

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

STORIES . . .

The Bible is a book with many stories: the flood, the exodus, Joshua fighting the Canaanites, Samson battling the Philistines, David defeating Goliath, the prophet Hosea marrying the sinful woman, and Jesus healing the blind man. Those are just a few of the many great stories in God’s Word, and I’m sure you could add more to the list.

Though there are many stories in the Bible, all of those little stories are part of one big story: our triune God saving his people from sin, death, and hell. Really, the whole Bible is this great story of God redeeming sinful people from the wages of sin, which is death (Rom. 6:23). Right at the center of this story is God’s Son, Jesus. He lived, died on the cross, and rose again to save sinful people. This is what we call the *gospel*, the good news that Jesus is the Savior “who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood” (Rev. 1:5). The Lord himself says, “Besides me there is no savior” (Hos. 13:4). “Salvation belongs to the LORD!” (Jonah 2:9). This is also what this book is about: the saving grace of God.

THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE

In both the Old and New Testaments, this is the big story of the Bible: God the Father saves sinners through his Son Jesus by the power of his Holy Spirit. The Apostles' Creed (written on page 13) tells this story very well. Many Christians from all over the world have been saying the Apostles' Creed for around 1,500 years. All true Christians agree that the main point of the Bible is that our God saves sinners. It's what Christianity is all about!

SALVATION . . .

How exactly does God save sinners? That's a question many Christians have discussed since Augustine debated a man named Pelagius around A.D. 400. Shortly after 1500 the Protestant Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin wrote, preached, and talked about justification by faith alone. They strongly disagreed with the Roman Catholic Church, which said sinners are justified by grace and faith, but also by obedience to the church and God's law. The Reformers said sinners are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. God used the Reformers to re-form the church according to his Word, the Bible.

HISTORY . . .

In the early 1600s some people in the Reformed churches of Holland were saying things about salvation that didn't sound Reformed or biblical. These people, called the Remonstrants or Arminians, summarized their teaching with five points. This is what they taught:

1. All people have free will, which means they can either choose to believe in Jesus or choose not to believe in him.

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2. Before the world began, God elected (chose to save) people whom he knew would use their free will to believe in Jesus.
3. Jesus died to make salvation possible for anyone who uses his or her free will to believe in him.
4. The Holy Spirit draws people to Jesus, but people can use their free will to resist the Holy Spirit.
5. Someone who is truly a Christian can fall away and not be a Christian anymore.

This is a short summary; we'll talk more about these things later.

Many pastors and elders in Holland strongly disagreed with these five points. A church meeting (called a synod) was held in the city of Dordrecht in 1618. Pastors and elders from Holland (and several from other countries) talked about these five points in the meeting. After much discussion, study of Scripture, and prayer, the Synod came up with five points of its own. Their five points showed that the Arminians' five points were neither Reformed nor biblical. They wrote a church document called the Canons of Dort. Solid Reformed churches still appreciate, preach, and teach these truths today. Later in this book we will refer to the Canons of Dort. You can find the Canons in appendix D.

- *A canon* is a statement.
- *Dort* is short for the city of Dordrecht.

CHURCHES . . .

It is also important to know that the Canons of Dort teach basically the same things as other Reformed documents like

the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession of Faith. The Presbyterian documents—the Westminster Confession and Catechisms—also teach the same things as the Canons of Dort. But the Canons of Dort speak only about the doctrines of grace specifically, while the other confessions deal with many more biblical topics. The point is that these confessions stand together on the main truths of the Christian faith. Presbyterian and Reformed churches that use these documents (also called confessions) are in agreement on these five points of the Canons of Dort. (Look at appendix B for more information on this.) Of course there is a lot more to being Reformed than just these five points. These five points aren't the only things Reformed Christians believe. But they are an important part of Reformation teaching.

➤ *Confessions* are statements of faith.

TULIP . . .

Most people know these five points as the five points of Calvinism. The popular acronym is TULIP, which stands for this:

1. Total depravity
2. Unconditional election
3. Limited atonement
4. Irresistible grace
5. Perseverance of the saints

Usually, if someone is a *Calvinist*, he or she believes these doctrines of grace are biblical. But I don't think we should use the

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name *Calvinist*, since John Calvin himself would not like us to think he made up these points. Many in the Christian church believed and taught these truths before Calvin was even alive. A better name for these points is *the doctrines of grace*. That's why the title of this book is what it is.

THIS BOOK . . .

In this book we will see how these doctrines have everything to do with God's grace. Pay attention to the following lessons. We're going to look at many Bible verses that talk about grace and salvation from sin. Each lesson will also have two memory verses. One goal of this book is to learn and memorize what the Bible says about salvation from sin. Another goal I have in writing this book is to show how these doctrines of grace are meaningful in the Christian life. They aren't just truths for the Christian mind. They are also truths for the Christian heart. People who believe these doctrines of grace should live joy-filled, thankful Christian lives of obedience to God.

In this book there are twelve lessons: an introduction lesson (which you're reading right now), a concluding lesson, and two lessons on each of the five doctrines of grace. This book is only an introduction to the doctrines of grace, so we won't be discussing all the details. Appendix A has a list of books that are good ones for further study—many of which I've used to write this book. Appendix C has a list of all the Bible verses this book uses to explain the doctrines of grace.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What are some of your favorite stories in the Bible?
2. What is the main story of the Bible?

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3. What is the gospel?
4. Read the Apostles' Creed on page 13. Do you think it is a good summary of the main story of the Bible? Why or why not?
5. What is one thing the Protestant Reformers emphasized, and why did they emphasize it so much?
6. What are the five points that the Arminians taught in the early 1600s?
7. Briefly explain the Synod of Dordrecht and the Canons of Dort.
8. What does TULIP stand for?
9. Do you think *Calvinism* is a good name for these five points? Why or why not?
10. What are the two goals of this book?
11. Do you think Christian doctrine is something that will help Christians in their daily lives? Explain.

MEMORY WORK

Salvation belongs to the LORD! (Jonah 2:9)

I am the LORD your God . . . besides me there is no savior.
(Hos. 13:4)