored the association between hardening and apostasy, concluding that the self-induced dimension of hardening described earlier may be particularly associated with apostasy that is realized through deliberate sin.

## **III. The Functions of Preceding Grace**

Now that we have surveyed the concepts of preceding grace, subsequent grace, and hardening, I would like to return to the notion of preceding grace and examine the biblical evidence for three specific functions of such grace. Gaining an understanding of these functions of preceding grace will help us to better appreciate the critical role that preceding grace plays in our sanctification as believers in Christ.

- (1) Preceding grace serves to *enlighten* the human mind to understand spiritual truth and the will of God.
- (2) Preceding grace serves to *inspire* (or motivate) the human heart to (desire

- to) love God and to do his will.
- (3) Preceding grace serves to *enable* the human will to make authentically-free moral choices by which the recipient may do the will of God.

I have ordered these three functions as above for logical reasons: the heart cannot be motivated about that which it has not been enlightened, and the will cannot be enabled to choose that which it does not desire in some measure.<sup>21</sup> Though the inspiring or motivating function falls second in the above logical order, I will discuss it last below because it is particularly relevant to the question of perseverance in sanctification with which I began this essay, and to which I will return in the closing sections.

## *Enlightening Grace*

### ***Evidence for Enlightening Grace***

First, preceding grace serves to *enlighten* the human mind to understand spiritual truth and the will of God. This first and perhaps least controversial function of preceding grace is seen in passages such as Romans 1:18-21:

"For the wrath of God is *revealed* from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, *because God has shown it to them*. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened."

In this passage the universal scope of God's enlightening grace is seen (cf. also Acts 17:26-28), as Paul teaches that all people have been granted enough light through the witness of nature (and similarly through the human conscience; Rom 2:15) to render them "without excuse" for their suppression of what has been revealed. The enlightening function of preceding grace in this passage is indicated by the words "revealed," and "shown." The result of this enlightening is

that the truth so revealed to humans becomes “plain to them,” “known,” and “clearly perceived.”

One mistake sometimes made when interpreting this passage is to assume that the revelation of truth referred to here as coming through the created order and the human conscience is merely a natural consequence of the working of the human mind. The mind perceives nature and its own moral conscience and naturally or logically concludes that there is a powerful, moral God. However, though the structure and working of the created mind is certainly a gift of God, it is more in keeping with the emphasis of the passage and with what we know elsewhere from Scripture to conclude that the divine revelation in Romans chapters one and two is an essentially supernatural act, the created order and the human conscience being only mediating channels for this revelation. We are told elsewhere that the fallen human mind “does not accept” and “is not able to understand” spiritual truths, “because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor 2:14). This does not, of course, mean that unbelievers (such as the mass of humanity referred to in Romans 1:18-21) can never perceive spiritual truth (as they are clearly said to do in this passage), but instead that they cannot do so *on their own apart from enlightening grace*.

The enlightening grace of God is seen elsewhere to be mediated through the Word of God (Ps 19:8; 119:27; Jn 17:17), the Holy Spirit (Jn 16:8; 1 Cor 2:10-16), and Christ himself (Jn 1:9; Lk 24:45; Eph 5:13-14; 1 Jn 5:20). Other references to enlightening grace are numerous. Conversion to Christ can be described as when a person is “enlightened” to truth (Heb 6:4; 10:32; cf. Eph 5:8). Moreover, continuing enlightenment--granted by God--is integral to our ongoing walk with Christ (Eph 1:18; Col 1:9; 2 Tim 2:7; Tit 2:11-12). Thus, Paul could pray that the believers would have “the eyes of [their] hearts enlightened” as the “Father of glory” gave them “a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him” (Eph 1:17-18; cf. 2 Cor 4:6). Similarly, later in the same epistle he prayed that these believers “may have the strength to *comprehend* with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to *know* the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (3:18-19a). This was a knowledge directly fostered by the Holy Spirit within them (note that the “strength” to have this knowledge has its source in the Spirit; vs. 16).

Expanding on the above passages, then, we can say that preceding grace includes the ability granted by God first for unbelievers to know, among other things, the reality of the creator God, their moral culpability before him, their need of a savior, and the identity of Jesus Christ as that savior. For believers preceding grace allows them to know God personally in an ever deeper way, to know his love, his character, his works, his promises. By preceding grace we are enlightened in all these ways and more to understand spiritual truths that in our fallen state we could otherwise make no progress toward comprehending.

### ***Seeing Through Deception***

One product of enlightening grace deserves special mention in relation to the believer's sanctification: I noted earlier that every deliberate sin is an act of unbelief, and that each such sin involves succumbing to the belief that the sin in question is in some way necessary, benign, and/or inevitable. By nature we are prone to accept these deceptions. However, by the enlightening function of preceding grace we are granted by God the ability to see through these deceptions to the truth beyond them, namely, that for the believer in Christ there is no power in sin except that which derives from the lie itself. In truth, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it" (1 Cor 10:13). The recognition of this truth is one of the most precious fruits of the enlightening function of God's preceding grace for the believer and is the first step toward the defeat of sin in the believer's life.

Closely related is the believer's ability to understand the truth of his own identity in Christ. There is considerable emphasis placed in the New Testament on the need for the believer to consciously affirm his status as a child of God who is dead to sin and alive to God in Christ (e.g., Rom 6:6, 11; 8:15-17; 2 Cor 5:16-17; Gal 6:14-15; Eph 4:20-24; 5:1-3, 7-8; Col 3:9-10; 2 Pet 1:9-10). This is truth of a clearly spiritual nature: one cannot ascertain either by physical inspection or psychological introspection that one is dead to sin or alive to God. Indeed, even experience cannot be entirely trusted in this regard. All who have struggled to resist the powerful allure of sin know that it can present itself in a seemingly living, potent form against which we may feel powerless. However, through an inflow of

preceding grace (often mediated through the Scripture, the sword of the Spirit) God can reveal to us the twin truths of sin's ultimate impotence over us as believers and our strong position in Christ.

## *Enabling Grace*

### ***Enabling Grace as Resistible Drawing in John 6:44***

A second function of preceding grace is the enabling function. This refers to the fact that it is by preceding grace that the human will is *enabled* to make authentically-free moral choices by which the recipient may choose to do (or not do) the will of God. The enabling function of preceding grace is perhaps most famously seen in Jesus' words in John 6:44: "No one can come to me *unless the Father who sent me draws him.*" In this verse God's drawing influence, initiated entirely by God himself, is presented as a necessary condition for a person's coming to faith in Christ. (See the essay "The Order of Faith and Election in John's Gospel" for extensive discussion of the conditions for coming to Christ in John's Gospel.)

Those within the Calvinist tradition have sometimes argued that the Greek word translated as "draw" in John 6:44 is stronger than can be accounted for within the Arminian position. Berkouwer comments, for example, "The word *draw* which Christ uses here has always attracted much attention. Kittel says that when it refers to man it has the meaning of *to compel, of irresistible superiority*, as in James 2:6 where the rich *drag* the poor before the judge, and as Paul and Silas are *dragged* into the market place in Acts 16:19" (G. C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, Translated by Hugo Bekker, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960, pp. 47f).

In response, Arminian theologian Robert Shank asserts, "Berkouwer's whole case here rests on an assumed significance of the word *draw* . . . and collapses in the face of the fact that the same word (*elkuō*) is used in John 12:32, where Jesus declares, 'And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me'" (*Elect in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Election*, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1970, 1989, p. 176).<sup>22</sup> Shank's point is that the Greek word for "draw" as it is used in John 12:32 cannot mean to "irresistibly compel" without entailing universal

salvation; therefore, the word cannot have that sense here and, consequently, need not have the irresistible sense in John 6:44 either.

In response to the sort of argument presented by Shank, Calvinist theologian Robert Yarbrough states,

“this contention fails on at least two counts. First, it requires that the word *draw* have exactly the same meaning wherever it appears. Such insensitivity to specific context is a linguistic mistake; “draw” can in principle refer to the work of irresistible grace in some passages and to a more general attraction that, say, renders persons accountable but not yet regenerate in others. Second it overlooks the likelihood that “all men” in John 12:32 refers to all--both Jew and Gentile--that the Father has given to the Son. . . . the immediate context, in which Jesus pronounces the climactic fulfillment to his ministry as Gentiles seek him out (John 12:20, 23), suggests that “all” here refers to the elect of both Jewish and Gentile origin, not to the general benevolent effects of the atonement on the human race as a whole.” (Robert Yarbrough, “Divine Election in the Gospel of John,” in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, ed. by Thomas Schreiner & Bruce Ware, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995, 2000, p. 52)

What of Yarbrough’s response? In regard to his first point, I agree that it is nearly always a mistake to dogmatically assert that a word must have exactly the same meaning wherever it occurs. Context is always “king,” as the saying goes. Notice, however, that Shank’s argument is *not* that the Greek word in question must “have exactly the same meaning wherever it appears.” Instead, Shank is arguing just the opposite, that John 12:32 provides good evidence that this particular Greek verb, though it may mean “irresistibly draw” in some cases (Jms 2:6; Acts 16:19), may yet mean “resistibly draw” in other cases (Jn 12:32, and by inference Jn 6:44). Shank is not arguing regarding *elkuō* that it *must* mean “resistibly draw” in John 6:44, but instead that there is a credible case (based on its usage in Jn 12:32) that it *may* mean “resistibly draw” in 6:44, and that for this reason the Calvinists have failed to offer a compelling argument against an Arminian interpretation of 6:44.

In regard to Yarbrough’s second point, I have no significant objection to his

proposal that the “all” in 12:32 may refer to the inclusion of both Jews and Gentiles in the fulfillment of Jesus’ ministry plan. (This interpretation has roots at least back to Calvin himself.) Yet, at the same time this interpretation is far from proven, based as it is on somewhat circumstantial evidence. More importantly, the fact that the scope of “all” in 12:32 *may* have this interpretation (and, thus, that *elkuō* in the same verse *may* refer to an irresistible drawing) does not entail that it *must* be so, nor that *elkuō* likewise *must* be interpreted as an irresistible drawing in 6:44. Yarbrough’s comments regarding the primacy of context cuts both ways. Just as those within the Arminian tradition cannot, based simply on one *possible* reading of the word’s usage in 12:32, dogmatically assert that *elkuō* in John 6:44 *must* refer to a *resistible* attraction, so in the same way those who argue for Calvinism cannot, based on one *possible* (though I would suggest tenuous) reading of the word’s usage in 12:32 and (more clearly) in the other passages cited by Berkouwer above, dogmatically assert that *elkuō* in John 6:44 *must* refer to an *irresistible* attraction. Ultimately, the evidence from these verses may not be clear enough for us to be dogmatic either way, the contextual data being compatible with either a Calvinist or Arminian interpretation. The upshot is that neither side of the debate may be able to find a knock-down punch in John 6:44.

It appears to me, however, that the Calvinist characterization of the degree to which *elkuō* entails irresistible attraction, even in the presumably more clear cases, has been overstated. Though *elkuō* can be used to describe actions that take place forcibly, without the consent or against the will of the persons involved (Acts 16:19, 21:30; Jms 2:6; see Jn 18:10 and 21:6, 11 for examples with inanimate objects where the will does not come into play), there is evidence to suggest that this is not a necessary or universal element of the verb’s meaning. The Septuagint translates the bride’s invitation to her lover in Song of Solomon 1:4 using *elkuō*: “Draw me after you; let us run. The king has brought me into his chambers.” Clearly, in this case the bride gives her full consent to be “drawn” by her lover, for it is her own desire expressed as an invitation. What this and all other instances of *elkuō* have in common is not irresistibility or compelling force, *per se*, but instead *the necessity of outside agency*. This understanding of *elkuō* actually fits the concept of preceding grace quite well. According to the doctrine of preceding grace, any favorable response to God on our part has been *entirely enabled by divine agency*. As I have discussed above, we have no inherent ability to come to God, no ability to appreciate spiritual truth or desire it. The desire and

ability to respond to God's overtures toward us are entirely due to the enabling of preceding grace. In this sense, God "carries" or "hauls" us to himself, simply because we are too weak to bring ourselves to him on our own. This does not, however, rule out the need for us to cooperate with that enabling to allow it to continue carrying us forward. The enabling goes forward without our strength, but not without our ultimate consent.

### ***A Resistible Gift***

This enabling function of grace is also seen in those verses that speak of faith or repentance as a gift of God.<sup>23</sup> John 6:65, Jesus' own paraphrase of John 6:44 above, states that "no one can come to [Jesus] *unless it is granted him* [Gr. *dedomenon*, pf. pass. ptc. of *didōmi* 'give, grant'] by the Father." Acts 18:27 speaks of Apollos having helped the disciples in Achaia "who *through grace had believed*." Philippians 1:29 says that it had "*been granted*" to the Philippians that on behalf of Christ they should "not only *believe in him* but also suffer for his sake." Several verses similarly speak of repentance too as having been "granted" or "given" by God (Acts 5:31; 11:18; 2 Tim 2:25). There is no need to interpret these verses in the deterministic sense entailed by Calvinism, for faith and repentance are just as much to be considered "gifts" of God if these acts of the will have been enabled by God in the sense associated with preceding grace above. To see this, it must be stressed that apart from the operation of preceding grace, there is *no freedom of will* for those who are "dead" in sin. That is, the choice to have faith or repentance would not have been possible apart from the Spirit's gracious intervention in the heart of the person, convicting the mind to perceive spiritual truth and awakening the will to be able to *freely* respond to these perceptions of truth by faith and repentance (see earlier discussion). The fact that an awakened will might in many cases choose to wield this freedom recklessly and suppress the truths so revealed (cf. Rom 1:18) does not negate the fact that faith and repentance, in other cases when the latter *are* embraced, are the fruit of God's dispensing of preceding grace. A gift once received is still a gift, even if there was the potential that it might have been rejected.

The above understanding of faith and repentance being a resistible gift is borne out by what is perhaps the most literal, explicit description of this phenomenon in the New Testament, provided in the account of Lydia's conversion in Acts 16:14.

There it says of her conversion experience, “The Lord *opened her heart to pay attention* to what was said by Paul” (per ESV; cf. NASB and NIV “to respond to”). The verb translated “open” here (Gr. *diēnoixen*, aor. of *dianoigō*) is used elsewhere to refer to Jesus’ activity in the opening of ears to hear for physical hearing (Mk 7:34), of the eyes for recognition (Lk 24:31), and of the mind for understanding (Lk 24:45). A particularly germane related usage is found in Acts 14:27, where it is said that through the preaching of Paul and Barnabas God “had opened [Gr. *ēnoixen*, aor. of *anoigō*] a door of faith to the Gentiles.” The Greek verb in this verse is the same root verb as that in Acts 16:14. As William Klein pointed out, “Luke employed the language of mission: to say ‘God opens doors’ means he provides opportunities to preach the gospel, and people can believe and receive salvation (cf. 1 Cor 16:9; 2 Cor 2:12; Col 4:3)” (William W. Klein, *The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election*, Academic Books/Zondervan; reprinted by Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene OR, 1990, p. 114). Likewise, in Acts 16:14 the sense of “open” is that of *opportunity*, that God intervened in Lydia’s heart in such a way as to remove obstacles to the gospel and allow her the opportunity to perceive its truth and respond to it. However, as Klein noted, “This text does not lessen the need for Lydia to exercise faith. The Lord presented her with an open door, and she could go through it or remain outside. Later, still at Philippi, Paul gave his jailor the same opportunity. Luke includes Paul’s explicit invitation to the jailor to believe in Jesus (16:31)” (ibid., p. 114).

The verb in Acts 16:14 translated “pay attention to” (Gr. *prosechein*, inf. of *prosechō*) is used elsewhere in the New Testament to indicate a careful, devoted attention or receptivity (Acts 8:6; 1 Tim 1:4; Tit 1:14; Heb 2:1; 2 Pet 1:19). It presses the meaning of the verb too far, however, to equate it to faith itself. This understanding of *prosechein* as indicating a focused attention is consonant with its usage in Acts 16:14. Luke falls short of stating that the Lord “opened her heart to *believe*,”<sup>24</sup> instead mitigating his words to say that the direct result of God’s work in her heart was an attentiveness or responsiveness to Paul’s words. To some extent this overlaps with the enlightening function discussed above, but it seems to go beyond mere enlightenment and indicate a receptivity to the truth that reflects the Holy Spirit’s enabling of her will to respond, yet without entailing an irresistible response.

### ***Strengthening As Enabling Grace***

Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14-19, mentioned earlier, provides an example of enabling grace as it applies to the believer's sanctification. The full prayer in Ephesians chapter three is as follows:

"For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory *he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being*, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." (Eph 3:14-19)

The crux of Paul's prayer is that God would "grant [them] to be *strengthened with power* through His Spirit in [their] inner being." This is a direct statement of the activity of preceding grace within them. Notice a twofold result of this power in them: (a) that *Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith*, and (b) that they *may comprehend and know the love of Christ*. The latter of these results has already been discussed earlier; it reflects the enlightening function of preceding grace. The former of these results arises from the enabling function of preceding grace. That is, it is by the Spirit's enabling (here viewed as strengthening) that the life of Christ can be formed within them and that they can become "rooted and grounded in love," with the accompanying result that they may corporately "be filled with all the fullness of God."

The Bible refers to fortifying grace of this sort in numerous places, whereby God strengthens the inner resolve, determination, endurance, love, and faith of his followers. In 2 Timothy 2:1, for example, Paul exhorted Timothy to "be *strengthened by the grace* that is in Christ Jesus." In 2 Thessalonians 3:3 Paul assured the Thessalonian believers that the Lord would "*establish* [them] and guard [them] against the evil one." Peter likewise assured those who suffer for the faith, telling them that after a little while, "the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself *restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish* you" (1 Pet 4:10). In 2 Thessalonians 3:5 Paul prayed for the Thessalonians, "May the Lord *direct your hearts* to the love of God and to the

steadfastness of Christ” (cf. 1 Thess 3:12 and Eph 3:17 above). These statements are more than just indicators of divine emotional support; they are expressions of God’s direct, active involvement in the inner volitional life of the believer, enabling the believer to choose the way of faith and obedience even in the face of resistance (see also 1 Chron 16:11; 29:12; 2 Chron 16:9; Neh 8:10; Ps 28:7; 46:1; 59:9; 68:35; 73:26; 86:16; 118:14; 138:3; Is 12:12; Hab 3:19; Zech 10:12; 12:5; Lk 21:36; Eph 6:10; 1 Thess 3:13; 1 Tim 1:12; Heb 11:34; 1 Pet 4:11).

The divine source of this enabling grace is emphasized in Romans 8:2-13, where Paul contrasted the impotence of those who walk “according to the flesh” to the Spirit’s power that is present in those who walk “according to the Spirit.” The former are *unable* to submit to God’s law and *unable* to please God (vss. 7-8). The latter, however, have the “righteous requirement of the law” fulfilled in them (vs. 4), and are the recipients of “life and peace” (vss. 6, 10-11). Paul summarized the essence of this contrast between those in the flesh and those in the Spirit in verse 13:

“For if you live according the flesh you will die, but if *by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body*, you will live.” (Rom 8:13)

Notice that the mortification of bodily deeds mentioned in this verse clearly is achieved not by human power but “by the Spirit” (cf. 1 Cor 12:3). Given that the Holy Spirit is the source and supply of grace in the life of the believer (Zech 12:10; 1 Cor 12:4; Heb 10:29), this verse, which is so central in any discussion of sanctification, may be interpreted in terms of preceding, enabling grace. That is, by the Holy Spirit the grace of God is supplied to believers whereby they may mortify the flesh and experience spiritual life and freedom from sin which they could not experience apart from the enabling of God.

It is important to note that the verb translated “put to death” (Gr. *thanatoute*, from *thanatoō*) is inflected in the Greek for a second person plural subject (plural “you”). In other words, though the power of the Holy Spirit was the means by which the deeds of the flesh could be mortified, it was the Roman believers themselves who were the volitional agents of this mortification. *They* must make the choice to rely on the Spirit’s power to crucify their flesh; God would not make this choice for them. In this we see the synergistic nature of grace: God initiates and supplies

sufficient grace for believers to live holy lives (2 Pet 1:3), but believers must respond to this divine initiation and with their enabled free wills invite the Spirit to complete his work. A similar example is found in Peter's injunction in 1 Pet 5:12 for believers to "stand firm" in the grace of God. God supplies the grace, but the believers must choose to stand firm in it.

### ***A High View of Grace***

What are the implications of the enabling function of preceding grace for our sanctification in Christ? I believe that the most important implication of enabling grace is the one to which I just alluded above: Enabling grace establishes the *sufficiency* of preceding grace for consistent, deliberate holiness in the life of the believer. Many in the contemporary church take a *low view of grace*, concluding that though God has justified and regenerated believers in Christ, they cannot expect more than mixed success when it comes to intentional holiness of life this side of heaven. Implied in this position is the belief that God's grace, though amazing in its ability to bring forgiveness to those who are vile and corrupt, is nevertheless unable to ensure that these same ones having passed out of death into life may walk in consistent victory over deliberate sin.

In contrast, the doctrine of enabling, preceding grace establishes the proper *high view of grace*. God's preceding grace overflowing to believers is sufficient to engender consistent victory over deliberate sin, just as promised in 1 Corinthians 10:13, cited earlier:

"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."

Notice the three powerful words, "*able to endure . . .*" This is an unequivocal statement of complete sufficiency. God does not leave us with doubtful resources to face temptation; instead, he promises to provide us with a *real ability* to resist any temptation that we encounter (recall 1 Pet 1:3, that we have been granted "*all things that pertain to life and godliness*"). God will not let us "be tempted beyond our ability," meaning that it is always *within* our ability, as we are strengthened by

his preceding grace, to say “no” to temptation. The certainty of this fact is based on three other words in this verse, “*God is faithful.*” Those who would deny the sufficiency of divine grace for deliberate holiness are forced to deny the truth of these words that God is faithful to provide for his children.

Because of God’s faithfulness to provide sufficient preceding grace to his own, the apostle John could say that he was “writing these things . . . so that you *may not sin*” (1 Jn 2:1), and Paul could charge his son in the faith Timothy to “keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach [cf. NIV, “*without spot or blame*”] until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Tim 6:14). The commandment Paul had in mind here was the command to “pursue righteousness . . . fight the good fight . . . and take hold of eternal life” that he had just issued Timothy in the preceding verses (11, 12). Notice that Paul expected Timothy to keep this charge not merely when he would be glorified in heaven but *now*, in this present life--from the day Paul uttered the charge to Timothy until the day that Jesus would return. A similar thought is expressed in Titus 2:11-13:

"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ"

Notice that it is the “*grace of God*” that trains us to “renounce ungodliness” and to live “godly lives,” not simply at some future time but “*in the present age.*” This is consistent, intentional, present holiness, and it is made possible by means of the preceding grace of God supplied to the believer.<sup>25</sup> God’s grace is sufficient to enable such holiness in his children; this is the only high and proper view of divine grace.

### ***Submission in Faith***

What must I do to see the fruit of this enabling grace released in my life in regard to a particular temptation? The simple answer, based on all that has been said above, is that I must respond to the enabling grace that has been granted me. But how should I respond? In what fashion? I will address this question in more detail

below, but for now let me make one important point that for the longest time I missed entirely in my understanding of sanctification. For many years I had the frequent experience of calling out to God for the strength to resist a temptation, only to miserably succumb to it without any apparent divine aid forthcoming. I have discussed this point at greater length in the essay "Submission," but here let me summarize the main lesson I have come to learn, using the terminology of preceding and subsequent grace employed in the present essay:

I cannot expect to receive God's subsequent, sanctifying grace until I have *first* made use of God's preceding, enabling grace to *submit myself in faith wholly to the Lord*.

The main point to grasp here is that preceding grace is *not* granted in order to *bypass* the human will. Preceding grace is given in order to *enable* the human will to *make the choice whether or not to submit to God in faith*. This submission, in turn, is a necessary prerequisite for me to then *invite the Holy Spirit to grant subsequent sanctifying, purifying, mortifying grace* by which the deeds of the flesh may be crucified within me (Rom 8:13). Here, then, is a necessary order: (1) God enables my submission; (2) by the power of this enabling I can submit myself to the Lord; (3) at this point I may by faith invite the Spirit to mortify the fleshly desires in me that would otherwise mock and resist my submission; (4) the Spirit mortifies the flesh as I have requested, bringing me freedom.

The common error that I fell prey to for so many years was that I tried to skip over step (2). This, however, will lead to endless frustration, as the Bible attests. Consider the fact that one cannot arrive at Romans 8:13 ("by the Spirit . . . put[ting] to death the deeds of the body") without first passing through Paul's discussion of submission in Romans chapter six. In Romans 6:13 Paul commanded, "present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God." Unless we first fully dedicate and present ourselves to God as "instruments of righteousness" (6:13) and "slaves for obedience" (6:16), we will be ineligible to experience the sanctifying power of the Spirit in our lives (6:19b).

James made a similar point when he said that God's grace is given only to the "humble" (James 4:6; cf. 1 Pet 5:5; Prov 3:34), where the humility he had in mind

is marked foremost by *submission* (4:7). “*Submit* therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. . . . *Humble yourselves* in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you” (4:7-8a, 10). From James’ perspective, a person can experience the nearness and grace of God, and victory over the devil, only if that person first humbly draws near to God in complete, voluntary submission.

It does no good, then, to cry out to God, “Lord, help me! Enable me to resist this temptation! Grant me victory over this sin!” *unless* you have first checked your heart to ensure that your fundamental sense of loyalty and submission to Christ is intact. If there is any residual doubt as to your desire and willingness to obey God, any hesitancy or reluctance (not to mention downright resistance), then you are not yet ready receive God’s gracious assistance in the battle against sin. You may say, “This is too much to expect from one in the throes of temptation!” No, it is not, for it follows readily from a high view of grace. God’s preceding grace is more than sufficient to enable us to sincerely, fully surrender ourselves to him even in the midst of temptation, if only we will respond to the grace that has been given us up to that point.

This is one point at which the necessity of *faith* becomes particularly important to our sanctification. When faced with a temptation I must choose whether to believe what natural wisdom would tell me, that my struggle against deliberate sin can never yield more than a partial victory, or to believe what God has said in his Word, that his grace is sufficient for me. The former position has no lack of proponents, from psychologists, counselors, even Christian authors, pastors, and theologians. The latter position requires us to hang all our confidence on God and his faithfulness to his promises. He never requires of us what he will not enable us to perform, if we will but cast ourselves in faith back upon his grace. Indeed, there is a great sense of freedom in knowing that my role is not that I would by some power of my own put an end to the temptation I face. Instead, my role is to submit this fleshly deed for crucifixion by the only one able to so crucify it, the crucified and risen Christ. For that task, both he and the grace he provides are more than sufficient.<sup>26</sup>

### *Inspiring Grace*

## ***Motivating the Heart***

In addition to the enlightening and enabling functions of preceding grace discussed above, there is substantial biblical evidence for a third important function of preceding grace:

Preceding grace serves to *inspire* (i.e., motivate) the human heart to (desire to) love God and to obey his will.

As noted earlier, this motivating function of preceding grace is logically ordered between the other two functions already mentioned, for the heart cannot be motivated about that which it has not first been enlightened; similarly, the will cannot be enabled to choose that which it does not already in some measure desire.

Unfortunately, the motivating function of God's grace is a point which those like myself who stress the reality of authentic human free will have sometimes failed to recognize. Too often we have assumed that the motivations of the human heart must be initiated and maintained strictly by humans themselves without divine aid, else the authentically-free nature of those motivations might be called into question. I now see this to be a false assumption, and an unbiblical one at that. Biblically speaking, the motivating function of God's grace is an integral part of the inheritance guaranteed to believers in Christ under the New Covenant.

One well-known passage that can be understood in terms of a motivating preceding grace is David's prayer in Psalm 51. In the midst of his prayer of repentance David pleads, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and *renew a right spirit within me*. . . . Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and *uphold me with a willing spirit*" (vss. 10, 12). David's request for God to grant him a "right spirit" [per ESV, KJV, RSV, NRSV; cf. "steadfast spirit" NASB and NIV] and a "willing spirit" [per ESV, NASB, NIV, RSV, NRSV; cf. "free spirit" KJV] indicate his belief that God could intervene in his heart in such a way as to not only forgive and cleanse him but to also foster a renewed *willingness* and *desire* to fulfill God's will. David wanted to never again descend into the same spiritual blindness and hardness of heart that had characterized his period of unrepentance (during which he had lost all semblance of salvation and the joy that comes with it; vs. 12a). He knew that

the regenerative grace of God would be required to restore within him a motivated, willing heart eager to follow after God.

### ***The Believer's Inheritance***

Significantly, God promised through Ezekiel to establish this kind of willing heart in *all* of his people under the new covenant:

"I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you *a new heart*, and *a new spirit* I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you *a heart of flesh*. And I will put my Spirit within you, and *cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules*. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God." (Ezekiel 36:24-28; cf. 11:19-20; Jer 31:33)

This is strong language, so much so that those who stress human free will are sometimes unsure quite how to fit it into their theology, though none would deny that it represents a high mark in the prophetic revelation of the Old Testament. As part of the "new heart" and "new spirit" that God promised to give to us as believers under the new covenant, through his Spirit he will *cause* us to be careful to obey him. Here is a whole new capacity, a whole new motivation in the believer, and God emphasizes that *he* is the one who will do it in us (note: "*I* will give," "*I* will put," "*I* will remove," "*I* will cause").

Various verses in the New Testament hint at a direct, motivating influence of this sort which God can have on the hearts of his people.<sup>27</sup> One of the verses considered earlier in regard to enabling grace, for example, can also be viewed in terms of inspiring or motivating grace. In Paul's prayer for the Thessalonian believers he said, "May the Lord *direct your hearts* to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ" (2 Thess 3:5). This may be taken as a motivating influence from God whereby they would more greatly desire to love God and remain faithful to Christ. Indeed, many of the prayers made on behalf of believers in the New Testament contain similar references to the Spirit's work in the hearts

of believers that can be interpreted in terms of motivating (or more generally, preceding) grace (e.g., Eph 1:16-21; 3:14-19; 1 Thess 3:12-13; 2 Thess 2:16-17; Heb 13:20-21).<sup>28</sup>

### ***Grace and Free Will in Philippians 2:13***

Perhaps the most well-known and explicit verse in the entire Bible regarding what I am here calling inspiring or motivating grace is Philippians 2:13. This verse has often been presented by those within the Calvinist tradition as definitive evidence that the human element in sanctification is determined by and finds its ultimate cause in the decretive will of God:

"for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." (Philippians 2:13)

The phrase *both to will and to work* is significant, for Scripture elsewhere attests that our desires and actions do not always match (cf. Rom 7:15, 18, 19; 2 Cor 8:10). The above verse indicates that the internal work of the Spirit in a person's heart touches on that person's *inward motivations* (Gr. *thelein*, from *thelō* "to will, to wish") in such a way as to affect the person's *external acts* (Gr. *energein*, from *energeō* "to work, to do"). God does not merely command an external standard of behavior without providing the inward resources necessary to achieve this standard, nor does he tantalize us with an inward desire without the hope of it being fulfilled. God provides everything necessary for his good pleasure to be realized in us both in the intention and in the doing.

And what is this good pleasure of God? The verses immediately following suggest that God's desire for them in this regard is that they shine forth their heavenly father's own holy nature by living blameless and innocent lives (Phlp 2:15). In a similar passage in Ephesians 2:10 Paul states that God does his work in us in order that we should "walk in" the good works which God "prepared beforehand" for us. Chapter one of Ephesians provides the larger context for this statement, namely, that the working of God's power toward us (1:19) is for the ultimate purpose that all will be united in Christ (1:10) once Christ's Body fully displays his divine nature through conformity to his image (1:23; cf. Rom 8:29, 2 Cor 3:18; 2 Pet 1:4). God works in us, then, in order that we, the Body of Christ, will

corporately manifest God's own holy nature as it is expressed in Christ and issues forth in good works, or, as Paul expressed it elsewhere, as it is displayed in "faith working through love" (Gal 5:6).

Those within the Calvinist tradition see the relationship in Philippians 2:13 between (a) God's will for believers (i.e., his "good pleasure") and his work in them, on the one hand, and (b) the resulting willing and working which arises at the human level, on the other hand, as determinative in nature. That is, God ultimately determines or preordains for each believer all of his motives, his choices of will, and his resulting acts.<sup>29</sup> There is, however, another way to interpret this verse and the similar passages mentioned earlier. Instead of viewing God's influence on the human heart in these passages as determinative, we can readily interpret the relationship in terms of a preceding grace that not only enlightens and enables individuals, but also can inspire or motivate them to do God's will, yet resistibly so.

Such an understanding of preceding grace in the life of the believer can be summarized as follows: God is continually active in the believer's heart, and this activity has as its ultimate goal the believer's full participation in God's conforming the entire Body of Christ to the image of Christ, this being the "good pleasure" of God. No progress whatsoever can be made toward this goal without the direct intervention of the Spirit of God. This intervention comes in the form of preceding grace, by which the open, responsive believer is continually *enlightened* to see the importance and value of holiness, the reality of his own impotence to achieve it, and the power of the Spirit available to bring it about. Not only is the believer enlightened, though, he is also *inspired* to desire this holiness as the beautiful prize that it is, reflecting as it does the worth and majesty of God himself. This motivation characterizes the "new heart" that God has produced in every believer, and, as long as the believer remains open and responsive, God promises to maintain this flame of desire and love for Christ at the core of the believer's heart. Moreover, through God's grace the believer is *enabled* to choose the good that his mind perceives and that his heart desires. He is genuinely able to resist temptation and all deceptions of the enemy (1 Cor 10:13). He is enabled to rightly consider himself dead to sin but alive to God (Rom 6:11). He is enabled to present himself in full surrender as an instrument for righteousness to God (Rom 6:12-13). He is enabled by the power of the indwelling Spirit to mortify any fleshly desire (Rom 8:13; Col 3:5). He is enabled to cry out for more grace at every point where

his present resources might seem insufficient to meet the spiritual challenges which he faces (Eph 1:3; 2 Pet 1:3).

Yet, these outcomes are not guaranteed in an absolute, deterministic sense, for the free will of the individual who has been enlightened, inspired, and enabled in these ways may still choose to entertain deceptions presented by the hand of Satan and may resist the operation of preceding grace in his life (Heb 3:13, 15; 1 Thess 4:7-8). The fact that God motivates a believer to have a deep, ever-present desire for Christ *does not mean that no other desire or motivation may be entertained, or that the believer is impotent to raise hindrances to this grace* (see Appendix for discussion). Satan untiringly presents new temptations to the believer, and at any point a believer may, with a will enabled to make free choices, choose to distance himself from his previous values and commitments by engaging in deliberate sin. Making provision for (i.e., “feeding”) the flesh in this way (Rom 13:14) will tend to breathe new life into fleshly passions that until then may have been under the mortifying influence of the Spirit.

Moreover, the choice to deliberately sin against the known will of God undermines the integrity of the believer’s faith, for faith is in its essence a choice to *value* Christ and the will of God above all else, whereas deliberate sin represents, for that moment at least, a choice to *devalue* or *despise* what one previously cherished (2 Sam 12:9-10; see the devotional “Despising God”). To the extent that a believer entertains Satan’s deceptions in this way, to that extent his heart will experience a hardening, a deadening to the things of God and a weakening of his faith (cf. the essay “Deliberate Sin Erodes Faith”). The flame of holy motivation within will be diminished accordingly, though it will never die out completely short of an individual renouncing his faith and loyalty to Christ on a wholesale scale, at the most fundamental level (i.e., apostatizing or suffering “shipwreck” in regard to faith; 1 Tim 1:19; 6:10).<sup>30</sup> At any point in this process, God’s grace, even if only a flicker remains, is still available and *is from that very point sufficient* to begin provoking the believer to repentance from unbelief and disobedience, *if the believer will embrace the grace being offered*. This is axiomatic: God’s grace, if present at all, is *always* sufficient to move an individual from his current level of faith and obedience (or doubt and disobedience, as the case may be) to where he ought to be, wholly surrendered to the Lord (Mt 13:12). Conversely, though God enlightens, inspires, and enables, it is possible (though never necessary)<sup>31</sup> for the

believer to swim against this sacred tide and reject the working of the Spirit, if the believer so chooses.

### ***The Balance Between Grace and Free Will***

Here, then, is the delicate balance between divine grace and human free will. We are in the truest sense carried by grace, even at the level of our motivations, and yet this grace will not attain its ultimate goal without our consent. Preceding grace is designed to provoke a response in the recipient: By grace we are brought to a point where we are able to decide whether or not we will voluntarily invite the Spirit of God to carry out his good pleasure in us. God through his grace can enable us to make this decision, but due to the very nature of free will he cannot make the decision for us. Our part is to consent to what God wishes to do in us as we enter upon a conscious, willful reliance on divine grace. God's part is to supply preceding and subsequent grace, both to enlighten, inspire, and enable us to give our consent in the first place, and then in response to impart to us regenerating, sanctifying life.

## **IV. Perseverance in Sanctification**

### ***God's Unwavering Purpose***

This brings us back to the question with which this essay began: Given the inconstancy and fickleness of the human will, what basis is there for any confidence that I will continue in the future to desire and pursue sanctification? Some of my comments in the previous few paragraphs might be taken to close the door on any such confidence, given that believers generally retain the ability to resist preceding grace and swim against the current of God's influence, as it were. Is there no basis for assurance that I will persevere in the faith that I now possess?

Notice what is happening here. The moment that we begin to focus on the human element in sanctification (which, undoubtedly, is a necessary element), we tend to lose clear sight of the divine element, namely, the promise of sufficient grace. The

fact is, however, that God has provided *everything* necessary for my perseverance in faith and obedience to be accomplished:

"His divine power has given us *everything* we need *for life and godliness* through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness" (2 Pet 1:3).

*Everything*. This includes sufficient enlightenment, sufficient motivation, and sufficient enabling. Moreover, God has covenanted not to withdraw this grace from me as long as I remain in Christ by faith (Jn 15:4; 1 Pet 1:5). God has just one intention: to see this thing through to the end.

"And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." (Phlp 1:6)

"Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it." (1 Thess 5:23-24; cf. 1 Cor 1:8-9)

God will not waiver from this purpose of "bringing many sons to glory" (Heb 2:10). Though God will not override our will in the matter (to do so would violate the very nature of humans as created in God's image), God is faithful to pursue us in every way that maintains the integrity of the relationship. This relentless divine commitment to pursue his people should fill our vision and give us great hope. Despair comes only when we focus on ourselves, on our past performance, on our propensity to failure. Hope and joy come when we raise our eyes to God and by faith embrace the sufficiency of his grace in us, both now and in the future.

"For all the promises of God find their Yes in [Christ]. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. *And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ*, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee." (2 Cor 1:20-22)

Thus, just as my hope of victory over sin at the present moment is founded upon my trust in the availability and sufficiency of divine grace at this moment, so my hope of victory over sin in the *future* is founded upon my trust in the future availability and sufficiency of preceding grace as it is guaranteed through the “new heart” granted to all believers under the new covenant. God will be faithful to continue supplying this holy motivation to me, a supply that will *always* be sufficient for my perseverance in the faith.

### *More Grace!*

But sometimes this desire for holiness, this love for Christ, seems to wane--admittedly, through the fault of my own neglect and self-hardening. I find to my dismay that I *want* to commit some act that I know is against the will of God. The deceitfulness of sin rolls slowly through my heart like an advancing fog, whispering the inevitability of sin. What can I do to stop this advance?<sup>32</sup>

I have found in my own experience (and this experience seems to be in agreement with what we saw in the scriptures quoted earlier) that the Lord always allows free will a window of opportunity to stop the deadening advance of sin’s deceitfulness. There is always a moment at which I first realize that the fog is coming, that it is beginning to cloud my thinking so that I am tempted to dishonor what I have previously prized in Christ and to value a lesser idol. It is at this moment that I must seize this opportunity or “way of escape” (1 Cor 10:13), confess my inability to stop the advance through my own strength, and look deep within my heart for that flame of preceding grace that would still motivate me to a steadfast love for Christ. Even though by this time the flame may seem to be only a wavering flicker, I will find it if I seek it, for God has promised it under the new covenant to which I am party.

This is exactly the opposite of what Satan would have me think, for he wants me to believe that the sin is inevitable and that it is futile for me to resist.<sup>33</sup> But this is a lie. When I perceive the flicker of motivating grace within my heart, I am reassured that God has not abandoned me, for the very fact that God has by his grace enabled me to see my need and to hunger for his salvation in any measure assures me that he *will respond* if only I will call out to him. God never grants any measure of grace that he is not willing to increase at the recipient’s request. At the

very least, there will always be enough grace to enable me *to cry out for more grace*.

And so I cry out:

“O God, you see what is happening to me. You see the twisted desire rising up in me to forsake my allegiance to you and dishonor your name. You know that I am helpless to defeat this in my own strength. God, I am afraid, afraid that this sin might somehow turn out to be inevitable. But God, you have not abandoned me. The very fact that I can cry out this prayer to you proves that you still have left some grace in my heart, grace to seek you, to trust you, to desire you. This is your gracious gift to me. O God, *by the power of this grace* I now submit to you; I cast myself at your feet, helpless before you. And, O God, I plead now for *more grace*, grace sufficient to hunger for you deeply as I did before, grace to prize Christ above all else, grace to renounce all duplicity and double-dealing in my intentions toward you, grace to resist this temptation that now rears its head before me, grace to see through the lie that whispers this sin to be inevitable, grace by which the Holy Spirit will put this fleshly deed to death in my heart before it comes to fruition, grace to resist any further concessions to this sin in my mind, intentions, words, or actions. I cast myself upon you and upon your grace. Do what I am unable to do. By the resurrection power of Jesus Christ, put to death this wicked desire in me and flood me with your life, your restorative, healing grace. Restore in me the holy desires that over the years I have come to love. *Soften what I have hardened*, every aspect of my will, heart, mind, and emotions that I have hardened by concessions to sin. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right, willing spirit within me. Do not cast me away from you for what I have done and for what I have considered doing. Do not remove your precious Holy Spirit from me, for then I would be utterly without hope. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and in the power of that salvation I will go forward, pursuing the holiness that you have promised is my inheritance in Christ.

If I do not raise this heart cry while the God-given window of opportunity is present, if I do not take hold of the freedom that God has granted to enable me to fall upon his grace, then I will have chosen instead to harden and deaden my heart, and the

fog of deception will roll more thickly through it, darkening the light that God had supplied through his grace. God may yet grant further grace to awaken me to my perilous condition, but by then the fleshly deed may have already given birth, wreaking yet more destruction on my spirit. I must never presume to think that I can accurately gauge beforehand the impact that a particular act of deliberate sin will have upon the integrity of my faith. The defiant have no right to presume upon the continued preceding grace of God (Jn 12:35-36; Heb 12:18-29, esp. vs. 25).

It is imperative, then, at the present moment of temptation while I am aware of even the smallest flicker of desire for God, that I immediately cry out in faith for God to grant more grace. When I do so, the flicker becomes a flame, then quickly a roaring fire of passion for God that consumes the temptation, the deception, and the fear that it had fostered.

### *Victory Assured*

This, then, is the basis for victory over sin and perseverance in sanctification. God has the power to keep us (1 Pet 1:5), and he can ultimately keep us from stumbling (Jude 24) as he enables us by grace to persevere in this good fight of faith (1 Tim 6:12; 2 Tim 4:7). Though I may be assailed time and time again with the same or with novel temptations, and though the fog may roll in heavily at times, while I still cling to faith in Christ God will not allow the inner flame of motivating grace to be snuffed out. More broadly, he always grants sufficient grace for me to recognize my danger and cry out for more enlightening, motivating, and enabling grace.

Indeed, I have made this my daily prayer: *More grace, O God, more grace*. The essence of this heart cry is that out of my impotence I cast myself back in reliance upon the grace of God. I use the free will that God enables within me not to pursue sanctification in my own strength but to *trust in the sufficiency and supply of divine grace*. This must be our focus and our assurance of victory: not human free will but that which is *both the source and the object* of the exercise of that will, namely, the grace of God.

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## Appendix: Motivations and Freedom of Will

Motivations of will are sometimes presented as though they necessarily *determine* or force the will to act in a particular fashion. This is especially so when one speaks of a strongest (or highest or greatest) motivation. This line of thinking assumes that the will is always swayed by the strongest motivation or desire; consequently, the exercise of human will becomes a mere handmaiden to motivation. Many of those in the Calvinist tradition (i.e., theological compatibilists, or soft determinists; see my essay “Philosophical Reflections on Free Will”) argue from such a position that God may determine the outcome of all free choices of men by either directly or indirectly determining their desires and motivations.

However, this line of reasoning mistakenly assumes that motivations may influence the will but not vice versa. In fact, motivations and desires may be altered due to an action of the will. Motivations and desires are not static but are fluid and may increase or decrease in strength depending on many factors, including past or present intentions and choices of the will. A man’s desire to please his wife, for example, may blossom over time as a direct result of an intentional commitment of will that he has made to faithfully serve her as a husband ought. In this case the force of will helps to determine the level of motivation that is present.

The compatibilist may attempt to get around this problem by pointing out that the husband’s commitment of faithful service was itself motivated by a prior desire (e.g., to obey the Scriptures, to receive greater appreciation from his wife), and that this prior desire was presumably the strongest among competing alternatives. On this basis the compatibilist might still invoke divine determination of this prior desire (hence, divine determination of the resulting commitment of will, etc.).

This, however, begs the question with which we started in the main text, namely, whether a desire that has been granted by God (i.e., as an instance of preceding motivating grace) is by definition irresistible. I would argue that it is not, even if it is the strongest desire felt by an individual at the moment relative to a particular issue. At this point we encounter the mystery of human free will. Whereas

compatibilism virtually equates a volitional agent with his character (because the agent's character determines his desires, and his desires determine his choices), the indeterminism that I am arguing for rejects this equation. David Ciochi has nicely summarized this point for the indeterminist:

"The agent, as a locus of free will, is something more than his own character--his character has a say, but not the final say, in a libertarian [i.e., undetermined] free choice. What the libertarian [i.e., indeterminist] affirms with the soft determinist is that the agent's character and circumstances will *determine the range of options from which he will make his free choice*," but these factors do not "determine *which* option from that range he will choose. *That* choice is what free will is all about . . . , and it is finally mysterious, beyond full explanation, for full explanations presuppose the very determinism the libertarian rejects" (Ciochi, "Human Freedom," in *Christian Perspectives on Being Human: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Integration*, Moreland & Ciochi (eds.), Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, pp. 93-94).

Ciochi's final sentence is important: The compatibilist's assertion that the strongest motivation determines the volitional outcome *presupposes* rather than demonstrates (soft) determinism. It is quite possible that the will, enabled by divine grace, can itself in part influence the strength of the motivations that lie before it for consideration, or, alternatively, can even choose to act upon a lesser motivation. These possibilities, of course, rest on the assumption that the will has some measure of autonomy from desire, an ability to reflect back upon desire and influence it or act independent of it. Such autonomy of will is entirely plausible if the free will of humans is derived from God's own free will. Even determinists would agree that the divine free will is necessarily autonomous, otherwise God would be subject to some determining factor(s) outside himself and could not serve as a prime cause. Yet, once we admit that God's free will is autonomous, we must consider the possibility that God may communicate this same sort of autonomy of will to humans made in his image. Determinists like myself argue just this, that the autonomy of human free will is a gift of God, one of the capacities made potential by the image of God stamped upon the human spirit and realized by the enabling power of the preceding grace of God.

This autonomy comprises the mystery of free will to which Ciochi alluded in the above quote. One of the common objections to indeterminism made by compatibilists is that an autonomous free will of the sort I have described above could not function, because there would be nothing to compel it to choose one option over another if not the relative strength of desire. This objection, however, misses the point that free will is by its very nature mysterious and not subject to logical analysis, much as the Trinity or the nature of spirit is not fully explicable in finite terms. The fact that these concepts cannot be fully analyzed does not mean that they are not biblically valid or true. The exercise of authentic free will should be viewed as an ongoing miracle, no less miraculous for its familiarity of occurrence.

Forceful biblical evidence for an autonomous free will of the sort described above is provided, for example, in 1 Corinthians 10:13, in which believers are promised that God will not allow them to be tempted “beyond [their] ability” but will provide a way by which they may be “able to endure” the temptation. This promise, based explicitly on the fact that “God is faithful,” entails that in any given situation a believer *can actually resist the temptation if he so chooses*. The incontestable reality that believers do *not* always so endure temptations equally entails that believers *have an actual ability to do otherwise than that for which God’s preceding grace allows*. This is essentially a statement of contra-causal freedom--the freedom to do otherwise, or to choose among multiple, viable options. This characterization of an autonomous will is incompatible with the compatibilist soft-determinist notion that there can be only one choice open to the will in any given instance, namely, that choice which follows from whatever is the strongest desire or motivation in the given situation. The above scriptural evidence for contra-causal freedom of will is similarly incompatible with the Calvinist doctrine of a comprehensive, efficacious, unconditional decree, according to which God unilaterally predetermines the necessary outcome of all human choices.

Is there any way for the compatibilist to avoid the above conclusion and reconcile 1 Corinthians 10:13 with the compatibilist or Calvinist view? The way most commonly attempted by theological compatibilists is to argue that the ability to endure temptation which is guaranteed to believers in this verse is not an ability to *actually* endure in every case, but only an ability to *hypothetically* endure. Ciochi

explains:

“To say that God will not permit us to be tempted beyond our (hypothetical) ability to endure means that in any given case of temptation the believer will endure *if* he wishes to endure. God has promised that there shall be no temptations sufficient to overwhelm the believer, and this means that the believer is left to act on his own preference. This preference, though, is the *necessary* expression of his character as mediated by the present set of circumstances. This in turn implies that whether the believer in a given case of temptation chooses to endure or not to endure, he could not (actually) have done otherwise.” (ibid., p. 98)

Though Ciocchi seems to lean toward accepting compatibilism (ibid, p. 99), he himself admits that the above compatibilist interpretation of 1 Corinthians 10:13 as guaranteeing only a *hypothetical* ability to endure temptation “produces a result that some will regard as counterintuitive” (ibid., p. 98). Indeed so. According to the compatibilist Calvinist interpretation, God’s promise in 1 Corinthians 10:13 can be reduced to something along the following lines: “I [God] am faithful to protect you from overwhelming temptation. To that end, I promise to intervene on your behalf to ensure that you will be able to endure any temptation that you want to endure, though you will want to endure only those temptations that I want you to (want to endure).” Stated this way, the final portion of the promise takes the wind out of the sails of the first part. The reason why this is so is that the compatibilist understanding of 1 Corinthians 10:13 is forced to posit contradictory desires on God’s part. On the one hand, the verse and its context clearly indicate that *God genuinely desires* to protect the believer from a situation in which he would necessarily sin (i.e., face an overwhelming temptation). Believers need not fear that they will ever *of necessity* commit deliberate sins. On the other hand, the compatibilist is forced by his own system to say that *God does not actually desire* that the believer will always want to endure temptation. In some cases, at least, the theological compatibilist must conclude that God unilaterally ordains that believers will *of necessity* (i.e., as a result of God’s efficacious, unconditional decree) both desire to commit sin and indeed commit sin (see “Philosophical Reflections on Free Will” for more discussion).

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*Notes:*

1. Arminianism is named after its most influential proponent, the Dutch Protestant reformer Jacob (James) Arminius (1560-1609 A.D.).

2. I have argued for this view in a number of essays, including “Three Lies About Sin” and “Without Spot or Blame.”

3. The concepts in this essay are also a needed complement to certain ideas I explored in the essay “Submission.” In that essay, as in most other essays I have written before now on the topic of sanctification, I emphasized the necessity of the human role in the process of sanctification. In the present essay I hope to have balanced this by recognizing the central role of divine grace in sanctification.

4. As we will see below, these three functions of divine grace are present as well, though in a less intensified form, in the grace extended to unbelievers by which they may be made aware of God and drawn to Christ (cf. the following discussion of preceding grace).

5. Wiley, for example, defined prevenient grace as “that grace which ‘goes before’ or prepares the soul for entrance into the initial state of salvation” (H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology*, Vol. 2, Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1952, p. 345). This definition excludes any consideration of the role prevenient grace plays in sanctification after conversion.

6. Compare also Arminius’ many statements against Pelagianism (e.g., “A Dissertation on the True and Genuine Sense of the Seventh Chapter of the Epistle to the Romans,” *The Works of James Arminius*, London Ed., Vol. 2, trans. James Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, p. 631).

7. This recognition of authentic roles for both divine grace and human free will is reflected in Arminius’ description of the interplay between God’s initiation and the human response: “by [God’s] power the dead are animated *that they may live*, the

fallen are raised up *that they may recover themselves*, the blind are illuminated *that they may see*, the unwilling are incited *that they may become willing*, the weak are confirmed *that they may stand*, the willing are assisted *that they may work and may cooperate with God*" ("Disputations on Some of the Principal Subjects of the Christian Religion," *The Works of James Arminius*, London Ed., Vol. 2, trans. James Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, Pub. Dis. XI, Sec. XIV, p. 196, emphasis added). On the same page Arminius quoted Bernardus, *De Libero Arbit. Et Gratia*: "What then, you ask, does Free Will do? I reply with brevity, It saves. Take away Free Will, and nothing will be left to be saved: Take away Grace, and nothing will be left [*unde salvetur*] as the source of salvation. This work [of salvation] cannot be effected without two parties—One, from whom [*sif*] it may come:--The Other, to whom or in whom it may be [wrought.] God is the Author of salvation: Free Will [*tantum capere*] is only capable of being saved. No one, except God, is able to bestow salvation; and nothing, except Free Will, is capable of receiving it" (ibid., p. 196).

8. Actually, I would argue that saving grace (by which one is regenerated and justified) and sanctifying grace (by which the believer is conformed to the image of Christ) are simply two aspects of the same underlying phenomenon, and that drawing too rigid distinctions between the two can lead to theological error. I hope to defend and explore the ramifications of this perspective in a future essay.

9. The question of the resistibility of grace has engendered much discussion over the years and goes to the very heart of the distinction between Calvinist and Arminian theology. Theologians within the Calvinist tradition, who generally avoid the term "prevenient grace" and instead subsume certain aspects of this concept under the notion "effectual calling" (cf. Westminster Confession of Faith, X/i-ii, iv), argue that any grace that has salvation in view is irresistible or efficacious not only in terms of its initial reception but also its effects, such that any person to whom this grace is dispensed will necessarily be led to faith and repentance and become a recipient of regenerating, redeeming, sanctifying grace. This follows from the Calvinist understanding of the divine decrees, by which God unconditionally determines who will and will not be saved, and foreordains all of the means necessary (including the dispensing of efficacious grace) to bring about this result in the elect. Theologians within the Arminian tradition, in contrast, while sometimes acknowledging that prevenient grace is irresistible in terms of its

initial reception (see main text), argue that prevenient grace does not itself *compel* or otherwise *necessitate* a particular response to such grace on the part of the recipient. Due to the enabling influence of preceding grace, the person possesses an authentically free agency by which he may resist the offer of further grace and reject the opportunity to exercise faith, repentance, or obedience.

10. In an interesting article on the nature and history of the doctrine of prevenient grace, Jeff Paton mentions that John Wesley and John Fletcher (a contemporary of Wesley) both held to the irresistibility of prevenient grace at the point of its initial reception (Jeff Paton, "Prevenient Grace," an essay developed from a paper presented to the Methodism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century conference held at St. Stephen Methodist Church in Columbus, GA, on October 12-15, 2000; see [http://biblicaltheology.webhostme.com/prevenient\\_grace.htm](http://biblicaltheology.webhostme.com/prevenient_grace.htm)).

11. See Robert Shank, *Elect in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Election*, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1970, 1989, p. 178.

12. For three surveys of the evidence see "The Universality of God's Love" by Fritz Guy, "Universal Grace and Atonement in the Pastoral Epistles" by I. Howard Marshall, and "The Universal Power of the Atonement" by Terry L. Miethe, all in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man* (Clark H. Pinnock, ed., Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1989, pp. 31-96).

13. Arminius alluded to this universal purpose of preceding grace: "Sinful man, after the perpetration of sin, has such a knowledge of the law as is sufficient for accusing, convicting, and condemning him: And this knowledge itself is capable of being employed by God when calling him to Christ, that He may, through it, compel man to repent and to flee to Christ" ("Certain Articles to be Diligently Examined and Weighed," *The Works of James Arminius*, London Ed., Vol. 2, trans. James Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, Art. XVII, 1, p. 720).

14. In the essay "The Order of Faith and Election in John's Gospel" I argue that all preceding grace has faith in Christ and conformity to his image as its ultimate aim. Preceding grace is in this sense truly Christocentric.

15. See the essay "The Order of Faith and Election in John's Gospel" for related

discussion.

16. Compare Arminius' comments: ". . . while they are destitute of the knowledge of Christ, yet God has not left Himself without witness, but even during that period has revealed to them some truth concerning His power and goodness; which benefits *if they had rightly used*, at least according to their conscience, *He would have granted them greater grace*; according to that, 'To him that hath shall be given' [Matthew 13:12] . . . 'All men are called with some calling,' namely, by that witness of God by which they may be brought to find God by feeling after Him, and by that truth which they 'hold,' or detain, 'in unrighteousness,' that is, whose effect they hinder in themselves; and by that writing of the law upon their minds, according to which they have their own thoughts accusing them. But this calling, though it is not a saving one, as from which salvation cannot be immediately obtained, *may yet be said to be antecedent to the saving grace by which Christ is offered, and, if rightly used, will acquire that grace from God's mercy.*"

("Examination of Perkin's Pamphlet," *The Works of James Arminius*, London Ed., Vol. 3, trans. William Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, pp. 483-484, emphasis added). Again, Arminius writes, "No man believes in Christ except him who has been previously disposed and prepared by preventing or preceding grace to receive eternal life, on that condition on which God wills to bestow it, according to the following passage of Scripture, 'If any man will execute his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself' (John vii, 17)" ("Certain Articles to be Diligently Examined and Weighed," *The Works of James Arminius*, London Ed., Vol. 2, trans. James Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, Art. XIX, p. 724).

17. The distinction here between preceding and subsequent grace is quite different from the distinction drawn by theologians within the Calvinist tradition between *common* and *special* grace (e.g., P. E. Hughes, "Grace," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by Walter A. Elwell, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984, pp. 479-480). According to those within this tradition, common grace is extended by God to all humanity and accounts for any measure of good (i.e., order, cooperation, forbearance, honor, and consciousness of right and wrong, truth and error) that is retained within fallen human society. However, unlike the preceding grace in focus in this essay, which is intended by God to allow all who will respond to it the opportunity to be drawn to a conscious faith in Christ,

common grace as those within the Calvinist tradition understand it never has the salvation of any individual as its goal.

Special grace, in contrast, is a term used within Calvinism to refer to regenerating, sanctifying grace. It is seen by those within the Calvinist tradition as being extended by God exclusively to those individuals whom he has elected to eternal salvation. Special grace, in this view, is never extended even in part to the nonelect, for special grace is understood to be uniformly irresistible and efficacious in its effects (i.e., every recipient of special grace is guaranteed to experience regeneration, redemption, sanctification, and ultimate glorification in Christ). This differs from my usage of the term subsequent grace, for subsequent grace refers to the divine response to *any* favorable exercise of human free will in the moral dimension, regardless whether the person ultimately comes to faith in Christ. Subsequent grace may thus be dispensed to an individual before, during, and after conversion. The precise content of subsequent grace will vary according to the circumstances (e.g., a heightened awareness of one's need for Christ in one case, the regenerating effect of the Spirit in another, or the fostering of a passion for Christ within the believer in yet another case).

18. I have argued in the essay "Submission" that the free exercise of the human will in full surrender to the supremacy of Christ is necessary before one can hope to receive God's subsequent grace for sanctification. The failure to recognize this fact has too often led Christians to wonder why God has not granted them deliverance from some particular sin. See my discussion in the main text below.

19. Consider another example of how preceding and subsequent grace alternate with the exercise of human free will:

Divine initiative: (Preceding grace)	<i>God enlightens a person to the presence of sin within and to the redemptive power available in Christ.</i>
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Human response: (Enabled free will)	<i>By the enabling power of this grace received, the person affirms the truth that has been revealed and desires to be free of sin's influence.</i>
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Divine response	<i>In view of the person's openness, God grants him</i>
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*and new initiative:*                    *sufficient grace to be able to flee the sin and draw near*  
(Subsequent grace                    *to Christ in faith.*  
*and preceding grace)*

↓

Human response:                    *Acting on the enabling received, the person embraces*  
(Enabled free will)                    *the opportunity, recoiling from his own wretchedness*  
*and crying out in faith for deliverance.*

↓

Divine response                    *Hearing the person's sincere cry, God dispenses*  
*and new initiative:*                    *redemptive power, putting the sin to death and granting*  
(Subsequent grace                    *life in its place.*  
*and preceding grace)*

The chart above is a vast oversimplification, of course, for in reality the number of God's infusions of grace, both preceding and subsequent, are for the typical person multitudinous throughout each day, not to mention throughout the entirety of a person's life.

20. See the essay "Despising God."

21. Arminius stated, "God gives to no one the power of doing well, without being prepared to give moreover [the inclination] to will and to do; that is, by the further help of grace God concurs with man in willing and carrying out into action that good for which he has received strength sufficient, unless man, on his part, places, or has placed, a hinderance [sic] in the way . . . For, 'to him that hath shall be given; and from him that hath not shall be taken even that which he hath.' [Mark iv. 25.] Otherwise the power would have been bestowed in vain: but the Wise God does nothing in vain" ("Examination of the Treatise of Perkins on the Order and Mode of Predestination," *The Works of James Arminius*, London Ed., Vol. 3, trans. William Nichols, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1986, p. 272; cf. also Arminius' comments on concurrence, *ibid.*, pp. 416ff).

22. As further evidence of an Arminian interpretation of John 6:44, Shank points out, "Having asserted that 'no man can come to me except the Father which hath sent me draw him' (v. 44), Jesus immediately declared, 'It is written in the prophets, And they shall all be taught by God, Everyone who has heard and

learned from the Father comes to me.” (v. 45 RSV) As Christ affirmed, all are *taught*. But only those who choose to *hear and learn of the Father* come to Him” (Robert Shank, *Elect in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Election*, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1970, 1989, pp. 176-177).

23. I exclude here what has been one of the most popular passages in this regard adduced by those within the Calvinist tradition, Ephesians 2:8-9 (e.g., Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1998, p. 466, fn 8). As Terry Miethe points out, “in the Greek text of this passage there is only one pronoun, not two; and that pronoun does not agree grammatically with the word ‘faith.’ The pronoun is neuter in gender, while the word ‘faith’ is feminine. According to all grammatical rules, the gift cannot be faith! What is referred to in this passage is God’s gracious gift of salvation, which none can merit” (Terry L. Miethe, “The Universal Power of the Atonement,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, Clark H. Pinnock (Ed.), Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1989, p. 77).

24. Even this wording, properly understood, would not be incompatible with an Arminian interpretation of the text.

25. For more thoughts on these passages see the essay “Without Spot or Blame.”

26. For related discussion, see the essay “Death and Freedom in the Christian.”

27. This is not to say that God uses no indirect or mediating influences to motivate us. The means of grace discussed earlier are all relevant here and may function as channels of inspiring/motivating grace to our hearts. For example, 1 Corinthians 10:6 refers to the Scriptures as a means of motivating grace:

“Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might *not desire evil* as they did.”

According to this verse, God seeks to fashion our desire or motivation to resist temptation through the scriptural example provided by the rebellious Israelites in the wilderness (i.e., “these things;” cf. vss. 1-5).

28. The relevance of preceding grace to prayer is a fascinating study, and one that I hope to write about in the future. Many of our prayers on behalf of Christians and nonchristians alike can be understood as requests that God would pour out preceding grace upon these people so that they will have additional opportunities and motivation to conform their lives to the will of God.

In a related vein, some of my favorite hymns and worship songs are ones that direct me as a worshiper to cast myself in reliance upon God for more enlightening, inspiring, and enabling grace. Consider the words of this contemporary worship song, which gives grace preeminence:

*Grace Alone*

(Words and music by Scott Wesley Brown and Jeff Nelson; Maranatha! Music, 1998)

Every promise we can make, every prayer and step of faith,  
Every difference we will make is only by His grace.

Every mountain we will climb, every ray of hope we shine,  
Every blessing left behind is only by His grace.

Grace alone which God supplies, strength unknown He will provide,  
Christ in us, our Cornerstone, we will go forth in grace alone.

Every soul we long to reach, every heart we hope to teach,  
Everywhere we share His peace is only by His grace.

Every loving word we say, every tear we wipe away,  
Every sorrow turned to praise is only by His grace.

Grace alone which God supplies, strength unknown He will provide,  
Christ in us, our Cornerstone, we will go forth in grace alone.

Or the words of this classic, which emphasizes the divine role in actively directing our hearts to the love of God and freedom from sin:

*Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*

(Words by Charles Wesley; Music by John Zundel; Integrity's Hosanna!  
Music and Word Music, 1997)

Love divine, all loves excelling, Joy of heav'n, to earth come down!  
Fix in us Thy humble dwelling; All Thy faithful mercies crown.

Jesus, Thou art all compassion; Pure, unbounded love Thou art.  
Visit us with Thy salvation; Enter every trembling heart.

Breathe, O breathe Thy loving Spirit Into every troubled breast!  
Let us all in Thee inherit; Let us find the promised rest.

Take away our bent to sinning; Alpha and Omega be.  
End of faith, as its beginning, Set our hearts at liberty.

29. For clarification and discussion, see the essay "Philosophical Reflections on Free Will."

30. A discussion of the nature of apostasy and the possibility of restoration afterwards is beyond the scope of this essay. See "Deliberate Sin Erodes Faith" for some thoughts on this topic.

31. See the devotional "Three Lies About Sin."

32. I have addressed this question of how to resist deliberate sin in a number of essays (see, in particular, "Three Lies About Sin," "No More Fear," "Death and Freedom in the Christian," "Without Spot or Blame," "Submission," and "Despising God"). However, as noted earlier, what I have not addressed adequately before now is the central role of *grace* in our fight against sin. The present essay represents my attempt to begin rectifying this imbalance.

33. See the devotional "Three Lies About Sin."

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