

CHAPTER NINE GOD'S INITIATING AND TRANSFORMING GRACE IN SANCTIFICATION

The Molinist Position: Molinists believe God's ability to transform the Christian is dependent upon human choice and likewise see the perseverance of the saint in the following way: "God created a world in which he knew what persons would freely choose to love God for eternity.... Therefore, God actualized a world in which he knows what persons will choose to love God and persevere into the infinite future."¹

Theological Truth #6 That Favors Calvinism: Based upon God's absolute sovereignty, free grace, the unchangeable nature of the decree of divine election, and the efficacy of the cross and intercession of Jesus Christ, the Spirit of God causatively renews the saint throughout his whole person, after the image of God, enabling him more and more to die to sin and live to righteousness, and so the saint will certainly persevere to the end, and be eternally saved.²

"It's hard to believe it took me so long!" That is a sentiment I have whenever I think about a very important biblical reality I missed in my undergraduate degree at a Christian college, while working on my M.Div. in seminary, and even in the first few years of pastoral ministry. What finally dawned on me was that the gospel is not only for the unsaved person to grasp so they can be saved. It is also for the believer. Tim Keller has memorably said it this way:

We never "get beyond the gospel" in our Christian life to something more "advanced". The gospel is not the first "step" in a "stairway" of truths, rather, it is more like the "hub" in a "wheel" of truth. The gospel is not just the A-B-C's but the A to Z of Christianity. The gospel is not just the minimum required doctrine necessary to enter the kingdom, but the way we make all progress in the kingdom.³

¹ Tim Stratton, "The Petals Drop: Why I'm Not A Tulip Kind Of Calvinist," in *Free Thinking Ministries Blog* (April 20, 2015, freethinkingministries.com/the-petals-drop-why-i-am-not-a-tulip-kind-of-calvinist. Accessed January 21, 2017).

² This statement is drawn from *The Westminster Confession Of Faith*, Chapter 17, 1-2 ("Of The Perseverance Of The Saints"), as well as from the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, #35 ("What is Sanctification?").

³ Tim Keller, "The Centrality Of The Gospel" (a position paper for Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, available at: www.redeemer2.com/resources/papers/centrality.pdf. Accessed in 2012.), 1-2.

We see applicability of the gospel to the saint, for example, in Galatians 2:14, where the Apostle Paul confronts the Apostle Peter and some other Jewish Christians for ceasing to eat with Gentiles in Syrian Antioch when individuals came to Antioch who believed a person must first become a full Jewish Proselyte (including circumcision for men), if they were to become a Christian. With the presence of these latter persons, Peter and some others gave in to an idea that was in keeping with the ceremonial law of the Old Testament, but as Paul wrote in Galatians 2:14, “They do not walk straight toward the truth of the gospel.” (author’s own translation)

Similar to the way that headlights on a car illuminate the way ahead, to know where to go, so also with the gospel, there is a way of thinking that flows from gospel realities that shows the Christian how to make progress. For Peter in Syrian Antioch that way should have revealed to him that ceremonial laws have been fulfilled in Christ and that now he and Gentile Christians can say of their relationship (Eph. 2:13-22):

But now in Christ Jesus you [Gentile Christians] who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both [Jewish and Gentile Christians] one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you [Gentile Christians] are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

And so, regardless of the differences, for Christians to be in step with the gospel means, for example, the realities that emerge from the gospel should lead us to love one another and have deep fellowship. As we see in Eph. 2:13-22, reconciliation to God in Christ should lead to practical reconciliation among believers. To word it in another way, genuine love for God should lead to genuine love for brothers and sisters in Christ (1 John 4:7-21). Such practical

reconciliation and love for Paul (cf. Eph. 5:1-2) is fleshed out in Eph. 4-5, where Paul writes that we are no longer to live as unbelievers (4:17ff.) and are to live as the new people we are (4:22-24), but goes on to explain this involves not sinning in our anger (4:26); working that we might share with those in need (4:28); speaking only edifying and not corrupting words (4:29); putting away bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, malice, sexual immorality, impurity, covetousness, filthiness, foolish talk, and crude joking (4:31-5:4). This new life also involves being kind to one another, tenderhearted, and forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven us (Eph. 4:32).

The reader of Paul must not miss that what lays the foundation for our ethics, as we discovered in our examination of Ephesians 2:1-10 in Chapter Eight, is the strong way in which God has causatively worked in the saint to transform her into a new person. We can live out these imperatives based on the indicatives, that is, the realities that Christ has accomplished for and applied to us (cf. Eph. 2:10; 4:1-7). To put this in another way, the Christian's hope for progress is not that we have the power within ourselves to make contra-causal choices and so we can do the things God desires. Nor is our hope in a small nudge that God has given us. It is in the fact he has made us new people in Christ, with new hearts—as applied through His Spirit!

There is heart change by which God causes in us new ways of looking at things, new affections, and the ability to make different choices than we have previously made—to do the things God wants, for the purposes God wants, and in the ways God wants. Understanding how God works us in the sanctification process, based upon the gospel, and directed by the gospel is not only crucial for holding to and living out New Testament ethics, it also fits with the soft deterministic Calvinism we have presented so far in this book. It does not fit with Molinism.

Another place we discover the importance of the gospel for Christian growth is in the epistle to the Romans. Paul writes this letter to address Jew/Gentile tensions among the church in Rome (Rom. 1:16; 2:9, 12-3:9; 14:1-23; 15:8-9). He desires to bring them back together (cf. 15:7) so that they can participate with him in taking the gospel to Spain and other places where it has not been heard (15:24, 28), as well as in taking relief to suffering saints in Jerusalem (15:25-28)—and this all to bring about faith-fueled obedience among the nations to God’s glory (1:5; 16:26-27). What is interesting is that Paul’s approach to these purposes was to explain the gospel he preaches and would take to the ends of the earth (1:1-8:39), the very gospel which has the power to transform (cf. 16:25), and so he lays the foundation for the kind of exhortations he needs to make to the church that they might come together and live on mission (12:1-15:33).

When we grasp Paul’s purposes in Romans, we should not be surprised that though he believes most of the people to whom he is writing there to be Christians (cf. Rom. 1:6-7), he is “eager to preach the gospel” to them (Rom. 1:15), which seems to be part of the way he and the Romans would be “mutually encouraged by each other’s faith” (Rom. 1:12). He also believes and prays that God would strengthen the Roman church “according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ...” (Rom. 16:25). In other words, he is convinced that these saints would grow together as they grow in Christ and in their awareness of how God has transformed them in Christ so they can live out a new life with and toward one another.

What we discover in Galatians 2:14, in Ephesians, and in the epistle to the Romans is the reality that because God has transformed Christians so deeply and profoundly, they can and should live a different kind of life than previously.

What is at stake, then, in our discussion throughout this book is not merely whether or not we understand God’s sovereignty and human freedom from a biblical perspective, but even more,

whether or not we get right how the gospel is applied in salvation (Chapter Eight) and how God's causative transformation stands behind the Christian's sanctification, that is, their progress in the faith. I believe that any model of sovereignty and human choice that holds to indeterministic human freedom (including Molinism) potentially dilutes the gospel realities that should undergird such progress.

As seen in my comparison of the Molinist and Calvinist models at the beginning of this chapter, Molinists believe God's ability to transform the Christian and to preserve them in salvation are dependent upon human choice. Seen in the context of their entire model, even the Christian who has been regenerated after believing and so, to some degree, has been made a new person, must make their choices in a manner that they are not determined or decisively caused by God's transforming grace. This is also seen in William Lane Craig's view of sanctification and perseverance:

...in the moment logically prior to creation, God, via His middle knowledge, knew who would freely receive Christ as Savior and what sorts of warnings against apostasy would be extrinsically efficacious in keeping them from falling away. Therefore, He decreed to create only those persons to be saved who He knew would freely respond to His warnings and thus persevere, and He simultaneously decreed to provide such warnings. On this account the believer will certainly persevere and yet he does so freely, taking seriously the warnings God has given him.⁴

Contrary to the Molinist model as just stated, the sixth theological truth that favors Calvinism is this: Based upon his absolute sovereignty, free grace, the unchangeable nature of the decree of divine election, and the efficacy of the cross and intercession of Jesus Christ, the Spirit of God causatively renews the saint throughout his whole person, after the image of God, enabling him more and more to die to sin and live to righteousness, and so the saint will certainly persevere to

⁴ Bill Craig, "Lest Anyone Should Fall: A Middle Knowledge Perspective On Perseverance And Apostolic Warnings," *International Journal For Philosophy Of Religion*, 29 (1991 Found at reasonablefaith.org/lest-anyone-should-fall-a-middle-knowledge-perspective-on-perseverance. Accessed Feb. 10, 2017.), n.a.

the end, and be eternally saved.⁵ Simply-put, God’s initiating and transforming grace stands underneath the sanctification of the saint.

As I did in the last chapter, so also here we will focus primarily upon one passage of Scripture—at the same time bringing in other passages to provide further support. This time we will focus upon Romans 6-8 to unpack what progressive sanctification is, as well as how and why God’s initiating and transforming grace stands underneath it.

Progressive Sanctification

Systematic Theology often speaks of sanctification in three ways: The initial sanctification of the person being set apart unto God when forgiven and declared righteous in Christ,⁶ ultimate sanctification (otherwise known as glorification) when the Christian is finally and completely set apart to God in the age to come, never to sin again,⁷ and then also progressive sanctification, that continual setting apart of the saint unto God to become more and more like Jesus and to grow in holiness in this age.

There are four truths I will unpack about progressive sanctification.⁸

⁵ *The Westminster Confession Of Faith*, Chapter 17, 1-2 (“Of The Perseverance Of The Saints”) and the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, #35 (“What is Sanctification?”).

⁶ 2 Thessalonians 2:13: “...saved through sanctification by the Spirit of God and belief in the truth.”

⁷ Romans 8:30: “...those whom he justified he also glorified.” Heb. 12:22-23: “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven...to the spirits of the righteous made perfect...” Rev. 21:3-4, 8, 27: “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.... ⁸ But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.... ²⁷ But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.”

⁸ These four truths are worded in accordance with the definition of sanctification in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, #35: “Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.”

The Work Of God's Free Grace

To begin, we discover that the Christian's sanctification flows from God's regeneration and justification of the sinner, the results of which, as we saw in Chapter Eight, transform the person to think, desire, choose, and act differently. This saving, transforming grace of God is by God's undeserved favor accomplished and applied in and through Christ and not dependent upon or limited by human choices, as is seen in the context of Romans 6-8 (Rom. 3:23-24): "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." Consider also Rom. 5:18-19: "Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.¹⁹ For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." Finally, there is Rom. 9:11: "...in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls..."⁹

Not only can we say that the preceding acts of God that bring about the work of sanctification are by God's free grace, but so also this implies the sanctifying work itself will not take place unless God initiates the sanctifying and transforming process. In other words, he causatively governs the person's intellect, affections, and will such that they not only want to trust Christ for salvation, but also they want to follow and be like Christ in life—and all this because they are united to Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. To turn this around, we can also say that because the person has been transformed, they can desire and do the things God wants, for the purposes he wants, and in the ways he wants. This truth is richly unfolded in Romans 6-8 in the following ways.

⁹ The unbreakable connection between justification and sanctification is also seen in the reality that all whom God justifies he also ultimately sanctifies or glorifies (Rom. 8:30), which implies all whom he justifies he also works in to sanctify progressively in this age.

To begin, it is clear that the ability to live as God wills flows from the transformation of the Christian in union with Christ—and this is so much the case that a truly regenerated and justified Christian cannot continue to live in a manner that is chiefly and solely characterized by sin and sinful defeat. After all, united to Christ, the Christian is united to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Paul puts it this way in Romans 6:1-10:

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For one who has died has been set free from sin. ⁸ Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰ For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God.

Clearly Paul affirms that the Christian's ability to live a different life is not rooted merely in his own will or in his ability, but in the change God has brought in his sovereign and gracious work of salvation. This is so much the case that Paul can say that based upon this change, the Christian ought to think, desire, choose, and live in a different way. Consider several of the statements Paul infers from this change in Romans 6:11-23:

*¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves **dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus**. ¹² Let not sin **therefore** reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. ¹³ Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.*

*¹⁴ **For sin will have no dominion over you**, since you are not under law but under grace.*

*¹⁵ What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ... ¹⁷ But thanks be to God, that **you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed**, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. ¹⁹ ... For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, **so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification**. ²⁰ For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹ But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are **now ashamed**? For the end of those things is death. ²² But now that you have*

been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life... (emphasis added)

It is true that Paul is commanding the readers here and assuming they have a choice to make. What is more, there is responsibility to live in a manner that is consistent with God's ethical standards. But, what should not be missed are the conclusions I have emphasized in the text: that a genuine Christian is now a person who has been causatively and decisively transformed by God. What is more, Paul presents the unregenerate person as lacking the moral ability to do what is right, for they are enslaved to sin. Yet, by God's regenerating work, the Christian now should have such a strong compulsion to do what is right that it is appropriate to speak of them as slaves to a new master: not sin, but righteousness. "Genuine, saving faith is the sort that not only learns what [the Lord] says, but also loves it. Genuine faith displays its true character by producing in the heart of the individual a persevering attachment to Jesus."¹⁰

Not only is this way of talking about this transformation compatible with the view of divine sovereignty and human choice for which this book has argued, it is incompatible with indeterministic freedom. As a result, what we discover is at stake in the Calvinist-Molinist debate is none other than how the Christian sees the gospel relating to his life: Does the gospel entail Spirit-wrought, Christ-bought, divinely-ordained transformation that stands underneath his ability to trust and obey? Or, must the first and primary movement of trust and obedience come from his own will? At the very least, Molinism (or any consistent indeterministic model) takes away some of the punch from the reality that saints are strengthened by the gospel (Rom. 16:25).

¹⁰ Sam Storms, *Kept For Jesus: What The New Testament Really Teaches About Assurance Of Salvation And Eternal Security* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015, Kindle Edition), 51.

In a verse that we have already examined earlier in the book, Paul highlights God’s grace standing underneath the Christian’s transformation—in this case, his own transformation. In 1 Cor. 15:10 he writes: “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.” Sam Storms captures the transformative nature of God’s free grace when he says, “Those whom God chooses, he changes.... Whatever God requires, he provides.... Whatever God starts, he finishes.”¹¹

Yet, we not only discover that sanctification is a work of God’s free grace. We also see that it is a work that transforms the whole person.

Christians Are Renewed In The Whole Person After The Image Of God

In the previous chapter we affirmed that sin has corrupted the entire person. We also discovered in Chapter Seven that humans make choices in a manner that is impacted by the whole person. So, it is certainly good news for us to find out that the change God effects in us is a transformation of the whole person, and with the goal that we will image forth the glory of God, which is part of God’s ultimate purpose for us.

I have argued elsewhere¹² that when Paul writes that all “those whom [God] justified, he also glorified” (Rom. 8:30),¹³ Paul is affirming with great certainty that someday the Christian will be transformed fully so that he can carry out the purpose God originally had for humans in creation, that is, having been created in the image of God and thus crowned with divine glory and honor,

¹¹ Storms, *Kept*, 119.

¹² Tom Barnes, *Living In The Hope Of Future Glory: The Glorification Of The Believer* (Faverdale North, Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2006), see especially pages 17-29.

¹³ What we most likely have here is the dramatic use of the aorist of *doxazō* (“glorify”) which is “stating a present [or in this case future] reality with the certitude of a past event” (D & M, 198).

humans were to reflect God's glory (Gen. 1:26-28; Ps. 8:5-6). The glorification of the Christian is about that transformation so that humans can be God-glorifiers in the fullest and most complete sense.

If this is the end-goal of God's work in us, then it stands to reason that his antecedent work also involves the restoration of the divine image in us that, though not lost, has been grossly twisted. This is why elsewhere Paul speaks of the new person, the Christian, as "created after the likeness of God" (Eph. 4:24 [see also Col. 3:10]). What does it look like for a human to become like God? It means he resembles the God-man. This is why one of the ways Paul describes the current, progressive growth of the Christian is in this way (2 Cor. 3:18): "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."

This renewal of the Christian also impacts the entire person (Rom. 6:13-14; 12:1-2): intellect (Rom. 6:11; 12:2; 1 Cor. 2:14-16); desires (Rom. 6:12); will (Rom. 6:15-19; 8:5-13); and even the resultant actions of the body (Rom. 6:4, 6; 8:4; 12:1). As Paul summarily affirms in 2 Corinthians 5:17: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." Most likely what Paul is affirming in this verse is that the new eschatological age is impacting the person in Christ now and so we can conclude that in the present age we gain a foretaste of the future full renewal that will even include our resurrected and glorified bodies (1 Cor. 15:42-44; Phil. 3:21).

This is not meant to suggest that our physical bodies in this age are being renewed. We must be precise. In 2 Cor. 4:16 Paul affirms that "though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day." So, in this age it is true that while inwardly we are being renewed, our body ages and diminishes. Only in God's miraculous healing of the body do we

experience occasional foretastes of the complete future physical renewal Jesus Christ has accomplished for his people (e.g. Mt. 8:14-17). In the age to come our bodies will be fully transformed, i.e. glorified (1 Cor. 15:42-44).

There is no doubt that throughout the New Testament there is overwhelming evidence that God has causatively and decisively worked in the regenerate justified saint to change their thoughts, desires, will, and actions so each one is a “new man” or “person” (*anthrōpos* [Eph. 4:24]).

On the one hand, this speaks of decisive change on the part of the Spirit of God in the saint that transcends what would be allowable to preserve contra-causal freedom. On the other hand, this decisive change does not result in always choosing what is right in this age. Paul affirms of himself, “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.... For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep doing” (Rom. 7:15-19). So, currently for the Christian, there is ability to do what is right, but not the moral ability to do it always and perfectly. We will look at this distinction in more detail shortly.

Now, when we bring this teaching together with what we have asserted in the book thus far, what we are affirming is this:

- God has causatively worked in each Christian so that they now have the moral ability to do his will in the way he wants and for the purposes he wants. This causative transformation exceeds what would be allowable in a consistent contra-causal or indeterministic model of human freedom.
- It still remains true that all actions for the Christian are the result of an immeasurable combination of God’s causative and permissive governance. So, whenever the Christian does not rely upon the Spirit applying in him the person, presence, and power of Christ that he might carry out God’s will, that resulting sinful act is ordained by God and the result of his permissive governance.

More specifically, there are two categories of actions the Spirit of God empowers the saint to accomplish. To begin, Christians are enabled to die to sin.

Christians Are Enabled More And More To Die Unto Sin

In Romans 8:1-17 Paul describes life in the Spirit for the Christian, life that, as we have seen, is a reality because of the New Covenant. This section of the epistle is very strongly tied into what has preceded it. Verse one reads: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” The word “therefore” (*ara*) ties the text into the previous thought-flow—that though we still struggle with sin, Jesus Christ is our hope for deliverance (7:21-25). After all, united to him and his life, death, and resurrection, we can live as new people (Rom. 6), having applied to us all that Christ has accomplished for and applied to us (cf. Rom. 3:21-5:21).

The word “now” (*nun*) ties the text back into Rom. 7:6, where Paul writes of the salvation-historical shift and the New Covenant realities for believers in Christ: “But now (*nuni*) we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.”

The thought-flow of Romans 8:2-17 is as follows. The evidence there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus is the reality that Christians live a new kind of life under the power of the Spirit (8:2), which is made possible because of the saving work of Christ that paid the full law penalty for sin and also enables the Christian to live a new life that is in keeping with God’s standards (8:3-4). The way this works itself out is through the indwelling of and empowerment from the Holy Spirit in all who belong to Christ, which enables such persons to have true life that desires to follow God’s will (8:5-11). In 8:12-17 Paul draws a conclusion (“So then” [*ara oun*]) for those truly in Christ (“brothers” [*adelphoi*]): Namely, that we no longer have to live in accordance with the flesh, but instead can follow the Spirit and thus, can carry out God’s will, which, as Paul said

in v. 2, is an indication we are genuine sons and daughters of God—adopted into his family.

“Flesh” (*sarx*) appears to refer to “man in his natural state apart from the work of God’s Spirit.”¹⁴

In the midst of the paragraph that spans Rom. 8:12-17, Paul affirms in verse 13, “For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” In context, Paul’s points seem to be these:

- Paul appears to explain further (“for” [*gar*]) the importance of his conclusion in 8:12 that those in Christ no longer have to live according to the natural state and apart from Spirit direction and why that is important. The point seems to be that those who follow the unredeemed way of life, the sinful impulses of living apart from God, will certainly die.¹⁵ After all, Paul has already affirmed the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23).
- In context, Paul appears to be making the point also that those who are genuinely in Christ and have the Spirit have true life and so will live according to the Spirit. Those who are not in Christ follow the flesh, are dead, and this leads to greater death (eternal death).¹⁶ Even though it does not follow that there will be perfection in this life and even though it is true that Christians grow at different speeds and experience different degrees of Holy Spirit fruit, it still follows that the true Christian has been transformed and will live differently than they did apart from Christ and his Spirit.
- Romans 8:13 is making the point that Spirit indwelling that has been purchased through the work of Christ and applied at the time of regeneration and justification transforms the person so significantly that the resulting difference in thoughts, desires, choices, and actions becomes strong evidence of salvation. What is more, such a life cannot and will not arise merely from the person or the person’s will apart from being transformed in Christ through his Spirit.
- Consistent with the entire New Testament, there is responsibility on the part of the person to think, desire, choose, and live differently. These are truly movements that come from

¹⁴ John Piper, *Five Points: Toward A Deeper Experience Of God’s Grace* (Fearn, Ross-Shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2013), 21. Steven L. Porter, “The Gradual Nature Of Sanctification: Sarx As Habituated, Relational Resistance To The Spirit,” *Themelios*, 39, 3 (2014): 470-483, is in basic agreement and makes the biblical argument for this understanding.

¹⁵ The use of the present, active, indicative, 2nd person, plural, of *mellō* (literally, “you are certain”), along with the present, active, infinitive, from *apothnēskō* (“to die”), emphasizes the certainty of the ultimate death (eternal separation from God’s blessed presence) that is a result of living as dead people and in death now. Of the over one dozen other uses of this verb (*mellō*) by Paul it always emphasizes certainty of future events (Rom. 4:24; 5:14; 8:18, 38; 1 Cor. 3:22; Gal. 3:23; Eph. 1:21; Col. 2:19; 1 Thes. 3:4; 1 Tim. 1:16; 4:8; 6:19; 2 Tim. 4:1).

¹⁶ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, vol’s. 12-13, in William Hendriksen, Simon J. Kistemaker, *The Baker New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 255, rightly comments on this text: “The fact to be emphasized is that the right choice must be made, for where a person will spend eternity is at stake.” Thomas R. Schreiner (ESVSB, 2170) agrees: “Those who give their lives over to the flesh will face eternal death, but those who slay the desires of the flesh through the power of the Spirit, will enjoy eternal life.”

the person's heart, arising from antecedent movements, and yet, they are carried out in dependence upon the Spirit: "...by the Spirit" (*pneumati*) and because God has decisively changed the heart. John Owen emphasizes the conditional nature of the statement (i.e. "if by the Spirit..., you will live"), which shows responsibility and then explains: "This [conditional] connection...is not between cause and effect. Instead, it is the connection between means and end. God has appointed the means of [putting sin to death] through the Spirit to achieve the end, life. If you use this means, you will live."¹⁷ Note Paul's appeal to the person's intellect, affections, and will in this text, as well as the reality this is done in dependence upon the Christ-bought Spirit. There is hypothetical alternativity: You can do this or not, but this is why you should do it and how you should do it. Paul believes that the genuine believer is so divinely transformed, she will want to put sin to death and will do it. And so, she will live. It is a dependent responsibility. William Hendriksen adds the following about this text:

...the recipients are by no means represented as being able to act independently. Salvation is not a 50-50 affair. It is God's gift from start to finish. It is by the Spirit that God's children must put to death the disgraceful deeds of the body (verse 13), that they are being led (verse 14), and are being moved to cry, "Abba!" (verse 15). It is from the Spirit that they receive the assurance that they are indeed children of God (verse 16). But all this does not take away the fact that the recipients of these favors must go into action. They have an obligation to perform; nevertheless, cannot do this in their own power. How then? As already indicated, "by the Spirit,"¹⁸

- The action to which Paul calls regenerated and justified believers to is to "put to death the deeds of the body."¹⁹ The verse seem to emphasize that the genuinely regenerated and justified person, indwelt by the Spirit, can put to death those fleshly sinful thoughts, desires, choices, and actions that are part and parcel of living apart from Christ. Bottom-line, then, the saint can carry out that part of sanctification that has often been labeled "mortification," i.e., the putting to death of sinful desires, choices, and actions. More specifically, it has been defined as: "The habitual weakening of sin...a constant fight and contention against sin...[that] is evidenced by frequent success against sin."²⁰
- Finally, one of the reasons that most Calvinists believe it is important to defend and preserve a view of human freedom that is compatible with God's absolute sovereignty as

¹⁷ John Owen, *Sin And Temptation: The Challenge Of Personal Godliness*, James M. Houston, ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996, repr.), 152.

¹⁸ Hendriksen, *Romans*, 254.

Schreiner (ESVSB, 2170) adds: "God and believers each have a role in sanctification; it must be 'by the Spirit' and his power, but 'you put to death' shows that one must take an active role in battling sinful habits."

¹⁹ The verb translated "put to death" is *thanatoō*. The word order of the sentence highlights the contrast between living by the flesh and living by the Spirit, as well as the results of each: Death and life respectively.

²⁰ Owen, *Sin And Temptation*, 156-158.

Owen's writing on mortification is a wonderful example of soft deterministic Calvinism in its best form, and how historically this model has emphasized God's free and sovereign grace in salvation and sanctification, but also the importance of human responsibility and choice.

seen in soft deterministic Calvinism is seen here in our discussion of sanctification. Paul's thought flow seems clearly to make the point that the new life to which Christians are called is dependent upon God's causative and decisive work in them to bring about change. Moral ability, in other words, does not flow merely from self or one's will, but from divine transformation—a transformation that exceeds what indeterministic (or libertarian) freedom allows.

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (#35) rightly emphasizes the gradual and continual nature of sanctification with the words, “more and more.”²¹ This is important. On the one hand, God has ordained that he will not perfect saints until the age-to-come, and so we live in this present age with a regenerated and transformed heart as a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17), yet, not as one who is perfectly holy. This means the genuine Christian has ability both to say, “Yes,” to God and “No,” to sin, as well as “No,” to God, and “Yes,” to sin. Where the soft determinist Calvinist differs from the Molinist view is that the former does not assert the saint possesses actual alternativity with any decision such that God is dependent on and limited by those decisions. Everything that happens does so because God has foreordained all that comes to pass.

One the other hand, because the heart of the Christian has been decisively changed, he will want to follow God and will continue to grow until he dies or Jesus Christ returns (Phil. 1:6; 2:13; Jude 24). Yet, since God works through an immeasurable combination of causative and permissive governance in each person (and so each person makes different combinations of choices either to follow or resist the Spirit's sanctifying work), growth takes places in different ways and at different speeds—and in such a way that choices truly matter.²² Yet, he will be grieved because of sin and will desire holiness (cf. Mt. 5:4; Rom. 7:24; Heb. 12:14).

²¹ It reads: “Sanctification is the work...whereby we...are enabled **more and more** to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.” (emphasis added)

²² See Porter, “The Gradual Nature,” 474-75, for the reality that non-glorified Christians, though decisively transformed, still at times resist the work of the Spirit.

It is not only mortification (putting sin to death) in which the Spirit enables the Christian more and more in this age. There is also a second category of action in which the Spirit enables the Christian.

Christians Are Enabled More And More To Live Unto Righteousness

It is not merely the avoidance of that which is morally wrong that is part of the Spirit's sanctifying work. It is also the pursuit of what is right and good. In Romans 6-8 we see that the Christian can "walk in newness of life" (6:4), consider themselves "alive to God in Christ Jesus" (6:11), "present [themselves] to God...and [their] members to God as instruments for righteousness" (6:13), be assured their overall disposition now is one of obedience to God and his teaching (6:17), know they now have the disposition overall to live in submission to righteousness (6:18-19), follow the Spirit and so please God (8:4-8, 14), be certain they will be conformed to the image of the Son (8:29), rest in the reality God will give them all they need for sanctification and perseverance (8:32), and that no one or nothing can separate them from God's keeping-and-preserving love in Christ Jesus (8:38-39).

After all, God works in Christians through his transforming grace (cf. 1 Cor. 15:10; 2 Cor. 9:6-10ff.) so they desire to do what is his good pleasure (Phil. 2:13) and so they are "zealous for good works" (Titus 2:14). Another way to state this is that the Spirit produces results or "fruit" in a saint that include the following: "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23). This is so much the case that it can be said that any kind of faith that does not produce such works is a dead faith, one that does not possess genuine life (James 2:14-26). "I do believe good works are essential, but as the evidence of saving faith. Good works are not the root of our salvation, but its fruit...good works are not the cause of

salvation, but its consequence.”²³ A Latin quote made popular by Martin Luther and John Calvin is *Sola fides iustificat, sed non fides quae est sola*. In English it is: “Faith alone justifies, but not the faith that is alone.”²⁴

Over and over again, in the New Testament, because the Christian has been so decisively transformed through the work of Christ and the continual sanctifying work of his Spirit, affirms the saint can be exhorted to do what is right and have the confidence that she can carry out whatever God commands (John 10:27-30; Rom. 12:1-2f.; Eph. 4:1ff.; Phil. 2:1-4f.; 4:13, 19; Col. 1:6; 2:6-7; 3:1f.; Heb. 13:20-21).

Yet, because of this decisive work, one’s genuine faith can be discerned by looking at its fruit. Matthew 7:16, 17, 20 reads: “You will recognize them by their fruits.... So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit.... Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.” “Jesus’ point is simply that the essence of what you are on the inside will inevitably become evident on the outside. Or, to say it in different terms, who you are will eventually show in how you live.”²⁵ “Christians produce moral and spiritual fruit that bears witness to the reality of what is on the inside.”²⁶ It is this way because of the causative and decisive way God has changed the saved person. It is a change that exceeds Molinism’s contra-causal, indeterministic freedom.

Abilities And Inabilities For The Saints

²³ Storms, *Kept*, 45.

²⁴ Storms, *Kept*, 46.

²⁵ Storms, *Kept*, 45.

²⁶ Storms, *Kept*, 45.

Because there is such a possibility for misunderstanding at this point, I want to clarify what we have asserted regarding abilities and inabilities for the Christian. To put this in its full context and to give perspective, let's consider the subject of ability and inability for unbelievers and believers both.²⁷

The typical person apart from Christ has a natural ability to see their need for Christ, to trust in him, and to obey God's will. This is similar to a person who has the natural ability to walk up a flight of stairs (an example of a natural inability is that of walking up a flight of stairs for a paraplegic). Natural abilities and inabilities have to do with whether or not a person can do something or not, when the desire to do so is there. In other words, if the desire is there, the natural ability to walk up a flight of stairs means that nothing will hinder this action. At the same time, a natural inability to walk up stairs means it cannot be done, even if the desire is present.

Though the typical person apart from Christ has the natural ability to trust and obey, as we discovered in Chapter Eight, he is morally unable to do so. Moral inability is a function of a person's character, of his beliefs and values. The person apart from Christ is morally unable to trust in Christ since he is convinced Christianity is not true and/or not needed, and so will never want to do so.²⁸ The person who has been regenerated and justified has the moral ability to say, "Yes," to God and "No" to sin.²⁹

²⁷ The following discussion is dependent upon David M. Ciocchi, "Understanding Our Ability To Endure Temptation: A Theological Watershed," JETS, 35, 4 (December 1992): 463-79.

²⁸ Ciocchi, "Understanding," 465, highlights that some moral inabilities are not merely temporary or short-lived inabilities, but are "settled disinclination[s]." He calls attention to Romans 8:7-8 as an example. "Those who are 'in the flesh' are morally unable to please God; [and] this is their settled inclination. In general terms, their inability to do X guarantees their nonperformance of X."

²⁹ Ciocchi, "Understanding," 465, also highlights the difference between natural and moral ability/inability with a helpful example. If Bill cannot swim, he cannot save a drowning child, whether he wants to do so or not. This is a natural inability. If Bill can swim, but is disinclined to save a drowning child, this is a moral inability that arises from his character and antecedent movements in his heart. Bill is not held morally responsible in the former situation, but in the latter, he is.

Yet, especially in relation to the Christian, there is another helpful distinction, that of general vs. particular ability. “A general ability is a skill or competence a person possesses over an extended period of time...for instance...the general ability to swim...for many years.... A particular ability is the ability to make use of a skill or competence at a particular time and in a particular situation.”³⁰ An example to highlight the distinction will help. “Suppose Sarah has had the general ability to swim for ten years. Today, however, she is sitting by her pool with both her legs in plaster casts.... We would say that today she has the general ability to swim, but she does not have the particular ability to swim.”³¹ The same is true of the Christian. The regenerated, justified, initially-sanctified man has the general ability to refuse the temptation to take a second look at and lust after a beautiful scantily-clad woman. The more he feeds that general ability and the habit of saying, “Yes,” to God and refraining from such temptation, the more he will have the particular ability to refrain from the actual temptation that is presently before him.

What we previously learned about mortification and vivification flows out of the general ability that God has decisively and causatively brought about in the believer. Based on such ability, the believer should put to death sin and also feed the desire to do right and so have the particular ability in particular situations and with particular choices. It is a reality that whenever a Christian gives into sin: Though he has the natural ability to say, “Yes,” to God and “No,” to sin, the general moral ability to say, “Yes to God and “No,” to sin, yet, God has ordained in that particular situation to permit him, flowing out of antecedent movements in his heart, to say, “No,” to God and “Yes,” to sin and so he did not have the particular ability at that time.

³⁰ Ciocchi, “Understanding,” 465.

³¹ Ciocchi, Understanding,” 465.

One of the places in Scripture where we see God’s sovereignty and human choice both coming together and impacting ability and outcomes is in 1 Corinthians 10:13, where we read: “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” Here we discover several pertinent points:

- When we face temptation to sin, we can be assured that none of us is facing a temptation that goes beyond what other humans have faced.
- When we face temptation to sin, we can be assured that God is sovereign over that temptation. Though God does not author sin or tempt us to sin (cf. James 1:13), nevertheless, he can limit the level of temptation so it fits with the general moral ability of the person, or he can provide grace such that the general moral ability of the person matches the temptation. Part of the way he does this is to provide a way of escape so the person can endure the temptation and not give into it. Here Paul may be thinking of other believers who come along to pray with, for, to exhort, and to encourage us (Heb. 3:12-14; 10:24-25; James 5:19-20), or he may be thinking of the Spirit bringing to our memory biblical promises that help us escape (e.g. 1 Cor. 10:13; 2 Cor. 7:1).
- What, then, Paul appears to be promising to the Christian is general moral ability in all cases of temptation. However, in line with God’s immeasurable combination of causative and permission governance in the believer, along with whether or not the believer is putting sin to death and pursuing holiness (i.e. disciplining self unto godliness and forming positive habits), and whether or not they are trusting in Christ at the time to be obedient, will determine whether or not they possess particular moral ability at the time. We can say that the presence of particular moral ability is always ultimately brought about by God’s grace and causative governance—and through the intellect, affections, and will of the person. The lack of particular moral ability is due to the person not resting in the promises of God and also due to their own sin.

The Habitual Shaping Nature Of Antecedent Choices

The picture, then, we have gained of divine sovereignty and human choice—especially as it relates to the believer—is that the overall desire and direction of the heart (there is natural and general moral ability) is to carry out God’s will, i.e. to please him, and this has come about by divine, decisive, and causative governance. What is more, through an immeasurable combination of causative and permissive divine governance, there is sometimes also particular moral ability to

please God and sometimes this particular moral ability is not present. In order to further particular moral ability, the Christian is called upon to choose to discipline himself unto godliness (1 Tim. 4:7), to have “powers of discernment trained by constant practice [, i.e. habituation,] to distinguish good from evil” (Heb. 5:14)—and all this through the means of transforming grace Christ has won for and given to the believer (Eph. 6:10-18). If this positive habituation, as well as the support and accountability that comes from other believers is not present, a person can be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (cf. Heb. 3:12-14) and can be habituated in the opposite direction (2 Peter 2:14, 19). So, though all progress is by the gospel of God’s grace and nothing happens that is not foreordained by God, nevertheless, human choices, actions, and habits are vital also in the process, for God works through the intellect, affections, and will of the person.

As the Dutch theologian and statesman, Abraham Kuyper, once wrote:

*But we should not imagine that every believer is instantly filled and permeated [by the Holy Spirit]. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit finds him filled with all manner of evil and treachery.... His method of procedure is not with divine power to **force** a man as though he were a stick or a block, but by the power of love and compassion so to influence and energize the impulses of the feeble will that it feels the effect, is inclined, and finally consents to [act like] the temple of the Holy Spirit [he is].... This operation is different in each person.³²*

No doubt, in the age to come, we will give praise to God for our justification, sanctification, perseverance, and glorification—understanding that it ultimately has all been due to his sovereign, saving, transforming, and gracious work, a work that we will see has flowed from his amazing love for us and carried out with such sweet patience and mercy (e.g. Rom. 2:4; 5:5; 2 Pt. 3:9, 15; Jude 24-25; Rev. 5:9-10). We most likely also will see how we could have progressed more quickly because of God’s grace and yet we chose not to do so. Yet, even in this, we will

³² Abraham Kuyper, *The Work Of The Holy Spirit*, trans. by Henri DeVries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 529-30, cited in Seven L. Porter, “The Gradual Nature Of Sanctification: *Sarx* As Habituated Relational Resistance To The Spirit,” *Themelios*, 39, 3 (2014): 480.

see God's continual pursuit of us—his continual forgiveness and continual sanctifying work—all that will redound to his glory!

Perseverance Of The Saints

I believe I have displayed in the previous chapter and in this chapter soft deterministic Calvinist not only is consistent with the biblical material, but also with the phenomena we see around us—namely that genuine Christians are decisively transformed, but they will grow and progress at different rates and in different ways. Yet, progress they will!

This reality leads to one of the most important outcomes of the view of divine sovereignty and human choice that we have set forth in this book. On the one hand, those who are saved are called upon to persevere (and if they do not, they will not be saved). On the other hand, if a person is truly saved, they will be preserved and so they will persevere, and they will be ultimately saved. In this we also see that the saint's salvation is dependent upon God's absolute, sovereign, free, initiating grace. God's saving and preserving work is not ultimately dependent upon or limited by human choice, though God works through such choice.

We begin by looking at the certainty of God's preservation of the saint. In Romans 8:31-39 we read:

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

*“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Here several pertinent truths are affirmed. To begin, God is for the saint, having accomplished salvation and applied it to him, and so no one can offer opposition in any way that changes this. “The thought here is that *no opposition can finally crush us*. To convey this thought, Paul sets before us the adequacy of God as our *sovereign protector*, and the decisiveness of his *covenant commitment to us*.”³³

Next, God promises to give to the saint all that is needed to be ultimately saved, to persevere. “Whatever is necessary for you to make it to the end of life still faithful and trusting Christ, God will give you.... Paul means everything essential to knowing, loving, and enjoying God more.... God will not withhold anything essential for your eternal enjoyment of him.”³⁴ “The thought expressed...is that *no good thing will be finally withheld from us*. [Paul] conveys this thought by pointing to the adequacy of God as our *sovereign benefactor* and to the decisiveness of his *redeeming work for us*.”³⁵

Additionally, no one can bring a legitimate charge against God’s elect, since God is the one who has justified the person. “The thought expressed...is that *no accusation can ever disinherit us*. [Paul] conveys this thought by point to the adequacy of God as our *sovereign champion* and to the decisiveness of his *justifying verdict upon us*.”³⁶

³³ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993, repr.), 260.

Previously we have seen how that salvation is cast in covenant terminology—especially as we now live under the New Covenant, namely, God’s greater commitment through the Spirit to transform the Christian from the inside out that he might carry out God’s will (cf. Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:25-27) and so that he will never turn away from following God (Jer. 32:40).

³⁴ Storms, *Kept*, 69.

³⁵ Packer, *Knowing*, 264.

³⁶ Packer, *Knowing*, 271-72.

What is more, Jesus Christ is continually interceding for the saved person and applying his work. J. I. Packer writes of this ministry of Jesus: “Now, by virtue of [Christ’s] enthroned presence at the Father’s right hand, he intercedes with authority for us—that is, he intervenes in our interest to ensure that we receive all that he died to procure for us.... [His] constant concern in heaven is that we should enjoy the full fruits of his redemption....”³⁷

Finally, nothing or no one can separate the saint from the love God has for him that is received and experienced because the person is in union with Christ—with Christ’s life, death, and resurrection continually applied. “The climactic thought...is that *no separation from Christ’s love can ever befall us*. [Paul] conveys this by setting before us God, the Father and the Son, as our *sovereign keeper*, and by making plain the decisiveness of *divine love* in settling our destiny.”³⁸ “All creatures are excluded as a threat to loss of salvation,”³⁹ because, “our security is ultimately dependent on God’s character and commitment, not on ours.”⁴⁰

This security is not only found in Romans 8. In John 10:27-30 Jesus asserted:

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one.”

“Is your will more powerful than his? Look again at Jesus’ words: ‘No one’ is all inclusive.”⁴¹ The point is not that the Christian, though she might come to the place that she

³⁷ Packer, *Knowing*, 273.

³⁸ Packer, *Knowing*, 274.

³⁹ Storms, *Kept*, 23.

⁴⁰ Storms, *Kept*, 24.

⁴¹ Storms, *Kept*, 23.

would want to turn away from Christ, could not. The point is that God so works in her heart that she will not want to turn away (see John 3:1-8). In this present age there will be many times she falls short. Nevertheless, God will continue to work in her causatively and decisively such that she has the general moral ability (and often the particular moral ability) to trust in and follow the Savior. She will be grieved and turn to the Lord when she falls short and sins (Mt. 5:4; James 4:8-10; 1 Peter 2:4a; 1 John 1:9).

Elsewhere we not only read that God will continue the work he began in the Christian until it is complete (Phil. 1:6); that he is able to “keep [the Christian] from stumbling and to present [him] blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy” (Jude 24); that the Christian has an “inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for [him], who by God’s power [is] being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:4-5); and that Christ “will never blot his name out of the book of life” (Rev. 3:5),⁴² but also the Christian is called upon to persevere or else he will not be saved. Consider the following examples:

- “Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake.¹⁰ And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another.¹¹ And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray.¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold.¹³ ***But the one who endures to the end will be saved.***” (Mt. 24:9-13, emphasis added)⁴³
- “Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, ***provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.*** (Rom. 11:22, emphasis added)

⁴² G. K. Beale, with David H. Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 81, write: “The promise...contains no inference that the names of the genuinely saved might for some reason be erased, but is rather an assurance that they will not.”

⁴³ We should note that some professing believers do not endure to the end and, as such, demonstrate their faith was not genuine saving faith in the first place. Consider 1 John 2:19: “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.”

- “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand,² and by which you are being saved, *if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.* (1 Cor. 15:1-2, emphasis added)
- “And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him,²³ *if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.*” (Col. 1:21-23, emphasis added)
- “For if we go on *sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,*²⁷ but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.²⁸ Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses.²⁹ *How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?*³⁰ For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.”³¹ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Heb. 10:26-31, emphasis added)
- “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness *without which no one will see the Lord.*” (Heb. 12:14, emphasis added)
- “My brothers, *if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back,*²⁰ let him know that *whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death* and will cover a multitude of sins.” (James 5:19-20, emphasis added)⁴⁴

These passages display that ultimate salvation is conditional upon perseverance. Yet, in the previous passages we discovered that perseverance certainly takes place in those who are truly saved. Bringing together both sides of this coin works since God has done a work in the true

⁴⁴ As James 5:19-20 suggests, there is a community aspect to the perseverance of the saints. In other words, within the dependent responsibility to which saints are called for themselves lies also the call to help each other persevere. Consider 2 Tim. 2:10: “Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.” Consider especially Hebrews 3:12-14: “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.¹⁴ For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.” The scriptural testimony is clear that our own choices and actions matter and our choices and actions matter toward each other (so we must persevere). And, at the same time, this perseverance takes place in complete dependence upon God’s sovereign, free, saving, and transforming grace (we will persevere).

saint to transform him and so to enable him to respond to the warnings (cf. Jer. 31:31-34; 32:39-40; Ezek. 36:25-27). What is more, the warning passages appear to be part of the means God uses to preserve the person. What we see is that God is giving real exhortations, but is also able to work in the genuine saint to carry out the outcome of the exhortations he gives and this is how saints are able to persevere. On the one hand, then, this perseverance is genuine perseverance on the part of the saint and on the other hand it ultimately is God's work in them.

Two passages out of the epistles of Peter give clarity to the fact that a call to persevere and the certainty of perseverance for the saint are compatible, and also that the very call to persevere itself is used by God to preserve the person.

To begin, in 2 Peter 1:3-4 Peter writes that God has given to the saint all he needs to live a godly and Christ-like life: "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, ⁴ by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire." It is "for this reason" (2 Pt. 1:5a) that all the ethical injunctions of verses 5b-9:

...make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. ⁸ For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins.

Once Peter finishes these ethical injunctions, he concludes (2 Pt. 1:10-11): "Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. ¹¹ For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." This entire passage (1:3-11)

begins and ends with very strong affirmation of God's saving and transforming grace undergirding the Christian's ethical life (see vv. 3-4, the mention of "your calling and election" in v. 10, and also the future passive, "will be...provided" in v. 11). Yet, it is also emphasized that by living out the entailments of the gospel (5b-9) the Christian confirms that he has truly been effectively called to Christ and has been chosen by God. Finally, it also seems that what Peter is doing is motivating believers to persevere with the implied warning they will not be ultimately saved and will ultimately show they have not been elected and called, if they do not. The logic of the passage seems to be that the warning is used by God to preserve the Christian.

Yet, in the second Petrine passage we see with even greater clarity God's gracious work in the Christian to enable him to persevere. In 1 Peter 1:3-5 the apostle praises God for his gracious work in Christians who are facing very difficult trials (cf. 1:6-9), a gracious work that has assured them they will someday obtain their inheritance in spite of the current challenges. In these verses Peter writes:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

The crucial clause for the current discussion is this: "who by God's power are being guarded through faith...." The "who" hearkens back to "you" (v. 4), i.e. the ones who have the certain heavenly inheritance because God has caused them to be born again to a living hope (v. 3), those who are "elect exiles," sanctified by the Spirit, and to whom the saving death (the blood) of Christ has been applied (vv. 1-2). Of these genuine Christians Peter affirms that by the power of God they are continually being guarded. The verb translated "guarded" (here it is a progressive present passive participle) is used in 2 Cor. 11:32 to speak of the guarding of Damascus in order to prevent Paul's escape. God's power is the instrument by which the Christian is guarded so that

he does not stray away from and escape salvation. The means that God uses to guard the Christian is his faith: “through faith” (the preposition *dia* + the ablative of means of *pistis*).

What Peter means by this is that God works in the saint so that he continually trusts in God and the promises of God and so he does not ultimately give up in the face of trials, but will keep turning to God in trust and for help (cf. Jer. 32:40). Part of the implication is that in the face of calls to persevere, the saint will not only see the need to persevere, but will have the desire to persevere, and will be able to persevere because of God’s working in him that has led to antecedent movements in the heart such that he mostly responds positively to the warnings (though not perfectly). This is part of what Paul evidently means in Rom. 16:25, where he speaks of being strengthened by the gospel. The Christian has confidence to go on because God has causatively and decisively transformed him in Christ so he can say, “Yes,” to God and “No” to unbelief and sin. Yet, he also knows that when he does fall and sin, he can get right back up, brush himself off, and move forward because the blood of Jesus Christ continually cleanses him from his sin (1 Jn. 1:7).

A. B. Caneday addresses the specific question, “Why does John in 1 John include admonition or exhortation [to persevere and not continue in sin] if genuine believers do have life and will persevere?”⁴⁵ His answer is twofold and also gives clarity to all the passages we have discussed in regard to perseverance. To begin, Caneday (“Persevering,” 48-49) clarifies that some readers were imposters. In other words, they were not genuine believers (and this has been true from the start [cf. 2:18-29]) and so for that reason needed to hear the admonitions. Yet, there are also

⁴⁵ A. B. Caneday, “Persevering In Christ And Tests Of Eternal Life,” *Southern Baptist Journal Of Theology*, 10, 3 (Fall 2006): 40-56.

genuine believers who need to hear the admonitions. How does this work and why is this the case? Here I quote him at length:

How, then, are the apostle's appeals in 1 John for us 'to persevere in Christ' compatible with his belief that believers 'do persevere in Christ' and will not perish?

Fellowship with the Father and with the Son is not mechanistic. It is a relationship of vitality and reciprocity....

*Because our relationship is **living and organic, not mechanical**, God sustains our abiding in him with appeals from the same gospel through which our fellowship with God first began (1:3-5)....*

The apostle makes his appeals to us not because he lacks confidence that God's children will remain in him but because God preserves us as his children through such admonitions. Herein is the reciprocity of our vital union with God in Christ Jesus.... Vigilance is essential. Enduring remembrance of the gospel, the Word of life, is necessary to sustain our vital union with the Son and with the Father....

True as it is that without persevering in him, at his coming, Christ will banish us in shame to eternal perdition, we must not attribute more to our perseverance in him than John's admonition allows. Let no one suppose that our persevering in Christ establishes our union with him. Our union with the Son and with the Father is one of reciprocity, but priority and causality is not ours. These belong to God who is the source of life and light....

*When John exhorts us who are abiding in Christ Jesus to continue to abide in him, his purpose is not to question whether we are abiding in him. Rather, he exhorts us because our union with Christ **is not mechanical but living and reciprocal**.⁴⁶ (emphasis added)*

What Caneday writes and what I have argued about perseverance fits with the soft deterministic Calvinism we have set forth in this book that sees human freedom as compatible with God's absolute sovereignty exercised through his meticulous providence. It does not fit with Molinism's commitment to libertarian (contra-causal) freedom.

Conclusion

What we have uncovered in this chapter about the Christian's sanctification and perseverance has a threefold importance. To begin, it forms the sixth of seven truths that demonstrate Calvinism is more consistent with Scripture than is Molinism. In light of the extensive biblical

⁴⁶ Caneday, "Persevering:" 49-50.

material we have examined, it seems that Molinism (regardless of its attempt to be biblical and to retain a high view of God's providence) falls short.

Additionally, what we have seen is that biblical ethics, especially as seen in the New Covenant, is such that one of the major ways a Christian makes progress in the life of following Jesus Christ is to come back to and apply the gospel to her life. This not only calls the saint to rest in Christ's saving death and forgiveness when she sins, but also to find confidence for trust and obedience from the causative and decisive transformation that has resulted in the moral ability to say, "Yes," to God and "No" to sin. This is the Christian's identity and hope. It is at the very least diluted with any model that affirms that our ethical choices must ultimately derive from our own will in a contra-causal or indeterministic manner.

In fact, I would go so far as to say that one of the reasons so many Christians today do not see the gospel as applicable to them and therefore miss out on one of the most powerful resources for growth is that so many think our ethical decisions must arise from our own hearts and not as a result of God's transformation. Jerry Bridges helpfully highlights the danger of this shortcoming:

Evangelicals commonly think today that the gospel is only for unbelievers. Once we're inside the kingdom's door, we need the gospel only in order to share it with those who are still outside. Now, as believers, we need to hear the message of discipleship. We need to learn how to live the Christian life and be challenged to go do it. That's what I believed and practiced in my life and ministry for some time. It is what most Christians seem to believe. As I see it, the Christian community is largely a performance-based culture today. And the more deeply committed we are to following Jesus, the more deeply ingrained the performance mindset is. We think we earn God's blessing or forfeit it by how well we live the Christian life.⁴⁷

Finally, the Christian's hope for perseverance is rooted and grounded in the causative and decisive work of God in her. And, yet, at the same time, there is a need for discipline,

⁴⁷ Jerry Bridges, "Gospel-Driven Sanctification," *Modern Reformation*, 12, 3 (May/June). Accessed on-line at modernreformation.org.

habituation, community, and utilization of the means of God's transforming grace. Soft deterministic Calvinism provides the best and most biblically-consistent model for how God's work is decisive and, at the same time, he works through the intellect, affections, and will of the person and so her choices and actions truly do matter.

In this and the previous two chapters, we have discovered what constitutes human freedom and how genuinely free human choices are compatible with God's absolute sovereignty, exercised through meticulous providence. We have seen that God can causatively and decisively govern a person such that they come to know Jesus Christ as Savior and grow in Christ. The pattern we have established, namely that choices can still be free, even if caused, and even if alternativity is absent, finds its culmination in the next chapter, the seventh truth that favors Calvinism over Molinism. In fact, it is the "nail in the coffin" of the Molinist model.