

# Opening Letter

*Dear Reader,*

This is a book about two things that at first glance may seem incompatible: grace and effort. We don't usually put those two words together. When we think of grace, we tend to emphasize what God has done over what we must do.

Grace *versus* works, right?

It is good and right to emphasize God's work of grace *for* us when we're thinking about how to get right with God. Justification is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Nothing you have done, nor anything you can do, can contribute anything to the saving righteousness of Jesus.

Not the labors of my hands  
Can fulfill thy law's demands;  
Could my zeal no respite know,  
Could my tears forever flow,  
All for sin could not atone;  
Thou must save, and Thou alone.

The recent resurgence of Reformed theology has allowed many to rediscover this dimension of grace, and that is a great gain. People who grew up thinking that Christianity mainly consists of dos and don'ts hear this reemphasis on the gospel of free grace as truly good news. There is nothing quite so liberating as coming to rest in the finished work of Christ!

Along with this rediscovery has come a flashflood of books about the "gospel" and how it changes and transforms us. I certainly haven't read all of these books (though I did write one of them!), but from what I can tell, the underlying emphasis seems to be something like this: these writers want you to understand that you're not only justified by faith alone, but you're also sanctified by faith alone. They want to celebrate how the gospel is the only way a lost person becomes saved, but also how it's the only way a saved person grows

and matures. These books remind us that transformation, no less than justification, is driven by the gospel, empowered by grace, and centered on Christ alone.

Amen. I agree. Keep preaching, my New Calvinist comrades!

### **Dangers to the North and the South**

But (you knew a “but” was coming, didn’t you?) I do think a caution is in order because this emphasis on grace *can* sound like a dismissal of effort. These books *can* sound like they’re pitting grace *against* works. The church does not easily live in the middle ground where both grace *and* effort dwell.

To explain, let me borrow and adapt an image from C. S. Lewis’s magnificent allegory *The Pilgrim’s Regress*. If you think of the Christian life as a journey across a rugged terrain, there are significant dangers to both the north and the south.

To the frozen north are the arctic dangers of icy legalism and frigid formalism, where religiosity and self-righteousness freeze the heart, leaving us brittle, cold, and hard towards both God and fellow human beings. The church veers north when she loses her wonder at the *freedom* of grace, when the heart-warming doctrine of justification by faith alone slips from her grasp.

But to the swampy south, there are the tropical dangers of sultry self-indulgence and lazy licentiousness, where grace is twisted into license, and even biblically-warranted, faith-fueled effort is condemned as legalism. Bonhoeffer called this “cheap grace.” (The theological word for it is *antinomianism*, which means *against law*.) The church wanders south when she loses her wonder at the *power* of grace; neglects the biblical demands for effort, perseverance, and watchfulness; and collapses the action-laden language of the New Testament (walk, fight, run, conquer, etc.) into overly simple, reductionist formulas that vacate sanctifying faith of all effort.

While the doctrine of justification by faith alone rescues us from the frozen glacier of legalism, it’s the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints that liberates us from the miry bog of antinomianism.

At its heart, this book is about the perseverance of the saints.

## The Perseverance of the Saints Defined

A definition may be in order at this point. After all, the phrase “perseverance of the saints” is a theological mouthful that ordinary Christians don’t often use. So, when I speak of the perseverance of the saints, what do I mean?

In good preacherly fashion, let me first offer a single sentence definition, followed by three clarifications, and then (since pictures are worth a thousand words) an illustration.

The definition: *The perseverance of the saints means that true believers cannot lose their salvation but will persevere in faith to the end and be saved.*

Now, the clarifications: (1) This does not mean that a believer can live in perpetual sin, without repentance, and still be saved. Some people equate the doctrine of perseverance with a somewhat stripped-down version of it usually dubbed “eternal security” or “the security of the believer” (the doctrine that a believer cannot lose his or her salvation). And some proponents of eternal security go so far as to say that a true, born-again Christian can even quit believing altogether but still remain eternally saved.

But the classic Reformed understanding of perseverance, while certainly affirming the eternal security of a genuine believer, says more. The doctrine of perseverance also clarifies what kind of faith is saving faith, since it recognizes that Scripture itself contrasts true faith against a kind of faith that is false (see James 2). Therefore, the doctrine of perseverance teaches *both* that a true believer cannot lose his or her salvation *and* that a true believer will persevere in faith and holiness.

(2) That said, true believers can and often do still sin. Let’s be honest. I do, and so do you. Sometimes believers even fall into serious sin. The Reformed confessions are clear on this point. For example, one old confession (The London Baptist Confession, 1689) says that Christians “may, through the temptation of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins, and for a time continue therein.”

This can lead to severe consequences in a believer's life. That same confession goes on to say that through such failure, believers "incur God's displeasure, and grieve his Holy Spirit, come to have their graces and comforts impaired, have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded, hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves."

In other words, the doctrine of perseverance is painfully realistic about both the sins and failures of Christians and the terrible consequences this can unleash in a person's life. Even in acknowledging these dangers, however, there is the underlying assurance that true believers "yet shall . . . renew their repentance and be preserved through faith in Christ Jesus to the end."

(3) Finally, while we need to emphasize the responsibility of believers to believe, obey, endure, persevere, and be holy, we must never forget that all of this ultimately depends on God's grace. Yes, we are commanded to "keep [ourselves] in the love of God" (Jude v. 21), but we can only keep ourselves because of "him who is able to keep [us] from stumbling and to present [us] blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy" (Jude v. 24).

Maybe an illustration will help. The life of a Christian has sometimes been compared to the Mississippi River. The general flow of The Big Muddy is from north to south, but anyone who looks at a map will see that sometimes the river flows east or west, and in at least one place even turns north for a short while. Despite these many sideways and occasional backwards turns, the water always eventually flows south.

In a similar way, while believers generally increase in faith and holiness, they certainly take many detours to the right or left, sometimes even temporarily turning away from the Lord into deeper patterns of sin and disobedience. But the firmness of God's love, the strength of his grace, the effectiveness of Christ's death, the power of his prayers, and the sway of his Spirit in our hearts guarantees that our God will always and eventually draw us back to himself in repentant faith.

## The Need for an Active Spirituality

This book, like my previous two, is born from my own struggles to understand and practice the Christian life. The dangers to north and south are not just dangers for the church at large but for each individual believer. More often than I care to admit, I have found myself subtly slipping first one way, then the other—towards self-righteousness and rigidity on the one hand or self-indulgence and passivity on the other.

Studying the various New Testament metaphors for living the Christian life has helped me in this struggle. I find the strongly action-oriented nature of these images almost startling: the Christian life is called a walk, a race, a contest, and a fight. We are told to run, to wrestle, to watch, and to stand. And the victors—those who conquer and overcome—receive great promises whereas terrible warnings go to those who grow sluggish and neglect the great salvation secured for us by Jesus.

Some of these metaphors formed the original idea for this book, but over time, some other pieces came into play. I started thinking about the nature of backsliding and apostasy and the specific sin of sloth or acedia (one of the classic seven deadly sins). Then there was the perennial question of how to live in the world without either idolizing it or becoming a pleasure-denying ascetic.

These issues, even more than the problems in faulty theological systems, caused me to see my own need for a very real, robust spirituality.

In other words, I've not written this book simply because Christians need balanced theology (as important as that is) but because there are real threats and dangers to my life and faith, and to yours. I want to be standing in Christ ten years from now. And I won't be unless (by God's grace) my spirituality is active.

Oswald Chambers said it well: "If we are going to live as disciples of Jesus, we have to remember that all efforts of worth and excellence are difficult. The Christian life is gloriously difficult, but its difficulty does not make us faint and cave in—it rouses us up to overcome. Do we appreciate the miraculous salvation of Jesus Christ enough to be our utmost for His highest—our best for His glory?"

## Letters of Spiritual Counsel

This book may seem unusual in its form. Rather than writing a linear, deductive, step-by-step primer on the active metaphors of the New Testament (what I'd originally planned), I've written a series of letters. There are a couple of reasons for this.

First, I thought it would be a fun and creative approach to writing theology. With the advent of the Internet, email, and texting, it appears that the art of letter writing has passed. But I'm old enough to remember both the quiet reflection involved in writing letters and the unique thrill of receiving them. While I like the new technologies, I view the decline of letter writing as a significant loss. Church history is rich with letters that were uniquely pastoral in character. Think of Martin Luther's *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, John Newton's *Cardiphonia*, or C. S. Lewis's more widely read *The Screwtape Letters* and *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*. And the richest spiritual letters we have are in the New Testament: Spirit-breathed letters by the apostles.

I certainly do not disdain newer forms of technology (I often use them!), but I think letter writing can still serve both individuals and the church. Hence, the form of this book.

There's a second reason I wrote this book as a series of letters. Our faith journeys are not linear or direct from infancy to maturity, from ignorance to understanding, from earth to heaven (or better, to the New Heavens and New Earth). No, our journeys are circuitous and roundabout, with lots of detours and obstacles, punctuated by backtracking, rest stops, and significant delays on the side of the road.

So these letters don't begin with the concept of "active spirituality" and then move sequentially through the need for it, the reasons for it, the character of it, etc. How unrealistic (and boring) a book like that would be! No, these are letters written to someone in the throes of temptation and endurance, agony and ecstasy, victory and defeat. They are written to a struggling young adult trying to find a church, live a chaste life, and walk with Jesus. In other words, these letters are not just theological—they are pastoral, written to help believers apply Christian theology to the complexities of real life.

You will hear echoes of other Christian writers in this book. They are my conversation partners as I try to work out a practical life of faith. They include John Bunyan, whose *Pilgrim's Progress* has instructed and encouraged me since my childhood. Then there's C. S. Lewis, whose writings have baptized my imagination; I learned from him (and Saint Augustine) the importance of rightly-ordered loves that can embrace all created goods under the lordship of Christ. John Owen's rich books of pastoral theology feed, instruct, rebuke, and encourage me like no others, so I am apt to quote them often when trying to encourage others. And, finally, Thomas Schreiner and Ardel Caneday first opened up to me the biblical metaphor of "the race" and its relationship to persevering faith in their excellent book *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance*. Few books have had a more profound shaping influence on my understanding of the Christian life, so it plays a big part in how I have crafted these letters.

A few explanatory comments are probably in order. First, while I have written these letters to "Chris" (Christian) as realistically as possible, they are fictional. I've written them in my own voice, and all of the significant autobiographical details are true of me, but I do claim creative license for some incidental details, which I've sometimes invented or changed for the sake of interest. The letters do build on one another and follow an implicit storyline, so you should read them in order rather than skip around. And to provide a smoother reading experience, I've chosen not to include footnotes to quotations and references in the letters themselves; if you want that information, see the Notes section at the end of the book.

## Exploring the Depths

One athletic image that Paul did not use in his letters, but serves well as a metaphor for this book, is scuba diving. Perhaps Paul would have used it, had it been invented. For just as *walking* captures the persevering, and sometimes plodding, nature of our pilgrimage in the journey of faith; and *fighting* vividly portrays the violent realities of our conflicted warfare with sin and Satan; and *running* pictures our endurance as we press forward to grasp the heavenly prize; so *diving*

depicts our attempts to probe the depth and mystery of God's grace. And, in fact, Paul does exult in "the *depth* of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God" (Romans 11:33) and reminds us that the "Spirit searches everything, even the *depths* of God" (1 Corinthians 2:10). One of my hopes as you dive into these pages is that the Spirit will grant you a deeper understanding of the mystery of how God's grace works in our disciplined effort and through our personal experiences to more closely conform us into the image of Christ.

None of us fully understand the journey we're signing up for when we first begin to follow Christ. We all encounter obstacles for which we are unprepared. Among our fellow travelers are companions who strengthen our faith and help us along the way, while others can get us off track. We face hostile enemies, including the toxic idolatries of this present evil age, the subtle and deceptive temptations of dark spiritual powers, and the fierce outposts of remaining sin in our own hearts. All of these conspire to sabotage our faith. But the gospel promises that God's grace is far greater than the combined force of all our foes. By faith, we can rest in knowing that every ounce of holy effort we exert is itself the fruit of God's grace. Whatever effort we make flows from the sovereign, unbreakable love of our Father; the effectual, finished work of our prophet, priest, and king, Jesus, the Son of God; and the mighty and mysterious power of the indwelling Spirit. In the words of an old hymn,

Every virtue we possess,  
And every conquest won,  
And every thought of holiness,  
Are His alone.

## Walking in the Way

*Dear Chris,*

It was really great to get your letter yesterday. I'm glad we had a chance to talk over coffee a few weeks ago. You have some important decisions ahead of you, and I'll be praying for the Lord's guidance, especially as it relates to your career and finding a new church family. Remember that his guidance extends beyond these big life-altering decisions into the nitty-gritty details of your daily attitudes, routines, and habits. To use the biblical words, the Lord is concerned with how we *walk* and with all of our *ways*.

Last summer, my three oldest kids (you may remember that we have four) and I discovered a great hiking trail just a few miles from where we live. It's a trail through the woods that winds in and out of several parks just on the east side of the St. Joseph River, complete with a river shelter and several picnic areas and playgrounds just off the trail. The kids were enthralled, and our little hike led into a natural conversation about walking the right path or *way* in life.

The word *walk* is one of the main biblical metaphors for living the Christian life. Sometimes I think its significance is lost on us today. In the ancient world, walking was the ordinary person's primary mode of transportation. The best way to get from here to there was to walk. They didn't have trains, planes, and automobiles—even the bicycle wasn't invented until the nineteenth century! Horses, at least in ancient Israel, were scarce and primarily used in battle. So most journeys were taken on foot by walking. We see this especially in the life of Jesus. As someone once noted, Jesus is the most persistent pedestrian in the Bible!

So the idea of *walking* in a *way* was the perfect picture for an ancient person to understand the moral and spiritual life. We find the metaphor early in Genesis where God walked in the garden of

Eden in the cool of the day (Genesis 3:8), picturing God’s active presence with humanity in their original created state. That fellowship was interrupted, of course, by the fall. But as the redemption story unfolds, God once again walks with his people. “I will walk among you and be your God,” God says to Israel (Leviticus 26:12).

He not only walks with us, but we walk with him. Both Enoch and Noah are commended for walking with God (Genesis 5:22, 24; 6:9), and the Lord said to Abraham, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless” (Genesis 17:1). The New Testament has many instances of this imagery as well. John and Paul describe Christian behavior in terms of walking in light rather than darkness, walking as Jesus walked, walking in wisdom, walking in newness of life, walking in good works, walking in the Spirit, and so on.

But to walk, one must have a way, a road, or a path. The Scriptures are full of this imagery, and it is especially obvious in Old Testament poetry, wisdom literature, and the prophetic books. The first psalm contrasts the ways of the righteous and wicked, commending the man who “walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers” (Psalm 1:1). The first verse of Psalm 119 echoes that commendation, declaring the blessedness of “those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord,” while Proverbs 4:18 says that “the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day.” Later, Jesus taught about discipleship and salvation by contrasting the hard way that leads to life with the easy way that leads to destruction (Matthew 7:13–14), and Luke describes the early Christians as followers of “the Way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22).

This brief survey of *walk* and *way* imagery in Scripture (and there are dozens and dozens of other texts—I encourage you to search them out.) suggests several insights about Christian living:

(1) First of all, it involves effort, movement, and action. Walking requires motion, and so does following Jesus. The Christian life is not a passive or static state. Ours is an active spirituality.

(2) But it also involves choices. You must choose a road, a path, a way in which to walk. The Scriptures variously describe this path as

a way of life, light, love, truth, righteousness, etc. But what is clear is that there is a *way* that leads to salvation and a *way* that doesn't.

*The Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan's classic allegory about the journey of faith, vividly captures this reality. I love this book and think it is worth repeated readings. Spurgeon reportedly read it over a hundred times! I haven't read it a hundred times, but I do keep coming back to it. I recently realized that Bunyan not only describes the Christian's journey through life with all its attending obstacles, detours, and dangers, but also provides a startling array of characters to illustrate defective faith. It's a study in apostasy every bit as much as it is a portrayal of the perseverance of the saints. When we meet Obstinate, Pliable, Ignorance, Hypocrisy, Worldly Wiseman, Talkative, Formalist, Legality, and all the rest, we're not just encountering transparent examples of unbelievers and apostates. We're also seeing in detail the kinds of spiritual problems that get people off track. The one thing all of these characters have in common is that they didn't continue walking in the way to the Celestial City.

(3) Therefore, we must keep walking in the right way. Whenever we realize we've gotten off the path, we must by God's grace find the way back on. Bunyan's Christian does this again and again, and he makes it all the way home only with dogged persistence. So must you and I. The most fatal thing is to stop walking.

(4) Finally, both Scripture and Bunyan remind us that walking often involves companionship. We must walk with the Lord (Genesis 5:22; Revelation 3:4), but we must also walk with others who follow him: "Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm" (Proverbs 13:20). Christian met numerous cases of dubious character and doubtful faith, but he also had companions like Faithful and Hopeful who helped him in the journey.

Like Christian, we also need good spiritual companions. Don't underestimate the importance of true Christian fellowship for your life. It will make a huge difference in your spiritual progress.

Your fellow pilgrim,

*Brian*