

## ONE



# *The Holy Grail*

*Gaily bedight, a gallant knight  
In sunshine and in shadow;  
Riding along, singing a song,  
In search of El Dorado.*

EDGAR ALLAN POE

I was compelled to leave the room. A deep, undeniable summons disturbed my sleep; something holy called me. The only sound was the rhythmic ticking of the clock on my desk. It seemed vague and unreal, as if it were in a chamber, submerged under fathoms of water. I had reached the beginning edge of slumber, where the line between consciousness and unconsciousness is blurred. I was suspended in that moment when one hangs precariously on the edge, a moment when sounds from the outside world still intrude on the quietness of one's brain, that moment just before surrender to the night occurs. Asleep, but not yet asleep. Awake, but not alert. Still vulnerable to the inner summons that said, "Get up. Get out of this room."

The summons became stronger, more urgent, impossible to ignore. A burst of wakefulness made me jerk upright and swing my legs over the side of the bed and onto the floor. Sleep vanished in an instant, and my body sprang into resolute action. Within seconds I was dressed and on the way out of my college dormitory. A quick glance at the clock registered the time in my mind. Ten minutes before midnight.

The night air was cold, turning the snow of the morning to a hard-crusted blanket. I felt the crunch under my feet as I walked toward the center of campus. The moon cast a ghostly pall on the college buildings, whose gutters were adorned with giant icicles—dripping water arrested in space, solid daggers of ice that resembled frozen fangs. No human architect could design these gargoyles of nature.

The gears of the clock atop Old Main Tower began to grind, and the arms met and embraced vertically. I heard the dull groan of the machinery a split

second before the chimes began to ring. Four musical tones signaled the full hour. They were followed by the steady, sonorous striking of twelve. I counted them in my mind, as I always did, checking for a possible error in their number. But they never missed. Exactly twelve strokes pealed from the tower like an angry judge's gavel banging on metal.

The chapel was in the shadow of Old Main Tower. The door was made of heavy oak with a Gothic arch. I swung it open and entered the narthex. The door fell shut behind me with a clanging sound that reverberated from the stone walls of the nave.

The echo startled me. It was a strange contrast to the sounds of daily chapel services, where the opening and closing of the doors were muffled by the sounds of students shuffling to their assigned places. Now the sound of the door was amplified into the void of midnight.

I waited for a moment in the narthex, allowing my eyes a few seconds to adjust to the darkness. The faint glow of the moon seeped through the muted stained-glass windows. I could make out the outline of the pews and the center aisle that led to the chancel steps. I felt a majestic sense of space, accented by the vaulted arches of the ceiling. They seemed to draw my soul upward, a sense of height that evoked a feeling of a giant hand reaching down to pick me up.

I moved slowly and deliberately toward the chancel steps. The sound of my shoes against the stone floor evoked terror-filled images of German soldiers marching in hobnailed boots along cobblestone streets. Each step resounded down the center aisle as I reached the carpet-covered chancel.

There I sank to my knees. I had reached my destination. I was ready to meet the source of the summons that had disturbed my rest.

I was in a posture of prayer, but I had nothing to say. I knelt there quietly, allowing the sense of the presence of a holy God to fill me. The beat of my heart was telltale, a *thump-thump* against my chest. An icy chill started at the base of my spine and crept up my neck. Fear swept over me. I fought the impulse to run from the foreboding presence that gripped me.

The terror passed, but soon it was followed by another wave. This wave was different. It flooded my soul with unspeakable peace, a peace that brought instant rest and repose to my troubled spirit. At once I was comfortable. I wanted to linger there. To say nothing. To do nothing. Simply to bask in the presence of God.

That moment was life transforming. Something deep in my spirit was being settled once for all. From this moment there could be no turning back; there could be no erasure of the indelible imprint of its power. I was alone with God. A holy God. An awesome God. A God who could fill me with terror in one

second and with peace in the next. I knew in that hour that I had tasted of the Holy Grail. Within me was born a new thirst that could never be fully satisfied in this world. I resolved to learn more, to pursue this God who lived in dark Gothic cathedrals and who invaded my dormitory room to rouse me from complacent slumber.

What makes a college student seek the presence of God in the late hours? Something happened in a classroom that afternoon that drove me to the chapel. I was a new Christian. My conversion had been sudden and dramatic, a replica for me of the Damascus Road. My life had been turned upside down, and I was filled with zeal for the sweetness of Christ. I was consumed with a new passion. To study Scripture. To learn how to pray. To conquer the vices that assaulted my character. To grow in grace. I wanted desperately to make my life count for Christ. My soul was singing, "Lord, I want to be a Christian."

But something was missing in my early Christian life. I had abundant zeal, but it was marked by a shallowness, a kind of simplicity that was making me a one-dimensional person. I was a Unitarian of sorts, a Unitarian of the second person of the Trinity. I knew who Jesus was, but God the Father was shrouded in mystery. He was hidden, an enigma to my mind and a stranger to my soul. A dark veil covered His face.

My philosophy class changed that.

It was a course that had held little interest for me. I could hardly wait to get the tedious requirement behind me. I had chosen to major in Bible and thought the abstract speculations that went on in philosophy class were a waste of time. Listening to philosophers quarrel about reason and doubt seemed empty. I found no food for my soul, nothing to inflame my imagination, just dull and difficult intellectual puzzles that left me cold. Until that winter afternoon.

The lecture that day was about a Christian philosopher whose name was Aurelius Augustine. In the course of history, he had been canonized by the Roman Catholic church. Everyone spoke of him as Saint Augustine. The professor lectured on Augustine's views of the creation of the world.

I was familiar with the biblical account of creation. I knew that the Old Testament opens with the words, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." But I had never thought deeply about the original act of creation. Augustine probed into this glorious mystery and raised the question, "How was it done?"

"In the beginning . . ."

It sounds like the start of a fairy tale: "Once upon a time." The trouble is that in the beginning there was no time as we understand it to be "once upon."

We think of beginnings as starting points somewhere in the middle of a period of history. Cinderella had a mother and a grandmother. Her story that began “once upon a time” did not begin at the absolute beginning. Before Cinderella there were kings and queens, rocks and trees, horses, jackrabbits, daffodils.

What was there before the beginning of Genesis 1? The people God created had no parents or grandparents. They had no history books to read because there was no history. Before the creation there were no kings or queens or rocks or trees. There was nothing; nothing, of course, except God.

Here is where I got an Excedrin headache in my philosophy class. Before the world began, there was nothing. But what in the world is “nothing”? Have you ever tried to think about nothing? Where can we find it? Obviously nowhere. Why? Because it is nothing, and nothing doesn’t exist. It can’t exist, because if it did, then it would be something and not nothing. Are you starting to get a headache like mine? Think about it for a second. I can’t tell you to think about “it” because nothing isn’t an “it.” I can only say “nothing isn’t.”

So how can we think about nothing? We can’t. It is simply impossible. If we try to think of nothing, we always wind up thinking of something. As soon as I try to think about nothing, I start imagining a lot of “empty” air. But air is something. It has weight and substance. I know that because of what happens if a nail goes through the tire of my car.

Jonathan Edwards once said that nothing is what sleeping rocks dream about. That doesn’t help much. My son offered me a better definition of *nothing*. When he was in junior high, I asked him when he came home from school, “What did you do today, Son?” The reply was the same every day: “Nuthin’.” So the best explanation I can give of “nothing” is “that which my son used to do every day in junior high.”

Our understanding of creativity involves the shaping and forming of paint, clay, notes on paper, or some other substance. In our experience we have not been able to find a painter who paints without paint or a writer who writes without words or a composer who composes without notes. Artists must start with *something*. What artists do is shape, form, or rearrange other materials. But they never work with nothing.

Saint Augustine taught that God created the world out of nothing. Creation was something like the magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat. Except God didn’t have a rabbit, and He didn’t even have a hat.

My next-door neighbor is a skilled cabinetmaker. One of his specialties is constructing cabinets for professional magicians. He has given me a tour of his workshop and has shown me how the magician’s boxes and cabinets are made. The trick is the clever use of mirrors. When the magician walks onstage and

displays an empty box or an empty hat, what you see is only half the box or half the hat. Take the “empty” hat, for example. A mirror is fixed in the exact middle of the hat. The mirror reflects the empty side of the hat, giving an exact mirror image. The illusion creates the visual effect of seeing both sides of an empty hat. In fact you see only half the hat. The other half has plenty of room to conceal snow-white doves or a plump rabbit. Not much magic to it, is there?

God did not create the world with mirrors. To do that He would have required half a world to start with and a giant mirror to conceal the other half. Creation involved the bringing into existence of everything that is, including mirrors. God created the world from nothing. Once there was nothing, then suddenly, by the command of God, there was a universe.

Again we ask, How did He do it? The only hint the Bible gives is that God called the universe into being. Augustine called that act the “divine imperative” or the “divine fiat.” We all know that an imperative is a command. So is a fiat. When Augustine spoke of a fiat, he was not thinking of a little Italian car. The dictionary defines *fiat* as a command or an act of the will that creates something.

At the present moment I am writing this book on a computer manufactured by IBM. It is an amazing piece of machinery, quite complicated in all its parts. The machine is designed to respond to certain commands. If I make a mistake while I am typing on the keyboard, I do not have to reach for an eraser. To correct my errors, I merely punch in a command, and the computer corrects it. The computer works by fiat. But the power of my fiat is limited. The only fiats that work are the ones that are already programmed into the computer. I would love simply to be able to say to the computer, “Write this whole book for me, please, while I go out and play golf.” My machine can’t do that. I can yell at the screen with the strongest imperative I know: “Write that book!” but the thing is too obstinate to comply.

God’s fiats are not so limited. He can create by the sheer force of His divine command. He can bring something out of nothing, life out of death. He can do these things by the sound of His voice.

The first sound uttered in the universe was the voice of God commanding, “Let there be!” It is improper to say that this was the first sound “in” the universe because until the sound was made there was no universe for it to be in. God shouted into a void. Perhaps it was a kind of primal scream directed at the empty darkness.

The command created its own molecules to carry the sound waves of God’s voice farther and farther into space. Yet sound waves would take too long. The speed of this imperative exceeded the speed of light. As soon as the words left

the Creator's mouth, things began to happen. Where His voice reverberated, stars appeared, glowing in unspeakable brilliance in tempo with the songs of angels. The force of divine energy splattered against the sky like a kaleidoscope of color hurled from the palette of a powerful artist. Comets crisscrossed the sky with flashing tails like Fourth of July skyrockets.

The act of creation was the first event in history. It was also the most dazzling. The supreme Architect gazed at His complex blueprint and shouted commands for the boundaries of the world to be set. He spoke, and the seas were shut behind doors, and the clouds were filled with dew. He bound the Pleiades and buckled the belt of Orion. He spoke again, and the earth began to fill with orchards in full bloom. Blossoms burst forth like springtime in Mississippi. The lavender hues of plum trees danced with the brilliance of azaleas and forsythia.

God spoke once more, and the waters teemed with living things. The snail sneaked beneath the shadowy form of the stingray, while the great marlin broke the surface of the water to promenade on the waves with his tail. Again He spoke, and the roar of the lion and the bleating of sheep were heard. Four-footed animals, eight-legged spiders, and winged insects appeared.

And God said, "That's good."

Then God stooped to earth and carefully fashioned a piece of clay. He lifted it gently to His lips and breathed into it. The clay began to move. It began to think. It began to feel. It began to worship. It was alive and stamped with the image of its Creator.

Consider the raising of Lazarus from the dead. How did Jesus do it? He did not enter the tomb where the rotting corpse of Lazarus was laid out; He did not have to administer mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. He stood outside the tomb, at a distance, and cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!" Blood began to flow through the veins of Lazarus, and brain waves started to pulsate. In a burst of life Lazarus quit his grave and walked out. That is fiat creation, the power of the divine imperative.

Some modern theorists believe that the world was created by nothing. Note the difference between saying that the world was created *from* nothing and saying that the universe was created *by* nothing. In this modern view the rabbit comes out of the hat without a rabbit, a hat, or even a magician. The modern view is far more miraculous than the biblical view. It suggests that nothing created something. More than that, it holds that nothing created everything—quite a feat indeed!

Now surely there aren't serious people running around in this scientific age claiming that the universe was created by nothing, are there? Yes. Scores

of them. To be sure, they usually don't say it quite the way I have said it, and they'd probably be annoyed with me for stating their views in such a manner. They'd undoubtedly protest that I have given a distorted caricature of their sophisticated position. Okay. True—they don't say that the universe was created by nothing; they say that the universe was created by chance.

But chance is no thing. It has no weight, no measurements, no power. It is merely a word we use to describe mathematical possibilities. It can do nothing. It can do nothing because it is nothing. To say that the universe was created by chance is to say that it came from nothing.

That is intellectual madness. What are the chances that the universe was created by chance?

Saint Augustine understood that the world could not be created by chance. He knew that it required something or someone with power—the very power of creation—to get the job done. He knew that something cannot come from nothing. He understood that somewhere, somehow, something or someone had to have the power of being. If not, then nothing would now exist.

The Bible says, "In the beginning God." The God we worship is the God who has always been. He alone can create beings, because He alone has the *power of being*. He is not nothing. He is not chance. He is pure Being, the One who has the power to be *all by Himself*. He alone is eternal. He alone has power over death. He alone can call worlds into being by fiat, by the power of His command. Such power is staggering, awesome. It is deserving of respect, of humble adoration.

It was the words of Augustine—that God created the world out of nothing by the sheer power of His voice—that drove me to the chapel at midnight.

I know what it means to be converted. I know what it means to be born again. I also understand that a person can be born again only once. When the Holy Spirit quickens our souls to new life in Christ, He does not stop His work. He continues to work on us. He continues to change us.

My experience in the classroom, thinking about the creation of the world, was like being born again a second time. It was like being converted, not merely to God the Son, but to God the Father. Suddenly I had a passion to know God the Father. I wanted to know Him in His majesty, to know Him in His power, to know Him in His august holiness.

My "conversion" to God the Father was not without its attending difficulties. Though I was deeply impressed by the notion of a God who created a whole universe from nothing, I was troubled by the fact that the world we live

in is a place filled with sorrows. It is a world riddled with evil. My next question was, How could a good and holy God create a world that is in such a mess? As I studied the Old Testament, I was also bothered by the stories about God's ordering the slaughter of women and children, of God's killing Uzzah instantly for touching the ark of the covenant, and by other narratives that seemed to reveal a brutal side to the character of God. How could I ever come to love such a God?

The one concept, the central idea I kept meeting in Scripture, was the idea that God is *holy*. The word was foreign to me. I wasn't sure what it meant. I made the question a matter of diligent and persistent search. Today I am still absorbed with the question of the holiness of God. I am convinced that it is one of the most important ideas that a Christian can ever grapple with. It is basic to our whole understanding of God and of Christianity.

The idea of holiness is so central to biblical teaching that it is said of God, "Holy is his name" (Luke 1:49). His name is holy because He is holy. He is not always treated with holy reverence. His name is tramped through the dirt of this world. It functions as a curse word, a platform for the obscene. That the world has little respect for God is vividly seen by the way the world regards His name. No honor. No reverence. No awe before Him.

If I were to ask a group of Christians what the top priority of the church is, I am sure I would get a wide variety of answers. Some would say evangelism, others social action, and still others spiritual nurture. But I have yet to hear anyone talk about what Jesus' priorities were.

What is the first petition of the Lord's Prayer? Jesus said, "This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven . . .'" (Matt. 6:9). The first line of the prayer is not a petition. It is a form of personal address. The prayer continues: "hallowed be your name, your kingdom come" (Matt. 6:9-10). We often confuse the words "hallowed be your name" with part of the address, as if the words were "hallowed is your name." In that case the words would merely be an ascription of praise to God. But that is not how Jesus said it. He uttered it as a petition, as the first petition. We should be praying that God's name be hallowed, that God be regarded as holy.

There is a kind of sequence within the prayer. God's kingdom will never come where His name is not considered holy. His will is not done on earth as it is in heaven if His name is desecrated here. In heaven the name of God is holy. It is breathed by angels in a sacred hush. Heaven is a place where reverence for God is total. It is foolish to look for the kingdom anywhere God is not revered.



How we understand the person and character of God the Father affects every aspect of our lives. It affects far more than what we normally call the “religious” aspects of our lives. If God is the Creator of the entire universe, then it must follow that He is the Lord of the whole universe. No part of the world is outside of His lordship. That means that no part of my life must be outside of His lordship. His holy character has something to say about economics, politics, athletics, romance—everything with which we are involved.

God is inescapable. There is no place we can hide from Him. Not only does He penetrate every aspect of our lives, but He penetrates it in His majestic holiness. Therefore we must seek to understand what the holy is. We dare not seek to avoid it. There can be no worship, no spiritual growth, no true obedience without it. It defines our goal as Christians. God has declared, “Be holy, because I am holy” (Lev. 11:44).

To reach that goal, we must understand what holiness is.

### *Allowing God’s Holiness to Touch Our Lives*

As you reflect about what you have learned and rediscovered about God’s holiness, answer these questions. Use a journal to record your responses to God’s holiness, or discuss your responses with a friend.

1. When you think of God as holy, what comes to your mind?
2. Describe a time when you were overcome by God’s holiness.
3. Are you attracted to God’s holiness?
4. What does it mean for you to be holy in the coming week?

## One



# The Struggle

**B**aseball. Hot dogs. Apple pie. Chevrolet. These are all things American. To complete the mix we must add the great American motto: “We will not discuss religion or politics.”

Mottoes are made to be broken. Perhaps no American rule is broken more frequently than the one about not discussing religion or politics. We embark on such discussions repeatedly. And when the topic turns to religion, it often gravitates to the issue of predestination. Sadly, that often means the end of discussion and the beginning of argument, yielding more heat than light.

Arguing about predestination is virtually irresistible. (Pardon the pun.) The topic is so juicy. It provides an opportunity to spar about all things philosophical. When the issue flares up, we suddenly become super-patriotic, guarding the tree of human liberty with more zeal and tenacity than Patrick Henry ever dreamed of. The specter of an all-powerful God making choices for us, and perhaps even against us, makes us scream, “Give me free will or give me death!”

The very word *predestination* has an ominous ring to it. It is linked to the despairing notion of fatalism and somehow suggests that within its pale we are reduced to meaningless puppets. The word conjures up visions of a diabolical deity who plays capricious games with our lives. We seem to be subjected to the whims of horrible decrees that were fixed in concrete long before we were born. Better that our lives were fixed by the stars, for then at least we could find clues to our destiny in the daily horoscopes.

Add to the horror of the word *predestination* the public image of its most famous teacher, John Calvin, and we shudder all the more. We see Calvin portrayed as a stern and grim-faced tyrant, a sixteenth-century Ichabod Crane who found fiendish delight in the burning of recalcitrant heretics. It is enough to cause us to retreat from the discussion altogether and reaffirm our commitment never to discuss religion and politics.

With a topic people find so unpleasant, it is a wonder that we ever discuss it at all. Why do we speak of it? Because we enjoy unpleasantness? Not at all.

We discuss it because we cannot avoid it. It is a doctrine plainly set forth in the Bible. We talk about predestination because the Bible talks about predestination. If we desire to build our theology on the Bible, we run head on into this concept. We soon discover that John Calvin did not invent it.

Virtually all Christian churches have some formal doctrine of predestination. To be sure, the doctrine of predestination found in the Roman Catholic Church is different from that in the Presbyterian Church. The Lutherans have a different view of the matter from the Episcopalians.

The fact that such variant views of predestination abound only underscores the fact that if we are biblical in our thinking we must have some doctrine of predestination. We cannot ignore such well-known passages as:

Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world,  
that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love,  
having *predestined* us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself,  
according to the good pleasure of His will . . . (Eph. 1:4, 5)

In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being *predestined*  
according to the purpose of Him who works all things according  
to the counsel of His will . . . (Eph. 1:11)

For whom He foreknew, He also *predestined* to be conformed  
to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among  
many brethren. (Rom. 8:29, italics added)

If we are to be biblical, then, the issue is not whether we should have a doctrine of predestination or not, but what kind we should embrace. If the Bible is the Word of God, not mere human speculation, and if God Himself declares that there is such a thing as predestination, then it follows irresistibly that we must embrace some doctrine of predestination.

If we are to follow this line of thinking, then, of course, we must go one step further. It is not enough to have just any view of predestination. It is our duty to seek the correct view of predestination, lest we be guilty of distorting or ignoring the Word of God. Here is where the real struggle begins, the struggle to sort out accurately all that the Bible teaches about this matter.

My struggle with predestination began early in my Christian life. I knew a professor of philosophy in college who was a convinced Calvinist. He set forth the so-called "Reformed" view of predestination. I did not like it. I did not like it at all. I fought against it tooth and nail all the way through college.

I graduated from college unpersuaded of the Reformed or Calvinistic view of predestination only to go to a seminary that included on its staff the king

of the Calvinists, John H. Gerstner. Gerstner is to predestination what Einstein is to physics or what Arnold Palmer is to golf. I would rather have challenged Einstein on relativity or entered into match play with Palmer than to take on Gerstner. But . . . fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

I challenged Gerstner in the classroom time after time, making a total pest of myself. I resisted for well over a year. My final surrender came in stages. Painful stages. It started when I began work as a student pastor in a church. I wrote a note to myself that I kept on my desk in a place where I could always see it.

YOU ARE REQUIRED TO BELIEVE, TO PREACH,  
AND TO TEACH WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS IS TRUE,  
NOT WHAT YOU WANT THE BIBLE TO SAY IS TRUE.

The note haunted me. My final crisis came in my senior year. I had a three-credit course in the study of Jonathan Edwards. We spent the semester studying Edwards's most famous book, *The Freedom of the Will*, under Gerstner's tutelage. At the same time I had a Greek exegesis course in the book of Romans. I was the only student in that course, one on one with the New Testament professor. There was nowhere I could hide.

The combination was too much for me. Gerstner, Edwards, the New Testament professor, and above all the apostle Paul, were too formidable a team for me to withstand. The ninth chapter of Romans was the clincher. I simply could find no way to avoid the apostle's teaching in that chapter. Reluctantly, I sighed and surrendered, but with my head, not my heart. "Okay, I believe this stuff, but I don't have to like it!"

I soon discovered that God has created us so that the heart is supposed to follow the head. I could not, with impunity, love something with my head that I hated in my heart. Once I began to see the cogency of the doctrine and its broader implications, my eyes were opened to the graciousness of grace and to the grand comfort of God's sovereignty. I began to like the doctrine little by little, until it burst upon my soul that the doctrine revealed the depth and the riches of the mercy of God.

I no longer feared the demons of fatalism or the ugly thought that I was being reduced to a puppet. Now I rejoiced in a gracious Savior who alone was immortal, invisible, the only wise God.

They say there is nothing more obnoxious than a converted drunk. Try a converted Arminian. Converted Arminians tend to become flaming Calvinists, zealots for the cause of predestination. You are reading the work of such a convert.

My struggle has taught me a few things along the way. I have learned, for example, that not all Christians are as zealous about predestination as I am. There are better men than I who do not share my conclusions. I have learned that many misunderstand predestination. I have also learned the pain of being wrong.

When I teach the doctrine of predestination, I am often frustrated by those who obstinately refuse to submit to it. I want to scream, “Don’t you realize you are resisting the Word of God?” In these cases I am guilty of at least one of two possible sins. If my understanding of predestination is correct, then at best I am being impatient with people who are merely struggling as I once did, and at worst I am being arrogant and patronizing toward those who disagree with me.

If my understanding of predestination is not correct, then my sin is compounded, since I would be slandering the saints who by opposing my view are fighting for the angels. So the stakes are high for me in this matter.

The struggle about predestination is all the more confusing because the greatest minds in the history of the church have disagreed about it. Scholars and Christian leaders, past and present, have taken different stands. A brief glance at church history reveals that the debate over predestination is not between liberals and conservatives or between believers and unbelievers. It is a debate among believers, among godly and earnest Christians.

It may be helpful to see how the great teachers of the past line up on the question.

<i>“Reformed” View</i>	<i>Opposing Views</i>
St. Augustine	Pelagius
St. Thomas Aquinas	Arminius
Martin Luther	Philip Melanchthon
John Calvin	John Wesley
Jonathan Edwards	Charles Finney

It must look like I am trying to stack the deck. Those thinkers who are most widely regarded as the titans of classical Christian scholarship fall heavily on the Reformed side. I am persuaded, however, that this is a fact of history that dare not be ignored. To be sure, it is possible that Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Edwards could all be wrong on this matter. These men certainly disagree with each other on other points of doctrine. They are neither individually nor collectively infallible.

We cannot determine truth by counting noses. The great thinkers of the past can be wrong. But it is important for us to see that the Reformed doctrine of predestination was not invented by John Calvin. There is nothing in Calvin's view of predestination that was not earlier propounded by Luther and Augustine before him. Later, Lutheranism did not follow Luther on this matter but Melancthon, who altered his views after Luther's death. It is also noteworthy that in his famous treatise on theology, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin wrote sparingly on the subject. Luther wrote more about predestination than did Calvin.

The history lesson aside, we must take seriously the fact that such learned men agreed on this difficult subject. Again, that they agreed does not prove the case for predestination. They could have been wrong. But it gets our attention. We cannot dismiss the Reformed view as a peculiarly Presbyterian notion. I know that during my great struggle with predestination I was deeply troubled by the unified voices of the titans of classical Christian scholarship on this point. Again, they are not infallible, but they deserve our respect and an honest hearing.

Among contemporary Christian leaders we find a more balanced list of agreement and disagreement. (Keep in mind that we are speaking here in general terms and that there are significant points of difference among those on each side.)

<i>“Reformed” View</i>	<i>Opposing Views</i>
Francis Schaeffer	C. S. Lewis
Cornelius Van Til	Norman Geisler
Roger Nicole	John Warwick Montgomery
James Boice	Clark Pinnock
Philip Hughes	Billy Graham

I don't know where Bill Bright, Chuck Swindoll, Pat Robertson, and a lot of other leaders stand on this point. Jimmy Swaggart has made it clear that he considers the Reformed view a demonic heresy. His attacks on the doctrine have been less than sober. They do not reflect the care and earnestness of the men listed above in the “opposing” column. They are all great leaders whose views are worthy of our close attention.

My hope is that we will all continue to struggle. We must never assume that we have arrived. Yet there is no virtue in sheer skepticism. We look with a

jaundiced eye at those who are always learning but never coming to a knowledge of the truth. God is delighted with men and women of conviction. Of course He is concerned that our convictions be according to truth. Struggle with me then as we embark upon the difficult but, I hope, profitable journey examining the doctrine of predestination.

## ONE



# Tender Grace

I see men like trees, walking” (Mark 8:24). What a strange experience. Walking trees are not a normal sight for normal people. But the man who saw “walking trees” was a man in transition. He was at an intermediate stage between total blindness and full clarity of vision. He was, as we shall see, a representative of all Christians in their progress toward pleasing God.

When the Bible records the miracle healings wrought by Jesus, the healings are usually instantaneous and complete. Jesus did not partially raise Lazarus from the dead. The man with the withered arm did not recover in stages. In most other miracles, the person was changed instantly.

So the episode recorded in Mark’s Gospel is unusual. It records the healing of a blind man in two stages:

And they came to Bethsaida. And they brought a blind man to Him, and entreated Him to touch him. And taking the blind man by the hand, He brought him out of the village; and after spitting on his eyes, and laying His hands upon him, He asked him, “Do you see anything?” And he looked up and said, “I see men, for I am seeing them like trees, walking about.” Then again He laid His hands upon his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and began to see everything clearly. (Mark 8:22–25, NASB)

This is a story of the power and the grace of Christ. It is a story of *tender grace*. When Jesus was approached by people concerned about the plight of the blind man, the first act He performed was to “take the blind man by the hand.” Holding his hand, Jesus led the man out of town.

Picture the scene. The Son of God surely had the power to heal the man on the spot. Instead, Jesus led him away from the crowd. He ministered to him in private. The blind man was not a spectacle for the curious to gaze upon. Our Lord directed the man’s steps. Never in his life did the blind man have so secure a guide. There was no danger of falling, no menace of tripping. He was being led by the hand of Christ.



Had Jesus' act of tenderness ended at that point, I'm sure it would have been enough. The blind man could tell the story to his life's end. "He touched me!" he could exclaim, and he would have savored the experience forever. But Jesus was not finished. He took the next step.

When they were away from the crowd Jesus did something that could offend our sensibilities. He spit on the man's eyes. Now, to have someone spit in our eye is to experience a shameful, degrading insult. But the purpose of Jesus was not to insult, but to heal. He touched the man and asked him if he could see anything.

It was at this point that the man began to see men as walking trees. He saw what any blind man would give anything to see. His vision was dim, blurred—but he could see. Moments earlier he could see nothing. His eyes were useless. He lived in perpetual darkness. But now, suddenly, he could discern moving forms. He could detect the difference between light and shadow. A new world was opening before him. No longer would he require that someone lead him by the hand. He could throw away his cane.

Jesus was not finished. He applied a second touch. With the second touch the things that were blurred came into sharp focus. Now the man could clearly distinguish between trees and men. Now he saw trees standing still, their branches swaying gently in the breeze. He saw men as men, walking. He could discern the difference between short men and tall men, fat men and thin men, young men and old men. He was beginning to recognize the minute facial characteristics that provoke recognition of distinctive personal identities. Perhaps he could have done it before by means of touch. Possibly he could have run his fingers over a person's face and recognized certain people. He surely would not have noticed the unique sounds of different people's voices. But now he could keep his hands in his pockets and still know who was standing before him. The first face he saw clearly was the face of Christ. For him it was the beginning of the blessed vision.

Though the Bible doesn't say so, it appears certain that his eyes were not the only part of the man that was healed. With the touch of Christ comes also the healing of the heart. His heart of stone had been changed to a heart of flesh, pulsating anew with spiritual life.

The story of this healing was not intended as just a parable of the Christian's spiritual renewal. The event was a real miracle in space and time, a prodigious display of the power of Christ. But it serves us well as a parallel of spiritual renewal.

The Bible uses the metaphor of blindness to describe our fallen estate. We are all men born blind. We enter this world in a state of spiritual darkness. We

do not see the things of the kingdom of God. By nature we have scales upon our eyes, cataracts so thick that we cannot even perceive men as trees, walking. It requires a special act of tender grace for us to see the kingdom of God.

### *The Beginning: Regeneration*

The act of grace by which our eyes are opened to the things of God is *regeneration*, spiritual rebirth. It is an act that only God can perform. We are no more able to regenerate ourselves than a blind man is able to see by a sheer act of the will. A blind man can decide to see, but he cannot see unless his eyes are healed.

Regeneration does not take place in stages. It is instantaneous. It is accomplished by one touch of the Holy Spirit upon our souls. It is a sovereign work, a thoroughly effective work accomplished by the immediate power of the omnipotence of God. Only God can bring something out of nothing and life out of death. Only God can quicken the human soul.

When God quickens a human soul, He does it *immediately*. When I say “immediately” I do not mean immediate with respect to time, though indeed it happens spontaneously. I mean by the term that He does it directly without *means*, without the use of secondary causes. (The Latin word *immediatus* actually meant “without intermediary.”)

When I am sick I do two things. I pray and I take my medicine. I ask that God will bring healing to me by means of the medicine. I ask God to guide the doctor’s hands, to guide the means of healing by His special providence.

Yet when Jesus healed the blind man, He did not use any indirect means. No medicine was necessary. Jesus could heal by the sound of His voice. I am puzzled by the narrative at one point. Why did Jesus spit upon the man’s eyes? Why did He have him bathe in the pool of Siloam? Obviously the power was not in the spit or in the water of the pool. On other occasions Jesus dispensed with such devices. His power was direct and immediate.

So it is with our regeneration. We are required to be bathed with the water of baptism. But the water in the baptismal pool does not contain a magic elixir to redeem human souls. The water is a sign that points beyond itself to the living water that makes us alive. It is an outward, concrete symbol of the healing power of God.

There is another parallel, however, in the story of the healing of the blind man. Though we are regenerated instantly by the sovereign power of God and are transferred immediately from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light, our sanctification is indeed in stages.

When we are born again we see men as trees, walking. Our spiritual vision is clouded. We do not see all things in sharp spiritual focus. Our vision is

still clouded by ongoing sin. There will come a day when all remnants of our old nature will be destroyed. There will come a day when our hearts will be so purified that Christ's beatitude will be fulfilled: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8). This is what many Christians in the Middle Ages called the "beatific vision."

The work of perfecting our spiritual state is called *glorification*. Glorification does not take place in this life. We must wait for heaven for our sanctification to be complete. Now, though we see what we could not see before, we still see through a glass darkly.

In this life we need the second touch of Christ. Indeed we require a third, fourth, fifth, and continual touch. Though the scales are removed from our eyes, we still need to be led by the hand of Jesus.

Regeneration is the beginning of a journey. It is a journey with successes and failures, with growth amidst stumbling. At times the progress seems painfully slow, but progress is there. It is a movement to sharper focus—a life that begins with a touch of tender grace that moves toward more grace.

Sisyphus was the tragic hero of an ancient Greek myth. Because he had offended the gods he was doomed to an everlasting hell of repeated and constant frustration. His task was to push a huge boulder up a steep hill. It took all of his strength to move the rock.

Every time he reached the top, the boulder rolled over and crashed once more to the bottom. Sisyphus' task required that he race to the bottom to start all over again. His task was never finished. No final progress was achieved.

Sometimes Christians feel like Sisyphus. Progress seems so slow in the Christian life that it feels like we are walking in place, spinning our wheels, doubling our efforts and gaining no ground.

The image that captures the torture of the damned is the image of the circle. The circle goes round and round with no beginning and no end—merely endless repetition.

Consider the punishment of Samson. After he revealed the secret of his strength to his traitorous lover, Delilah, he was captured by the Philistines. His dreadful disgrace is summarized by one verse in the Bible: "Then the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes; and they brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze chains, and he was a grinder in the prison" (Judg. 16:21, NASB).

I don't really know what a grinder in a Philistine prison did. I do remember how the job was depicted by Hollywood. I have vague memories of an old film about Samson. Victor Mature played the mighty man of Israel. The scene that sticks in my mind is that of the blinded Samson replacing an ox on the wheel

of a grinding machine. The ox was yoked to a lever that turned the gears of the machine as the ox plodded around in a circle, wearing a rut in the ground. I can see Victor Mature with vacant eyes, his muscles glistening with sweat, walking around and around in an endless cycle of toil, getting nowhere, only digging the rut of his path deeper and deeper.

That is the brutal image of the circle.

### *The Continuation: Sanctification*

But the Christian life is not futile like that. It does not follow the pattern of the circle. The image of the Christian life is a line. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. There is an end goal of glory. The God who started all things in the beginning has a goal for His people. We reach ahead for the day when we hear Christ say, "Come, My beloved, enter the kingdom which My Father has prepared for you."

With the apostle Paul we say, "Forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13, NASB). In the Christian life there is an *upward call*. One does not move upward in a circle. We are on a line that is going somewhere. It is moving forward. In a word, there is *progress* to the Christian life.

We remember the classic of Christian literature written by John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The pilgrim is the Christian who moves toward heaven. His progress is made slow and cumbersome by the weight he carries on his back. He faces obstacles at every turn. He is threatened by the Slough of Despond. He is tripped up by the likes of Mr. Worldlywise.

Bunyan understood the many temptations and pitfalls that stand in the path of every Christian. But he also understood two vitally important truths about the Christian life: We are pilgrims, and we make progress.

A pilgrim is one who is on a journey. His travels take him to strange places. He is a person on the move. Like the Old Testament Hebrew, a Christian pilgrim lives in tents. He is a seminomad. He is never so at home in this world that he completely settles in. Life is always a frontier for him. The water he drinks is never stagnant. Like Abraham, the father of the faithful, he searches for a better country whose Builder and Maker is God. All of God's people are pilgrims and sojourners on the earth.

All Christians make progress. Progress is made certain by the indwelling Holy Spirit who refuses to allow us to stand still. Oh, we try to stand still. We even regress. Like the disciples, we hide in our upper rooms, huddled in fear. But Jesus will not allow us to stay there.

No one is born a Christian. By nature we are flesh. The Christian life begins with the work of the Holy Spirit in rebirth. The term “born-again Christian” is almost a misnomer. It is a redundancy. It is a kind of theological stuttering. If one is born again, then he is a Christian. If he is a Christian, then he is born again. There are no nonborn-again Christians and no born-again non-Christians. To be reborn is to be born into Christ by the Holy Spirit. This is a prerequisite for the Christian life. It is also the genesis, the beginning of the Christian life.

Everyone starts the Christian life the same way: We all start by being born again. Our experiences of rebirth may differ, but the fact of rebirth is necessary for all of us.

It is important for us to understand that no two Christians begin their Christian walk with the same baggage. Some people are born again at five years old, some at fifty-five. Some come to faith from a well-disciplined background, others from a life of riotous and unbridled wildness. We struggle with different sins. We carry mixed and matched luggage.

Some of us know the day and the hour we were converted. Others have no distinct recollection of when we were reborn. Billy Graham speaks of a meeting held by Mordecai Ham where he met Christ. Ruth Graham can't pinpoint within five years the date of her conversion. Some people weep at conversion, others are giddy with joy.

It is a grave mistake to insist that everybody display the same outward signs of conversion that we experienced. Those with a sudden and dramatic conversion experience tend to be suspicious of those who cannot name the day and the hour. Those whose experience is less dramatic may wonder about the emotional stability of those who cite a sudden experience.

Here we must honor the work of the Holy Spirit, who convicts people in different ways at different times. The ultimate question we face is not *when* we were converted or *where* we were converted. The only real question is whether we *are* converted. If we are born of the Spirit, then we are brothers and sisters to all who are in Christ.

Paul tells us: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:8–10, NASB).

At this point we are all equal. None of us has converted ourselves. Rebirth is the work of God. We are the workmanship or the craftsmanship of Christ. Christ is the master craftsman. His workmanship is neither dull nor monotonous.

When He redeems us He does not destroy our identity nor our individuality. Each Christian is a distinctive work of art fashioned by Christ. Each redeemed person is literally a masterpiece.

Jesus does not fashion His art on an assembly line. His work of molding and shaping is done with infinite care and patience. We've seen the bumper sticker that reads, "Please be patient with me; God is not finished with me yet."

Sanctification is a process. It is a gradual process. Run for your life from those who promise you instant sanctification. There is a poisonous doctrine—one that dies hard in Christian circles—called the doctrine of perfectionism. It teaches that some people have already attained spiritual perfection in this world. They promise a "second work of grace," a "second blessing" of instant sanctification. From such teachers turn away.

I was a Christian for only a few months when I met my first preacher of instant sanctification. He offered to lay hands on me and pray that I receive the second blessing. I found the idea very attractive. The most serious frustration I experienced in my new Christian life was that I was still sinning. I had experienced profound victory in some parts of my life, but other areas seemed very stubborn. I was already acutely aware of the ongoing warfare between the flesh and the Spirit.

I prayed with the preacher for instant sanctification. It didn't work. The second blessing eluded me. Martin Luther, who spent so much of his early life trying to be completely righteous, had said, "If ever a man could get to heaven through monkery [faithfully living the monastic life], it was I." I was thinking that if ever a man could get the second blessing by seeking it, it was I.

The preacher was convinced that my sin was blocking my efforts to gain release from my sin. I was caught in the most vicious of circles. What the minister was actually saying to me was that if I was going to get rid of my sin I had to first get rid of my sin. In other words, all I needed before I could get the second blessing was the second blessing.

Finally, another minister helped me out of this hopeless dilemma. I soon realized that the idea of a second blessing that would give me instant sanctification was a pious fraud.

Since that experience I have met two people who claimed they had attained perfect sanctification. Their Christian lives were tragic. For people to convince themselves that they have already achieved spiritual perfection, they must do one or both of two things: They must so reduce the demands of God's law to such a low level that they can obey them, or they must radically inflate their own assessment of their spiritual performance.

Either of these steps is deadly. To reduce the demands of God's law is to do violence against the holiness of God. To inflate one's own self-assessment to the point of self-delusion is an extreme form of pride.

Sanctification requires far more than a quick experience of the laying on of hands. Rebirth is instantaneous. Justification is instantaneous. *But sanctification is a lifelong process.* It involves a diligent struggle against a multitude of obstacles. It is like the journey of Bunyan's pilgrim, filled with pitfalls and laden with perils. It is a journey that takes us through the dark night of the soul, through the valley of the shadow of death, and through the wilderness of temptation.

The journey has but one guarantee: Christ promises to go with us and to bring us out the other side. Our Lord finishes what He starts. He does not abort His handiwork in the middle of its creation. He does not leave us staring at walking trees.

No, the Lord is intensely interested in our welfare and our maturing. He wants us to learn more and more about God and how to please God. He wants us to find joy in pleasing God. He wants us to change, like the healed blind man, so that our vision clears, so that we grow in how we perceive the world and how we act in it. Growth and change in such perception means learning more and more about what pleases the holy God. The growth in pleasing God is sanctification, and that is what this book is all about.