



WHAT'S *so* GREAT



ABOUT



*the* DOCTRINES



*of* GRACE?



RICHARD D. PHILLIPS

## ENDORSEMENTS

The heart of the gospel is contained in the doctrines of grace. To understand these truths is to understand the height, depth, breadth, and length of the saving grace of God for sinners. Richard Phillips has done an outstanding job of capturing the heartbeat of these precious truths. Prepare your heart to be greatly blessed as this pastor and author guides you into a greater appreciation of the sovereign grace of God.

—Dr. Steven J. Lawson  
President, OnePassion Ministries, Dallas

Rick Phillips has an unbounded love for the doctrines of grace and writes about them with an enviable simplicity and clarity. Here is persuasive exposition of biblical teaching that captures the thrill of knowing a sovereign God. *What's So Great about the Doctrines of Grace?* never loses sight of the grace to which these doctrines point. This is a wonderful book to read, study, lend, and give away.

—Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson  
Teaching fellow, Ligonier Ministries

Richard Phillips has done it again! In summarizing the doctrines of grace in this book, he brings us into the arena of historic Calvinism, which, as C. H. Spurgeon said, “is the Gospel and nothing else.” But what we have here is more than just a retelling of the doctrines themselves; it is an account of why these truths *matter* in the church of the twenty-first century. Its enthusiasm is infectious, its urgency compelling, and its logic irrefutable.

—Dr. Derek W. H. Thomas  
Senior minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, S.C.



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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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To Chuck and Irene Elliott,  
whose lives so beautifully exhibit  
the sovereign grace of God.





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## PREFACE

I LOVE THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE. I love them as *doctrines*, that is, as biblical teachings that are sublime and wonderful beyond all human expectation. There can hardly be thrills greater to the mind than those produced by the central doctrines of the Reformed faith. But I especially love these doctrines because of their marvelous theme: the sovereign *grace* of God for unworthy sinners. For even greater than their enlightening effect on the mind, the doctrines of God are utterly transforming to the believing heart. To love the doctrines of grace is to love God as He has revealed Himself in His Word. He is “the God of all grace” (1 Peter 5:10), and unless we anchor our faith in the fullness of grace taught in Scripture, we will never glorify God for our salvation as He so richly deserves.

This book has two purposes. The first is to explain the doctrines of grace, also known as the “Five Points of Calvinism,” through the exposition of Scripture. In this, my aim is not to exhaust the biblical data or to engage in heavy biblical polemics with differing theological views. Instead, I seek to exposit definitive passages as they pertain to the respective doctrines. My approach is to present and explain the doctrines as plainly as possible by drawing out both the clear teaching of the Bible’s text and the necessary implications thereof. The second purpose is one that I find often neglected in treatments of distinctive

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Reformed doctrines, though to my mind it is equally important. This purpose is to help believers feel the power of these precious truths in their lives. In other words, I aim not merely to teach the doctrines of grace, but to show what is so great about them. And how great they are! If we really believe the Bible's teaching on the sovereign, mighty, and effectual grace of God, these doctrines not only will be dearly beloved, they will exercise a radical influence on our entire attitude toward God, ourselves, the present life, and the life to come.

I have written this book with an intended audience of those interested in (or alarmed by!) the Reformed view of salvation. There are other books that provide more detailed and extensive treatment of the doctrines of grace, and I would recommend them for the reader's study. But the aim of this book is to present these gracious truths briefly and directly, fortified only by the persuasive power of the plain truth of God's Word. My hope is that Reformed believers will find this book to be a helpful resource to place in the hands of inquiring friends, and that those who already believe the doctrines of grace will drink more deeply of their saving significance. At the heart of my desire, and my prayer to God in offering this book, is that Christians will come to see the grace of God as so great that it transforms their entire spiritual experience. What's so great about the doctrines of grace? It is a fair and important question. May God bless to the readers of this book the Bible's answers, and may God cause more and more of His people to receive the grace revealed in these doctrines to the praise of His wonderful name.

I am grateful to the session and congregation of First Presbyterian Church, Margate, Fla., to which these messages originally

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were preached, as well as to my present church, Second Presbyterian Church of Greenville, S.C., for their support of my teaching and writing ministry. This book is dedicated to Chuck and Irene Elliott for the gracious spirit of their lives and for their loving devotion to my ministry. Moreover, I thank my beloved wife, Sharon, for the joy and beauty she brings to my life and to our church, as well as our five children for the many sacrifices they cheerfully make because of God's calling on Daddy's life. Lastly, I give praise and glory to the God and Father of my Lord Jesus Christ, with grateful thanks for the transforming power of His grace in my life.

—*Richard D. Phillips*  
Greenville, South Carolina  
December 2007



*What's So Great about*  
THE SOVEREIGNTY  
OF GOD?

Isaiah 6:1–7:14

*In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. (Isa. 6:1)*

THERE ARE MOMENTS IN LIFE YOU NEVER FORGET: the first time you kiss your spouse, the birth of your first child, your favorite baseball team finally winning the World Series. For many of us, the awakening of our minds to the sovereignty of God is one of these unforgettable moments. “It’s like being born again, again,” many Christians remark after their faith is renewed by an understanding of the doctrines of grace. Everything changes. It is not that they begin to trust God—all



believers must trust God—but that they see the truth about the God they trust. And the truth, as Jesus promised, sets us free: free to rejoice in the glory of a divine grace that truly is gracious.

This book is about the doctrines of grace, biblical teaching about the sovereignty of God at work in our salvation. The doctrines of grace offer a perspective on salvation in which God truly is God, so that everything depends on His will and works to His glory. As with all God's attributes, sovereignty is not a mere abstraction, but a reality that shapes the warp and woof of our experience. The real God is a God who really is sovereign over all reality. Reality in this world is always governed by the statement that begins the Bible: "In the beginning, God . . ." For, in truth, everything—every event, every truth, every experience—begins with God. And so it must be if God really is the God of the Bible: a God who sees all, who knows all, and who is almighty. This is the great truth that opens our eyes to the glory of our sovereign God: He is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end of all things. "For from him and through him and to him are all things," Paul writes. "To him be glory forever. Amen" (Rom. 11:36).

By *sovereignty*, we mean that God actively governs everything. By *everything*, we mean all things that happen, from the greatest to the least of occurrences. "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?" asked Jesus. "Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care" (Matt. 10:29, NIV). So *sovereignty* means "according to God's sovereign will." God's sovereignty in salvation means that believers are saved for this sole ultimate reason: "according to God's sovereign will." Or as Paul wrote, our salvation was "predestined according to the

purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11). That sums it up about as well as possible: we are saved according to God’s sovereign purpose, by God’s sovereign working, according to God’s sovereign will. Salvation truly is “from him and through him and to him” (Rom. 11:36). When this truth breaks into our minds and hearts, we glory in God forever.

### ISAIAH’S VISION OF SOVEREIGNTY

A great many Christians can bear testimony to the earth-shaking effects of realizing the sovereignty of God. These same kinds of testimonies are found in the Bible, perhaps none more profound than the prophet Isaiah’s account of his life-changing encounter with the sovereign Lord. If the apostle Paul is the New Testament figure most associated with the teaching of God’s sovereignty, his Old Testament counterpart is surely Isaiah. How did Isaiah gain his understanding of God’s sovereignty, and what influence did this have on his life? In other words, how would Isaiah answer the question, “What’s so great about the sovereignty of God?”

The prophecy of Isaiah contains some of the boldest proclamations of God’s sovereignty in Scripture. In chapter 45, he compares God’s relationship with mankind to that of a potter and his clay, making of His creation whatever He will. In chapter 46, Isaiah points out the utter sovereignty of God’s will: “For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I

will accomplish all my purpose” (Isa. 46:9–10). In chapter 59, Isaiah speaks of God’s sovereignty in terms of the long arm of the Lord, by which He is able to will the salvation of His people anywhere: “His own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him” (Isa. 59:16).

Isaiah’s message about divine sovereignty wouldn’t have been any more popular in his time than it is in many circles today. But where did Isaiah get this radical conception of God? Was Isaiah under the influence of eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinking (as is often said of those who espouse his teaching today)? Was Isaiah a closet rationalist, under the influence of Plato and Aristotle, so that he can be written off as a prophet of the Greek philosophers rather than of Israel’s God? These can hardly be the case, given that Isaiah wrote in the late eighth and early seventh centuries BC. So where did Isaiah gain these peculiar views in which God is truly God?

The answer is that Isaiah learned of God’s sovereignty through his personal experience of the Lord. And he wasn’t the only one. Paul got his view of a sovereign Christ on the Damascus Road, Jonah attained his “Calvinism” in the belly of the whale, and Habakkuk gained his grasp of God’s sovereignty in his watchtower. In other words, Isaiah—like the other prophets and the apostles, who worshiped God’s sovereign glory—gained his doctrine from the Lord Himself.

Isaiah’s grasping of God’s sovereignty was the great event that changed his life forever. “It was like being born again, again,” he might have said about the event that convinced him of sovereign grace. Just like believers today who find that the doctrines of grace change their lives forever, Isaiah’s encounter with

the sovereign God shaped his life and ministry from that time onward. It was the turning point of his life.

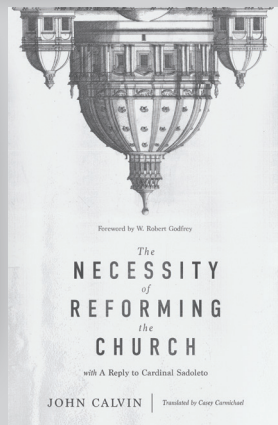
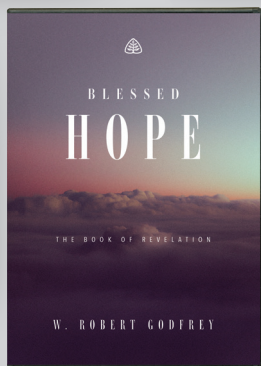
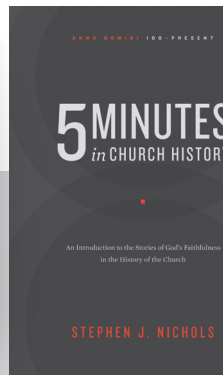
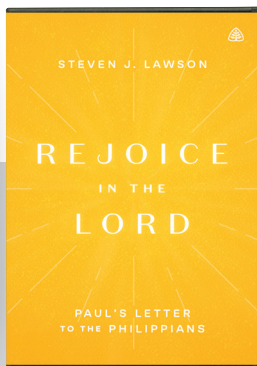
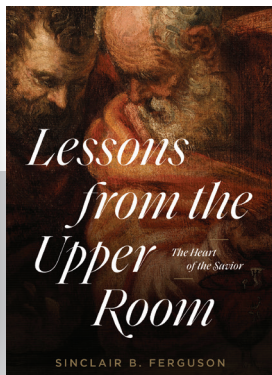
If we can pinpoint the turning point of someone's life, we gain a portal into the very vitals of his or her heart. For one it is the death of a parent. For another it is, sadly, his father walking out on his mother. For still another it is the experience, at long last, of putting on the uniform worn by his father and his father's father before him. Isaiah 6 records the pivotal moment in Isaiah's life, when he gained the insights that governed all the years of his prophetic ministry to come.

Isaiah's turning point was also his call to ministry as a prophet. It came "in the year that King Uzziah died" (Isa. 6:1). Uzziah was one of Judah's great kings. He reigned for fifty-two years of prosperity and expansion. For those of us younger than 52, that would be like having one president govern for our entire lives with a godliness and ability that few modern politicians ever display. With Uzziah as king, Isaiah grew up in a rare period when Judah had been restored to something like the righteousness and prosperity known during the time of David and Solomon.

But now the king was dead, the nation was in mourning, and an unproven youth was taking the throne. Isaiah understandably found himself walking to the temple, seeking consolation. He was from a priestly family, so the temple was a comfortable and familiar place. But this time Isaiah entered the temple to see something wholly unfamiliar. R. C. Sproul, in his singular study of this passage, writes: "The king was dead. But when Isaiah entered the temple he saw another king, the Ultimate King, the One who sat forever on the throne of Judah. He saw the Lord."<sup>1</sup>

Isaiah tells us what he saw with these words:

We want to see men and women around the world connect the deep truths of the Christian faith to everyday life.



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