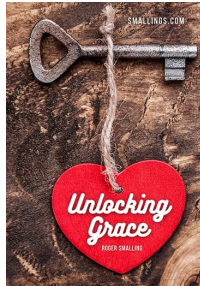


Unlocking Grace

A study guide in the doctrines of grace
by

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Kindle



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All verses are quotes from the English Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

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Preface

Have you ever wondered why God did not define “grace” right at the beginning of the Bible? Since we are saved by grace, it would seem efficient to define it right away. He could have inspired a prophet to write a dictionary definition starting with something like, “Grace *is defined as...etc.*” This would be to the point, just as we moderns like it.

That is not what we find, is it?

Instead, we encounter a series of stories about imperfect people whom God favored for little apparent reason. This helps moderately, but it still remains ambiguous.

Next, we encounter a series of negations. Grace is not the product of merits. Grace is not deserved. Grace is divine and not human, and so forth. We find our definition search improving, but nailing it down seems like grabbing smoke.

Then we notice how Bible writers connect grace with certain teachings they claim are important. These doctrines quickly begin to unlock the definition, and our understanding improves.

When we encounter the cross, though, all the previous material takes on substance. The fog lifts, and the reason for the delay becomes evident.

God could have given us a short definition, but it would be pitifully shallow. The longer route turns out to be deeper and infinitely more satisfying. A brief definition would save us time, but time seems a low-priority item with him. Other matters, such as a job done thoroughly, appear more important to the Father, especially when it has to do with blessing his people.

Grace itself would never short-change us with paltry definitions. So God goes about defining grace in the only way that could do it justice. Grace is altogether too glorious to do it any other way. Why? Grace reflects an essential element of God’s character. Each member of the Trinity contributes in his own awesome style. Looking at it like that, it seems amazing the Lord managed to define it at all, since grace is involved with defining himself.

Yet once we grasp it, we say, Oh! How remarkably **simple**! Then we do a double-take and say, But how incredibly **profound**! Children can understand this gospel while theologians drown in its depths.

After all, that’s typical of God’s style, isn’t it? Did we expect anything else?

So the study of grace turns out to be an involved journey, with unexpected twists. The trip is long but not boring and truly exhilarating. One of these twists is that while we are defining grace, we find *ourselves* defined more clearly...like it or not. There is plenty of glorious scenery on the way, though, and different people delight in contemplating various views of the route.

Some revel in the authority of a sovereign will. Others savor the security of an eternal covenant. Still others are enthralled at the power of the cross. Personally, the part of the trip I enjoy the most is that it lasts forever.

Enjoy the journey.

Introduction

The Protestant Reformation caused a rediscovery of the Bible, and with it, the revolutionary doctrines it contains. Several of these doctrines conflicted with the teachings of the time because each affirmed that salvation is by grace alone, with no contribution by man. Consequently, these doctrines are known today among Christians as the *doctrines of grace*.

The controversy continues. These biblical teachings are so destructive to man's pride that human emotion rebels against them. Sinful human nature imagines itself to be captain of its fate, fully able to contribute to its own salvation.

Roger Smalling did this study of the doctrines of grace originally in Spanish. For easier memorization, these key biblical doctrines were in the form of an acronym. That is, each letter of the words, SI, JESUS (Yes, Jesus) represents one of the doctrines of grace. For the purposes of this English version, the author has chosen to maintain this form to preserve the acronym and simplify the study of these truths.

The Acronym

Sovereignty of God

S The word "sovereign" means to control everything. This doctrine teaches that God controls everything that happens, and that all reality is a consequence of divine decrees established from eternity, before the creation of the world.

Inability of man

I When Adam fell, mankind lost all ability to contribute to salvation. Sin infects every aspect of the individual and enslaves him. This doctrine also deals with the question of free will, showing that a sinner is incapable of choosing Christ, or producing saving faith, apart from a miracle of grace. "Total Inability" or "Total Depravity" are other terms frequently used to describe this teaching.

Justification by faith alone

J God requires nothing less than absolute righteousness, as described in his moral law. How then is it possible to be righteous before God, knowing that we cannot keep the law perfectly? Christ fulfilled the law's demands as our substitute, both in his life and in his death. When we accept Christ, God not only forgives our sins, but also attributes to us the perfect righteousness of Christ. Thus, we have an imputed perfection relative to God's holy demands, and this forms the basis of our permanent acceptance before God.

Election by grace

E Before the foundation of the world, God chose certain individuals as recipients of his marvelous grace. He did this apart from any foreseen conditions in us. God's choice was not because he saw ahead of time that the person would choose Christ. No one could do that anyway since all were dead in sin. Though election has no basis in human merits, it is not arbitrary. This doctrine presents grace as a product of God's sovereign decree in eternity, and not as a response to something man thinks or does.

Sacrifice of Christ

S The sacrifice of Jesus is the only cause of the salvation of the elect. The crucifixion made salvation much more than a mere possibility. It *accomplished* salvation for all the elect. Although Christ's sacrifice is sufficient to save everyone, God the Father designed it for his elect only. The cross is the power-source that guarantees that God's chosen ones will believe and be obedient. This doctrine is also called *limited atonement*, and sometimes *particular redemption*.

Unity and universality of the church

U The Church of Christ is essentially an invisible organism, rather than a visible organization. It is composed of all the elect of God throughout the ages. Christians have a spiritual unity among themselves, whether or not they are unified organizationally. This unity is therefore spiritual and invisible, not terrestrial and visible. It is universal in the sense that the spirituality of the body of Christ and the communion the elect have with one another transcend all limits of culture and time.

Security of the believer

S The same grace that saved us preserves us to the end. Through exhortations, warnings, and fatherly rebukes, God preserves his elect so that none will be lost.

Questions for Review

1. The doctrines of grace lead us to the conclusion that salvation is solely by _____, without any human contribution.
2. The Reformation doctrines are known today as _____.
3. True _____ or False _____: The doctrines of grace are no longer controversial today.
4. Sinful human nature wants to be _____ of its own _____.
5. True _____ or False _____: Man is capable of contributing to his own salvation.

Sovereignty of God

6. What does "sovereign" mean? _____
7. True _____ or false _____: Reality is a consequence of the divine decrees.
8. When did God decide all things? _____

Inability of man / Total depravity

9. Which parts of the human individual were affected by sin? _____
10. This doctrine teaches that a sinner's will is incapable of coming to Christ for _____.
11. True _____ or False _____: Saving faith comes from our own free will.
12. Where does saving faith come from? _____
13. Our inability to contribute to our salvation came about through the fall of _____.

Justification by faith alone

14. True _____ or False _____: The righteousness of the law has nothing to do with the Christian.
15. God only accepts the _____ of Christ.
16. Can we fulfill the law for ourselves? _____
17. Who fulfilled the law for us? _____
18. When we accept Christ, God grants to us the perfect _____ of Christ.

Election by grace

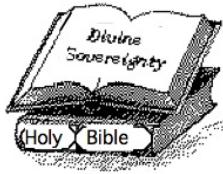
19. Justification means _____.
20. True _____ or False _____ God chose everyone to be a recipient of his grace.
21. True _____ or False _____ No one can choose Christ under his own power.
22. Before we knew Christ, we were _____ in sin.

Sacrifice of Christ (Limited Atonement)

23. What makes salvation effective for the elect? _____.
24. The death of Christ not only made salvation a _____, it _____ it.
25. True _____ or False _____ The cross was insufficient to save everyone.

Answers: 1. Grace 2. The doctrines of grace 3. F 4. Master, fate 5. F 6. Controlling everything 7. T 8. Before the creation of the world 9. All of them 10. Salvation 11. F 12. God 13. Adam 14. F 15. Righteousness of Christ 16. no 17. Christ 18. Attributed, righteousness 19. Declared just 20. F 21. T 22. Dead 23. The cross 24. Possibility, accomplished 25. F

Chapter One: Sovereignty of God



The sovereignty of God is the only legitimate basis for a solid faith. Although someone might claim to have faith without believing in God's sovereignty, a close examination exposes a trust based on human ability. Divine sovereignty is so crucial to biblical Christianity that without it, our faith is scarcely worthy of the name Christian. But the pervasive influence of humanism in modern society has deeply affected every domain of thinking, from the political to the religious. Even among conservative Christians, the sovereignty of God is frequently neglected in the pulpit. This is unfortunate, because it is the only possible foundation for a stable Christian walk. Everything else crumbles under the pressures of life.

This doctrine contends that all reality is a product of divine decrees established before the creation of the world. It claims that God is in control of everything that happens, good or bad. This does not mean, however, that God causes evil or is the author of sin. Nor does he rejoice in the sufferings of his creation. It indicates that everything forms part of a great plan that will inevitably result in his glory.

Why do we say it is the only valid foundation for the believer's faith?

First, only a sovereign God can guarantee his promises. Only if he controls everything can we trust him for salvation. Otherwise, something he does not govern might prevent him from saving us. Is it logical to trust in a God who does not control everything?

Second, if God were not sovereign, it would be impossible to derive spiritual lessons from the events of our lives. We could never know if God is teaching us something or if the episodes of life are mere happenstance. Trusting God would be little better than trusting to luck.

Third, the sovereignty of God is the only basis on which to give him glory. Unless he is responsible for the entire work of salvation in our lives, why give him all the glory?

Fourth, this is the only basis for prayer. Why pray to a God who is not sovereign? Unless he controls everything, then perhaps he cannot answer us, either.

The very idea of sovereignty implies unlimited control and authority. It is impossible for God to be a little bit sovereign or even mostly sovereign. Thus, it is illogical to contend, God is sovereign, *but* ... If we add the word "but," we confess we do not really believe God to be sovereign. Such affirmations are like proposing that God is somewhat infinite or almost all-powerful. Any effort to qualify God's sovereignty is a tacit denial of it.

How we know God is sovereign

Four foundational biblical ideas establish the sovereignty of God. These follow in logical order:

- The divine attributes of omniscience and omnipotence.
- The immutable will of God. (This means *unchangeable*.)

- Reality as a product of God’s will.
- God owns everything.

First Foundation: His attributes

The Bible teaches God’s omniscience, meaning that he knows everything. *Known to God from eternity are all his works. Acts 15:18*

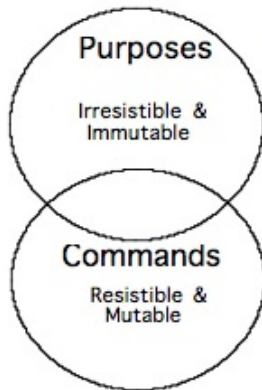
"Omnipotent" means that God is almighty. *For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. Revelation 19:6*

Denial of the sovereignty of God implies a denial of one or both attributes. Example: Suppose something happens that God did not ordain. It could only be for one of two reasons: either he did not know it was going to happen, or he lacked the power to prevent it.

In the first case, he would not be all-knowing. In the second, he would not be all-powerful. The existence of these two attributes makes it impossible for anything to happen without divine permission.

Second Foundation: Immutability

The word "immutable" means never changing. It also carries the idea of irresistible. This term is found in Hebrews 6:17-19. To better understand it, it helps to distinguish between two aspects of the divine will. These are his will of command versus his will of purpose.



God expressed his will of commands as moral edicts, such as the Ten Commandments. God allows people to transgress these laws, and man sins in doing so. But when God decrees that he will fulfill a certain purpose, he allows no one to invalidate or hinder it.

Example: Suppose God said, “Do you see that tree? I command that no one should cut it down.” This would be a divine injunction, the expression of his will of commands. Would God permit someone to cut the tree down? Yes, because God allows his commands to be broken.

Suppose, though, God said, “My sovereign purpose is that this tree never be cut down.” Would God allow someone to cut it down? No power on earth, human or demonic, could cut down that tree. God would prevent it.

Were it not for his will of commands, man would not be allowed to sin. And without his will of purpose, we would lack the confidence that God could fulfill his promises.

Theological disaster results from ignoring the difference between these two aspects of God’s will.

So, his will of command can be resisted. God himself may choose to change his commands. Not only does he allow his commands to be broken, but he may even annul them. The Old Testament ceremonial laws, for example, are no longer binding.

Not so with immutable decrees. These never change, and no one stops him from accomplishing them. This idea is sometimes expressed in Scripture as his *counsels*.

My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose. Isaiah 46:10

Other times, the word "purpose" expresses the same thought.

So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath. Hebrews 6:17

... according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will. Ephesians 1:11

For the Lord of Hosts has purposed, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back? Isaiah 14:27

Some texts may not use these terms, but the idea comes across unmistakably.

...and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?" Daniel 4:35

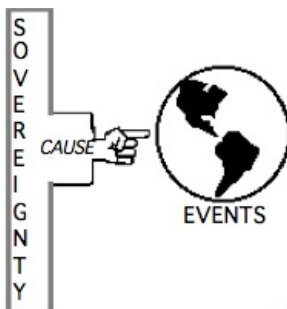
Through the concept of immutability, we see more clearly what is meant by the phrase *sovereignty of God*. We have more than solid grounds for trusting him.

Third Foundation: Reality is a product of God's will

For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm. Psalm 33:9

This answers the question, "Where does reality come from?"

According to the Bible, all reality is a product of the divine decrees, established before the foundation of the world.



By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. Hebrews 11:3

This verse can be translated as, *By faith we understand **that the epochs of time** were established.*

- The events of history, good or bad, have taken place by the will of God.

This includes the most important as well as the most insignificant events.

Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created. Revelation 4:11

This affirmation is clear. All things owe their existence to God.

Occasionally we read in the Gospels, ...*this happened that the word might be fulfilled...* This phrase says more than that the prophet simply predicted the event. It says that the event took place to fulfill the decrees of Scripture. Normally, people involved in fulfilling these prophecies were unaware they were fulfilling anything.

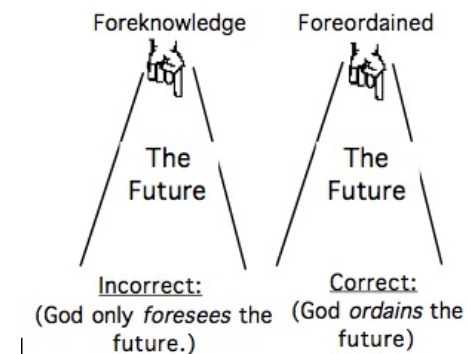
In this we see the bottom-line principle behind the sovereignty of God: **Reality is a product of the will of God.**

A prophecy is simply a declaration of that will. Reality obeys what God has commanded.

Prophecy, therefore, is more than divine foresight. It is a declaration of infallible divine intent. Here are several examples:

In Matthew 21:1-4, Jesus told his disciples to look for a certain donkey in a village. Surely the owner was unaware of Zechariah's prophecy concerning Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The entire incident illustrates the sovereignty of God in the sense that the prophecy was more than divine foresight. It was a divine arrangement.

When the crowd came to capture Jesus in Gethsemane, he said this occurred to fulfill the Scriptures.¹ In the texts that describe the arrest and crucifixion, it's obvious that everything takes place according to a divine plan.



The Roman soldiers divided Christ's garments to fulfill *what was written by the prophet*. These pagans were unaware they were fulfilling Scripture.

How does God know the future with certainty? Some suppose that God has a mental capacity, like a supreme fortune-teller, allowing him to peer into the future, as though he had a telescope through which to look down the corridor of time and examine coming events. Some teachers even assert that God forms his plans based on this

discernment. This idea is called the concept of *foreknowledge*.

Many Christians believe this idea today. Yes, the word "foreknowledge" appears in Scripture. However, to interpret it strictly in terms of a passive divine observation is a defective approach. After all, who created time? Did God create it? Or is time something God discovered by chance in the course of eternity?

If God created everything, then he also created time. And if he created time, he also ordained the events that occur in it. If we deny this, we are affirming that God created the universe without purpose or without full comprehension of what he was creating.

The only sensible option left is the scriptural teaching about sovereign decrees. The foreknowledge of God is simply his own understanding of his purposes, which no power in the universe can change.

Fourth foundation: God owns everything

During a Bible study, a woman asked, “Who owns the earth, God or Satan? With all the wickedness going on, it looks like Satan!” What does Scripture teach?

Exodus 9:29 ...so that you may know that the earth is the Lord's.

Exodus 19:5 ...for all the whole earth is mine.

Deuteronomy 10:14 Behold, to the LORD your God belong the heaven and the highest heavens, the earth with all that is in it.

Job 41:11 Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine.

1 Chronicles 29:11 Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all.

Psalms 89:11 The heavens are yours; the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it, you have founded them. and yours also the earth; you founded the world and all that is in it.

Some imagine that when Adam fell into sin, God lost control of the earth. Note that all the above verses are post-fall and present tense. With Adam's fall, God lost nothing. The only loser was Adam.

Let's delve into some specific categories of reality that God controls.

God is sovereign

Over nature

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. Matthew 10:29

According to Jesus, the Father controls the lives of animals. Not even the most insignificant bird can die without God's permission. The same is true for us. We are worth much more than the birds and cannot die until our Father allows it.

God brought quail to the Israelites. He closed the lions' mouths in the presence of Daniel. He placed a coin in the mouth of a fish that Peter would catch. He used frogs, lice, and flies as judgment on Egypt. He sent grasshoppers against Israel, brought the animals to Noah's ark, and fed Elisha by means of ravens.

God also manifests his sovereignty through use of the inanimate. He controlled the flood and sent darkness, hail, and fire upon the Egyptians. Christ rebuked and calmed the storm. God caused the sun to stand still at the command of Joshua. Not even a fly can buzz without divine permission.

Over human governments and the human race

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place (Acts 17:26).

The first thing Paul preached to the Athenian pagans was the sovereignty of God. He realized that this truth is central to a proper understanding of the gospel.

The book of Daniel is a complete study of God's sovereignty in human government. God taught King Nebuchadnezzar a difficult lesson about who establishes kings on the earth (Daniel 4:17). After having received divine punishment for his pride, the king recognized this with the words,

...all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?" Daniel 4:35

Over the human will

Can God overrule the limits of the human will? Does God's sovereignty extend even to man's will and thoughts? Scripture provides an answer.

The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will. Proverbs 21:1

... for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled. Revelation 17:17

If it is easy for God to alter the course of a river, then it would not be difficult to change the heart of a king. So if he can change even a king's heart, how much more the hearts of ordinary people?

God gave Israel favor in the sight of the Egyptian people and then hardened Pharaoh's heart to show his power.

And the Lord had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. Thus they plundered the Egyptians. Exodus 12:36

And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, so that he will pursue them... Exodus 14:4

Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand. Proverbs 19:21

True, man has a will. But it is not *sovereign*. Some have preached as though the will of man were a holy ground on which God himself cannot tread. The only inviolable will in the universe is God's.

Over evil

God never compels anyone to sin. Though he is sovereign, he cannot be accused of being the author of sin. Man sins because he has a sinful nature, not because God compels him.

Nevertheless, no one can sin unless God permits it. The Bible reveals that even the circumstances surrounding sinful acts are under God's sovereign control. He has the power to prevent or to allow man to sin. It is just as offensive to declare that God cannot prevent man from sinning as to declare that God causes sin.

How can God limit sin and control its circumstances without being guilty of causing it?

When a rat is placed in a cage, it usually runs around the inside walls. Rarely will it just sit in the middle of the cage, because its natural environment is normally closed-in areas such as tunnels or other enclosed spaces. Rats feel more comfortable pressing against something. If we want to see a rat running in circles, we simply place it in a round cage. Its movements are predictable without any violation of its nature.

The same happens with man. God controls his sinful actions by simply arranging the circumstances surrounding the act. Through his intimate knowledge of the nature and character of those involved, God remains in control of everything, yet is not responsible for the sin committed. He obliges no one to sin, though he may indeed arrange the circumstances that allow people to express what is already in their heart.

The outstanding example of this is the arrest and crucifixion of Christ.

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes"? Matthew 21:42

Paradoxically the rejection of Christ by the Jews was something that Matthew attributed to God. Not only did he know about it ahead of time, but *this was the Lord's doing*,... Nevertheless, the Jewish leaders acted according to their own desires, without compulsion. God's will of command told them not to harm his prophets. God's will of purpose decreed that this was exactly what needed to take place to fulfill his higher purposes in redemption.

...for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the

peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. Acts 4:27-28

The sovereignty of God and man's freedom run together through Scripture like two train rails. They complement each other. The Bible writers never considered this a contradiction. They affirmed the two, as shown in the preceding text, without the slightest reservation.

Motivated by selfishness and hatred, Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. Obedience to God was farthest from their minds. Notwithstanding, the Scriptures describe this treachery as a divine act.

So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Genesis 45:8

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. Genesis 50:20

As part of the divine judgment upon David for his sin with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, God declares that other men *will lie with the wives of David* before all Israel. The way this decree is expressed is very revealing:

Thus says the LORD, 'Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. (12) For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun.'" 2 Samuel 12:11, 12

When David's son Absalom temporarily ruled, he committed incest with his father's wives. Though it seems odd to assert it, this happened as God's judgment on David. God himself raised up Absalom as a rebel against David and decreed this would take place. Nonetheless, Absalom alone was guilty of the sins of rebellion and incest, although God decreed these acts as judgments.

How could God decree this and remain holy? The Lord simply provided Absalom the opportunity to express what was already in his perverse heart.

Doctrines of this type are like raw meat for some people—hard to swallow. But they are the clear teachings of the word of God. If God is sovereign over all, then he is also sovereign over evil. Otherwise, we cannot call him sovereign.

Other scriptural examples of the sovereignty of God over evil are: King Saul killed himself by falling on his own sword, according to 1 Chronicles 10:4. Yet in Chapter 5, verse 14, we note it was God who killed him.

The apostle Paul teaches that the unbelief of the Jews forms part of the divine plan to include Gentiles in the covenant of grace (Romans 11:7-11).

When David fled from Jerusalem, Shimei cursed him. This was wicked on Shimei's part. Nonetheless, David recognized that Shimei did what the Lord had decreed.

Leave him alone, and let him curse; for the Lord has told him to. 2 Samuel 16:11

Even evil spirits are under God's control. God sent an evil spirit to speak through the false prophets during Ahab's reign.

Now therefore behold, the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the LORD has declared disaster for you. 1 Kings 22:23

The deceptions that afflict men sometimes come from God as judgments for rejecting the truth. The sovereign Lord himself chooses the kind of deception suffered.

Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false (12), in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. 2 Thessalonians 2:11

The Scriptures attribute to the Lord the stubbornness of Eli's sons in spurning their father's reproaches. God allowed them to express their wickedness as judgment against Eli for his fatherly negligence and poor example as a priest.

But they would not listen to the voice of their father, for it was the will of the LORD to put them to death. 1 Samuel 2:25

Sickness came into the world because of sin. *Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Exodus 4:11*

A hurricane destroys a town. A landslide buries a village. *Does disaster come to a city unless the Lord has done it? Amos 3:6*

Although Satan is an active agent of evil, divine permission limits his activities. Like a tethered dog, he has freedom only as long as the length of the leash. We know who holds the other end of the leash.

A comforting tension

We find ourselves in a philosophical tension between the sovereignty of God and human responsibility. This tension may feel uncomfortable. How can we arrive at a comfortable position?

The answer is that we cannot escape the discomfort entirely. Paradoxically, God wants us to experience comfort in the midst of an uncomfortable tension. He considers this tension healthy for us. God's sovereign power on one side and man's responsibility on the other are two truths neither of which we can abandon.

As the late Dr. Francis Schaeffer put it, "For God to be God, and for man to be man, both must be true." ²

Jesus went to the cross conscious that *the time of darkness* had arrived. Although he knew the agents of darkness had captured him, it was not into the darkness that he commended his Spirit. He accepted the cup of suffering from the hand of the Father, not as from Satan. He did not rejoice in the pain but in the greater good that would result. This is the consolation point in the tension where God wants us to live.

Questions for Review: The sovereignty of God

1. What is the only basis for a solid faith?
2. Those who do not believe in the sovereignty of God place their faith in _____ ability.
3. What is the central doctrine of the Bible?
4. What happens when one's faith is not based on the sovereignty of God?
_____.
5. The sovereignty of God means all reality is the result of the _____ established before the creation of the world.
6. Neither good nor _____ escapes the _____ of God.
7. True or False: _____ God is the author of sin.
8. Everything that happens is by the _____ of God.
9. Only a _____ God can guarantee the fulfillment of his promises.
10. True or False _____ Satan can deter God.
11. True or False _____ The events of our lives are chiefly caused by luck or happenstance.
12. True or False _____ God has decreed all that is to happen.
13. What is the only basis of giving God glory? _____
14. We give all the glory to God because he does _____ the work.
15. Is it logical to pray to a God who is not sovereign? _____
16. Why is it illogical to pray to a God who is not sovereign? _____
17. The word "sovereign" means _____.

18. Today a new gospel is being preached that focuses on _____ instead of the _____ of God.

19. True or False _____ The will of God concerning his eternal purposes can be resisted or can go unfulfilled.

The foundations for this doctrine

1. What are the four biblical foundations for the sovereignty of God?

- A. _____
- B. _____
- C. _____
- D. _____

2. The Bible teaches that God is omniscient. This means that he _____.

3. The word "omnipotent" means that God is _____.

4. Give two of God's attributes: _____ and _____.

5. Which word means unchangeable? _____

6. This word can also mean _____.

7. True or False _____ God allows men to sin.

8. When God has decreed something, he allows no one to _____ it.

9. True or False _____ God cannot go against someone's will.

10. Is God in control of the human will? _____

11. Give a Scripture verse to support your answer to question number 10. _____

12. Reality is the product of _____.

13. Human history has unfolded the way it has because of the _____ of God.

14. True or False _____ God decreed the important events of history but the insignificant ones happened by chance.

15. Certain prophecies _____ the _____ prophesied.

16. True or False _____ Although God is responsible for everything that happens, he is the author of sin.

Answers: 1 = The sovereignty of God; 2 = human 3 = The sovereignty of God; 4 = it is shipwrecked, crumbles 5= Divine decrees 6= bad; sovereignty 7= F 8= will 9= Sovereign 10= F 11= F 12= T 13= The sovereignty of God 14= all 15= no 16= Because he does not deserve all the glory 17= controlling everything 18= man, honor 19= F

Foundations of this doctrine 1= His attributes of omnipotence and omniscience; his immutable will; reality as a product of his; God is Lord of everything and therefore, he controls everything. 2. Knows everything 3. All-powerful 4. Omniscience and omnipresence 5. Immutable 6. Irresistible 7. T 8. Resist 9. False 10. Yes 11. See text 12. The divine decrees 13. The decreed will of God 14. F 15. Produce, events 16. F

Chapter Two: Inability of Man

A favorite myth of lost humanity is the assumption of the moral neutrality of man's will. The sinner imagines himself in a neutral position, equally suspended between good and evil, with the ability to choose between the two whenever it suits him.

A sinner usually presupposes the ability to repent and come to God any time he wishes. He perceives himself in total control with regard to all moral questions and the master of his own destiny. He sees himself in possession of a faculty called *free will* and defines it as an ability and right to choose whatever suits him.

All religious groups affirm a doctrine of free will by some definition. But they differ in the meaning of the word *free*. Clearly our will possesses limitations, so it is not "free" in every conceivable respect. We cannot sprout wings and fly by willing it, nor do we augment our intelligence to the level of Einstein by force of will. As we quickly discover in moral struggles, our will is sometimes our friend and sometimes a determined enemy. It is limited in some respects but not in others.

Some groups feel the will of man escaped the effects of the fall and remained morally neutral, the only faculty unaffected. Others claim the will was weakened by sin but continues to possess the ability to contribute to salvation. Then again, some affirm that sin dominates all human faculties, so the sinner is incapable of seeking salvation without a work of grace.

Our view of divine grace ultimately depends on what we assume about the abilities and limitations of the will. Consequently, it is imperative to define its abilities and limitations carefully.

We affirm the following:

1. All aspects of a human being, before the new birth, are dominated by sin and controlled by Satan.
2. The will of man, also dominated by sin, will never desire salvation nor accept Christ on its own initiative without a miracle of the grace of God.
3. The new birth is a sovereign act of God in which the sinner is entirely passive until God grants the gift of saving faith. It is not because we have faith that we are born again. We have faith because we are born again. The will is not the cause of the new birth.

The word "free" is the source of most of the confusion in this discussion because of its ambiguity. "Free" can mean "ability," "permission," or even "neutrality." It is important, therefore, to define our terms before entering such a dialogue. Some definitions are biblically valid and others not.

It is valid to affirm free will in the following senses:

1. The right to choose the good, though the *right* to do a thing does not prove the *ability* to do it.
2. The power to choose in morally neutral matters, such as what we will eat for breakfast.

3. The power to choose between certain external actions of a good or bad nature, such as whether to give to a charity or choosing to read the Bible instead of a pornographic magazine.
4. The ability to participate in certain religious practices such as church meetings, learning hymns, or praying.

It is unscriptural to affirm free will in the following senses:

1. The ability of the sinner to repent and accept Christ on his own initiative.
2. The ability to contribute anything by deed or thought that could attract the grace of God.
3. Moral neutrality.
4. The faculty of a person that ultimately governs his choices.

Importance of the doctrine

A good grasp of this doctrine puts our pride in its place. Why should we be proud about something we never accomplished? Instead, we receive a new security in our relationship with God. After all, if God could overcome the natural resistance of a sinful nature to change our obstinate heart, surely he can preserve us for his eternal kingdom, despite the resistance of our sinful flesh.

The instant the Christian realizes his will is not the grounds of his salvation, the word "grace" takes on its correct definition. The believer learns he did not convert himself, and salvation is not a cooperative work between God and man. *The Lord is my light and my salvation... Psalms 27:1*

The biblical grounds of this teaching are...

Original Sin

God created Adam with marvelous gifts. One of these was the ability to choose between good and evil. We call this faculty *free will*.

When Adam fell into sin, his entire being became enslaved to sin, including his will. The Bible never insinuates that any of Adam's faculties escaped the power of sin. To imply the neutrality of the will is to assume this faculty escaped miraculously when Adam fell. Does the Bible imply this?

The effects of Adam's fall are explained in Romans 5:12-21. In this passage we learn we inherited Adam's death, condemnation, and judgment. The guilt of the sin of Adam was attributed to his offspring.

From this we derive a central fact of mankind's moral condition: man sins because he is a sinner; he is not a sinner because he sins. Man is condemned first because of what he is and secondarily because of what he **does**.

What about "innocent" children? No such thing. All are born under the condemnation and slavery of sin.

The heart governs the man, not his will

Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life. Proverbs 4:23

A widespread presupposition exists that it is the will that decides a person's actions. This contradicts Scripture and defies logic. How can a will be free from the nature of the person in whom it is found? A man always chooses that which he likes. What a person likes reflects what he is in heart. It is the heart, the internal nature, that directs a person's choices, not his will.

The will is never "free" from the nature of the creature in which it is found.

Place a duck, for example, between a body of water and a sand pile. It will always choose the water. Why? It chooses according to its desires. It has free will only within the limits of its nature.

Christ himself underlined this principle when he said to the Pharisees,

You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. Matthew 12:34

The Bible teaches it is the heart of man that governs (Matthew 12:33-37; 15:18, 19; Proverbs 4:23). If his heart is dominated by sin, so is his will.

An illustration: The coyote is an animal that cannot be domesticated. By nature it will always be wild, even if raised by humans. Let us suppose, as an illustration, that during a walk in the woods, we encounter a coyote. We think, "How lovely it would be to have a coyote as a mascot! Let's persuade the coyote to come with us!"

So we approach the coyote and say, "Coyote, if you come with us, you will have plenty of food. You'll be protected from your enemies. We will be friends and have a good time." Thinking the coyote is now persuaded, we extend our hand to pick him up.

What will the coyote do? Being the kind of animal he is, he will bite. Here is where we face the central question: Does the coyote have free will or not?

This question is a trap. An absolute answer does not exist because it depends on the angle from which we approach the question. If we define the will of the coyote as the ability to choose between wild and domestic, then we must say he lacks free will. If we define free will as his ability to choose within the limits of his nature, then yes, he has free will.

This illustration suggests a realistic definition of free will more in accord with biblical data. The sinner has free will within the limits of his nature. If sin governs his nature, he will choose sinful autonomy rather than submission to God, since that is what he truly prefers. For his mind to change, God must work changes in the man's nature. We will see how this happens when we study the new birth.

Dead? Or just sick?

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins (2) in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—(3) among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.
Ephesians 2:1-3

The carnal man may perceive himself as a sinner but never morally dead in the sense of total inability to be otherwise. The Bible says we were ...*dead in trespasses and sins*.

Religious groups that believe in free will in the sense of moral neutrality frequently preach as though the sinner were merely sick. They may even use illustrations taken from the field of medicine. The sinner is portrayed as seriously ill but able to accept the “medicine” of the gospel if he wishes. Such a concept is unbiblical. The Bible presents the sinner as dead, not sick; totally incapacitated, with no ability to submit to God.

Can the dead raise themselves? Though "dead" implies total inability, the pride of man will not tolerate such a description of himself.

Paul continues his discourse in Ephesians 2 by showing we were conformists.

... following the course of this world ...

We went through life under the illusion that all our thoughts were truly our own. We thought we were being original, without realizing we were products of a perverse society. The only thing original about us was original sin.

Paul reveals we were puppets of an evil being... *the spirit that now works in the children of disobedience...*

Finally, the apostle explains that our will was not controlling us after all. It was enslaved by our flesh, ...*carrying out the desires of the body and the mind...*

In short, Paul appears distinctly unimpressed with the condition of man’s so-called “free will.”

Another text underlining man’s total inability is Romans 3:9-18. According to verse 9, all are *under sin*. This domination is expressed as,

None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God.

If none understand, can a sinner grasp the essence of the gospel on his own? Can we allege the sinner has an inherent power of will to seek God if Scripture declares that nobody ever does so? If no one can do good, may we suppose the sinner possesses an ability to commit himself to Christ? Is that not good? If they lack fear of God, may we expect them to throw themselves on his mercy on their own accord?

This state of affairs is illustrated by C.S. Lewis,

“Agnostics speak openly about seeking God. For me, it makes more sense to speak of the rat seeking the cat... God trapped me.”³

If there exists the least suspicion that the carnal nature of man could submit to God, Romans 8:7 is sufficient to put it aside:

For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Romans 8:7

Every aspect of man's being is controlled by sin

The sinner neither understands nor seeks after God (Romans 3:11). His understanding is darkened (Ephesians 4:18). He is blind to spiritual things and considers them foolishness (1 Corinthians 2:14). His mind cannot submit to God (Romans 8:7); he is God's enemy (Colossians 1:21) and blinded by Satan (2 Corinthians 4:4). The thoughts of his heart are evil continually (Genesis 6:5).

His will is controlled by Satan (Ephesians 2:3), so he is unable to repent unless God grants him repentance (2 Timothy 2:26). He cannot come to Christ unless God draws him (John 6:44, 65).

Someone asked the great theologian Saint Augustine if he believed in free will. He replied, “Of course! Without Christ, we are totally free from all righteousness!”

How does God regard the good works of the unsaved? He does not regard them at all because no unsaved person has ever done a good work.

“Impossible!” exclaimed a doctor in one of my theology courses. “Now I know that you are really off base, professor!” he said. “I know many fine non-Christians who provide for their families, give to charity, serve the community, and are good conscientious citizens. Are you saying that these good works are evil?”

Although the answer may shock today's humanist culture, the answer to the doctor's exclamations is an uncompromising *yes!* God counts all the good works of the unsaved, including those that agree with his commands, as sinful acts. This is true for two reasons: first, because these works proceed from a corrupted source, and second, they are practiced from impure motives.

First, the unregenerate heart is dominated by sin, with the self enthroned as the ruling figure, with its own pride and benefit as the highest value. Until this perverted nature is transformed and the SELF dethroned, the entire nature of man is a fountain of corruption. Whatever proceeds from such a fountain will be tainted with corruption. God's holiness will accept none of it. This is true even if the deed performed is outwardly good. Jesus said,

*So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit.
Matthew 7:17*

No wonder Isaiah exclaimed, *And all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.* ⁴ Take some filthy rags, make a sweater out of them, and present them to a prince. See how pleased he is. That is what the unregenerate do when they suppose God is pleased with their good works.

Secondly, the motives of the unregenerate are impure. How do we know this? Because *whatever does not proceed from faith is sin* (Romans 14:23). ⁵ Anything done for other motives than the glory of God and submission to his will is merely a subtle form of rebellion.

The unregenerate are never so corrupt as when they are being charitable. The only thing that could be worse is when they are being religious. Such works merely deceive the unsaved into imagining they are good and that God must be pleased with them.

After all, if unbelievers really wanted to please God, then they would do the first thing that God requires: repent and submit to the lordship of his Son.

The crowd asked, *What must we do, to be doing the works of God?* ⁶ Jesus replied, *This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.*

This term “believe” implies something more profound than the accomplishment of a good work. It suggests a personal trust in Christ leading to an obedience that dethrones the self. This faith places Jesus as the central figure in the life of a person and his will as the highest value. No work of any unsaved person, however outwardly good, can substitute for this self-abandonment.

The unregenerate do good works and religious acts as *substitutes* for submission, rather than *signs* of the auto-negation of a purified heart. The self remains enthroned.

This was the problem with the Pharisees. Jesus said prostitutes and thieves were closer to the kingdom of God than they were. Was this a mere poetic exaggeration?

Many works of the Pharisees were in accord with the divine law since obedience to the law was the central focus of their movement. In what sense, then, were the works of the Pharisees worse than those of prostitutes and robbers? The self-deception involved in a work proceeding from a corrupt heart perverts any deed into a sin worse than those just mentioned.

So it is not surprising that Paul, while discoursing on unregenerate humanity, said, "*None is righteous, no, not one; (Romans 3:10).*"

Is this a brand new doctrine, recently invented? An ancient Christian document written in 1648, **THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH**, affirms:

“Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands and of good use both to themselves and others, yet, because they proceed not from a heart purified by faith nor are done in a right manner, according to the word; nor to a right end, the glory of God, they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man

meet to receive grace from God: and yet, their neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing unto God.” (Chapter 16, Art. 7)

God requires good works of everyone, including from the unsaved. Yet when the unsaved do them, they are sinning. If they fail to do them, however, the omission is even worse. Sadly, they never contribute to their salvation, only their condemnation. This is the essence of slavery to sin.

Nothing less than the incredible miracle of the new birth can change this hopeless situation.

Special questions on total inability

Question A: How can God make us responsible for doing good if we cannot do it? How can God condemn someone for practicing sin if we can do nothing else?

Place a Bible at one end of a table and a bottle of wine at the other. Then put a drunk between the Bible and the wine with liberty to choose between the two. Which will the drunk choose? Obviously he will choose the wine because that is his nature. He has freedom to choose right and the responsibility to do so but lacks the ability to choose the Bible. Having the liberty helps him little because his addiction determines what he really wants.

We may misinterpret many Bible texts if we fail to consider this difference between *liberty* and *ability*. Such texts reveal what man *ought* to do, rather than what he *can* do.

The sinner is never free from his responsibility to obey God. Yet he cannot fulfill that responsibility. The Scripture outline below exposes this terrible paradox between the responsibility of man versus his inability.

Responsibility: Come to Christ, Matthew 11:29.

Inability: Nobody can come, John 6:44.

Responsibility: Repent, Acts 3:19.

Inability: Repentance is a gift of God, 2 Timothy 2:25.

Responsibility: Believe, John 3:16.

Inability: Believe is a gift of God, Philippians 1:29.

Responsibility: Keep the law, Romans 2:13.

Inability: Nobody can keep the law, Romans 8:4.

Man's inability does not free him from his responsibility to obey God. After all, it is not God's fault mankind fell into sin. Man's ungodliness does not deprive God of his own holiness, nor does it mitigate his right to require from his creation what is just.

The power that compels man to sin is not external but internal, from within his own nature. But isn't the will of man sort of neutral, able to choose between good and evil?

Many assume the neutrality of the human will, as though it were an organ floating somewhere in our brain, disconnected from our moral state. If this were so, in what sense could we label it *our* will? How could we be held responsible for what our will decides if it were independent of what we are?

The Bible always presents the will of man as an extension of the character of that person. In the case of the unregenerate, a person always rejects Christ until God changes him.

Finally, the biblical basis of our responsibility before God is knowledge, not our ability. We see this in Romans 1:18-20. The sinner *knows* certain truths by the revelation of God in nature. He does not *seek* God because he prefers sin.

Question: In the first chapter of this book on the sovereignty of God, you claim God is in control of everything, even the will of man. Doesn't this make man a puppet? Are not the doctrines of the sovereignty of God versus the responsibility of man in conflict?

True, there exists a profound philosophical tension between these two aspects of biblical theology. It becomes easier to grasp, however, if we remember that God's control is normally indirect, using human nature itself. Since a person chooses whatever agrees with his own nature, then God must change that nature to motivate the individual to choose salvation. This way, the will of the person chooses freely, according to the revelation God gives. God conserves his own sovereignty, without forcing the person against his will. With others, God leaves them in the sinful condition they themselves have chosen.

The question of the new birth

How do we come to accept Christ?

If the sinner has no internal motivation to repent and choose Christ, why are some converted and others not? We resolve this question by considering the order of events in the new birth.

Two different viewpoints exist about what happens in the new birth:

One viewpoint says the sinner makes a decision to believe in Christ, and this results in the new birth. The sinner produces in himself a degree of faith through an act of his free will. God responds to this act and rewards him with grace, causing him to be born again. The sinner himself initiates the process. God is the passive agent, waiting for the human response. Faith, according to this view, produces the new birth, so the sinner contributes to his salvation through faith and obedience.

Another viewpoint says the sinner is dead in sins, unable to believe. God, therefore, by a sovereign act, regenerates those whom he has chosen for salvation. The sinner is totally passive in the act of being born again. God is the initiator. Upon being born again, the sinner has a new nature, perceives correctly divine things, and places his faith in Christ. So, being born again produces saving faith, not vice versa. Faith and obedience are results of the new birth, not causes of it. The sinner contributes nothing to his salvation.

Which of these two scenarios is biblical? By examining the Bible texts on the new birth, we can compare the interplay between cause and effect. Is our obedience the cause of being born again? Or is being born again the cause of our obedience?

Cause: John 3:3 Born again

Effect: See the kingdom of God

Cause: Jeremiah 24:7 God gives a new heart

Effect: That they may know him

Cause: Ezekiel 16:62, 63 God confirms his covenant

Effect: And he will forgive their sins

Cause: Ezekiel 36:26, 27 gives a new heart

Effect: Obedience

Cause: James 1:18 Of his own will

Effect: Born again

Cause: Psalms 65:4 Chosen by God

Effect: Drawn to him

If any doubt remains as to which of the two scenarios mentioned above is correct, then read,

...who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. John 1:13

We can illustrate the point another way via the question, where does saving faith come from? Does it come from the free will of man, or is it a work of grace? The outline below answers:

Cause: Acts 13:48, *...as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.*

Effect: Acts 18:27, *through grace had believed.*

Cause: Hebrews 12:2, *Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.*

Effect: Ephesians 2:8, *For by grace you have been saved through faith.*

Cause: Philippians 1:29, *it has been granted to you...believe in him...*

Effect: John 6:65, *... him by my Father.*

Does this mean the will of man remains an inert faculty before, during, and after salvation? Is our will a mere puppet, manipulated by a celestial puppeteer? No way!

When our perceptions change, other faculties of mind follow. When we see the kingdom of God through the illumination that regeneration brings, conversion to Christ becomes inevitable. God reveals Christ as so attractive that his very person becomes irresistible.

The irresistible nature of grace consists in this perception, rather than in a forcing of the will. Christ is too good to resist when revealed as he is. Such illumination does not transgress any aspect of man's freedom.

Why God grants this illumination to some and not to others is a mystery hidden in eternity.

The words of the Canons of Dort, a Protestant document written in 1618, express it with beauty and clarity:

“He opens the closed and softens the hardened heart ...infuses new qualities into the will, which, though heretofore dead, he quickens; from being evil, disobedient, and refractory, he renders it good, obedient, and pliable; actuates and strengthens it, that like a good tree it may bring forth the fruits of good actions.”

The order of events in salvation

New birth→faith→justification

Saving faith is a divine gift, not the fruit of human free will. The new birth is a sovereign act of God. The sinner does not convert himself.

Warning for pastors

The notion of neutral free will is like a weed in a garden. Just when you think you have it rooted out, it sprouts up again. Of all the erroneous ideas about salvation, this one is the most difficult to eradicate among Christians. As a teacher, you will experience more resistance on this point than any other aspect of the doctrines of grace. Proud human nature persists in its desire to make a contribution to salvation, however minimal.

As we teach the doctrine of total human inability, it is advisable to repeat constantly what we are *not* saying. This helps avoid misunderstandings. For example, it helps to say something like, “We are not saying that man has no will. He does. But sin enslaves his will.” Or, “Man is responsible for his actions, although he lacks the strength to fulfill this responsibility because of the power of sin. And, God commands us to do right because he is holy, not because we can obey properly.” And, “We are *not* saying the sinner has no right to choose salvation, only that he cannot do so without the grace of God.”

As a pastor, it may be costly to clarify to the congregation the doctrine of total inability. It is worth the trouble to insist on it. God will use your teachings to reveal more clearly what is the true grace of God. You will be giving them a precious jewel that will enrich their lives forever.

The news of our inability is a blessing

When I teach this doctrine, students generally suppose they misunderstood when they hear that understanding the doctrine of total depravity is one of the finest blessings they can experience. This surprising paradox gets their attention and prepares them for the following quotation from the great reformer Martin Luther:

On the comfort of knowing that salvation does not depend on free will

“I frankly confess that, for myself, even if it could be, I should not want ‘free will’ to be given me, nor anything to be left in my own hands to enable me to endeavor after salvation; not merely because in face of so many dangers, and adversities, and assaults of devils, I could not stand my ground and hold fast my ‘free will’ (for one devil is stronger than all men, and on these terms no man could be saved); but because, even were there no dangers, adversities, or devils, I should still be forced to labor with no guarantee of success and to beat my fists at the air.”

“If I lived and worked for all eternity, my conscience would never reach comfortable certainty as to how much it must do to satisfy God. Whatever work I had done, there would still be a nagging doubt as to whether it pleased God, or whether he required something more. The experience of all who seek righteousness by works proves that, and I learned it well enough myself over a period of many years, to my own great hurt. But now that God has taken my salvation out of the control of my own will and put it under the control of his and promised to save me, not according to my working or running, but according to his own grace and mercy, I have the comfortable certainty that he is faithful and will not lie to me and that he is also great and powerful, so that no devils or opposition can break him or pluck me from him. ‘No one, ’ he says, ‘shall pluck them out of my hand, because my Father, who gave them me, is greater than all.’ (John 10:28-29) Thus it is that, if not all, yet some, indeed many, are saved; whereas, by the power of ‘free will,’ none at all could be saved, but every one of us would perish.

“Furthermore, I have the comfortable certainty that I please God, not by reason of the merit of my works, but by reason of his merciful favor promised to me, so that, if I work too little or badly, he does not impute it to me, but with fatherly compassion pardons me and makes me better. This is the glorying of all the saints in their God.”⁷

Questions on total human inability

Certain verses appear to support the idea of free will, in the sense of moral neutrality. We can organize these according to the following categories:

Verses showing man chooses evil

Some suppose because man can choose to sin, he must also have the ability to choose righteousness. This would be like saying a log has the ability to float upstream merely because it can float downstream. Insisting that man has the power to choose evil is no evidence he can choose submission to God without a work of grace.

Exhortations and commands to choose the right

Occasionally verses are quoted from the Old Testament in which God commands people to choose the good. God commanded Israel to keep his law. Is this evidence that man can keep the law? Of course not. The New Testament tells us nobody keeps the law. It was given to reveal what man *cannot* do, rather than what he *can* do. Why then take verses out of the law to prove moral free will?

God commands us, *be perfect*. Does this prove we have an innate ability to be perfect without God and without grace? Why, then, suppose that unconverted mankind has the ability to choose the good on the mere basis of a command?

God commands people to do right because he could hardly command them to do otherwise. Being good himself, he could not command them to do evil. God commands us to do right because *he* is just, not because *we* are capable.

Verses which show man responsible for his actions

We affirm that man is responsible for his conduct. We deny responsibility implies ability.

The only kind of verses that could possibly refute the doctrine of total human inability would be those showing that sinful man, without God and without grace, can convert himself. Such verses do not exist. Commands, exhortations, examples of sinners choosing evil, and explanations regarding our responsibility have nothing to do with the question.

Review Questions
Total Human Inability

1. A popular myth among humanity is _____.
2. This myth is the basis of every distortion of the _____.
3. True or False: _____ All faculties of the sinner are dominated by sin, except his will.
4. True or False: _____ The human will, on its own, can never desire salvation apart from a work of grace.
5. True or False: _____ The new birth is a sovereign act of God in which the sinner is entirely passive, until his nature has been renewed, enabling him to respond correctly.
6. The myth that we have been refuting in this chapter is called _____.
7. The correct definition of grace becomes clear when we realize man's _____.
8. True or False: _____ Salvation is a co-operative work between God and man.
9. What are a couple of the benefits that a Christian obtains through understanding the doctrine of total human inability?
 - A. _____
 - B. _____
10. What happened to Adam's will when he fell into sin? _____
11. The guilt of Adam's sin is attributed to _____.
12. Which of the following sentences is the most correct according to our understanding of the fall of Adam?
 - A. We sin because we are sinners.
 - B. We are sinners because we sin.
13. Which of the following faculties of human nature determine what he is going to decide?
 - A. His will
 - B. His nature/heart
 - C. His blood
14. Which of the following sentences is correct?
 - A. The heart governs the will.
 - B. The will governs the heart.
15. True or False: _____ The sinner is spiritually sick, but not spiritually dead.

16. Those who reject the doctrine of total human inability are confused with regard to the difference between the _____ to choose and the _____.

17. (Mark the correct answer): The phrase *freedom to choose* means:

- A. The sinner has the power to choose the good.
- B. Elements within his own nature oblige him to choose evil, not because any external force does oblige him.
- C. God obliges him to choose evil.

18. Explain in your own words why the verses in the categories below are not valid evidence to show the will of man is “free” to choose salvation, apart from the intervention of grace.

- A. Verses showing man chooses sin.
- B. Exhortations and commands to choose the good.
- C. Verses showing man is responsible for his actions.

19. The biblical basis for human responsibility is _____.

Answers: 1=Moral free will; 2=Gospel=V; 3=F; 4=T; 5=T; 6=Free will; 7=Total inability; 8=F; 9=A. Destroys pride; B. Gives security; 10=His entire being became enslaved to sin; 11=His descendants; 12=A; 13=B; 14=A; 15=F; 16=Responsibility, ability; 17=B; 18=(See text of book) 19=Knowledge

Chapter Three: Justification by Faith

The war cry of the Reformation resounded throughout Europe during the sixteenth century. This was *justification by faith!* Thousands lost their lives rather than renounce this doctrine. War broke out in various countries over it. Why such controversy? This doctrine represented a total upheaval in the concept of personal salvation, contrary to everything accepted for centuries.

Toward the end of the sixteenth century, something in the Bible astonished a German priest named Martin Luther. It was Paul's declaration in Romans 1:17 that struck him: *The just shall live by faith.* God illuminated his heart, and Luther understood that merits had nothing to do with salvation.

Astounded by this revelation, he continued his studies in Romans and came to understand the centrality of justification by faith in biblical teaching. This incident contributed to a rediscovery of the theology of the Bible and the beginnings of the movement known as the Reformation.

Why is this doctrine essential?

First: It frees us from confusion about the basis of our acceptance with God. The moment we realize God roots our acceptance in the righteousness of Christ alone, rather than our own degree of perfection, we experience a profound relief from unwarranted fear.

Second: We avoid legalism by focusing on righteousness as an inwardly accomplished fact rather than external practices. Performance-based righteousness always leads to legalism.

Third: It helps in prayer. The moment we realize answers come because God accepts Christ in us, rather than how good we've been lately, we are encouraged to approach God with boldness.

Defining it

Justification is a legal declaration by God that a person is righteous compared with the divine law because of the perfect righteousness of Christ, imputed by faith in Christ.

What justification is not

A doctor once said that the best way to understand what is good health is to study diseases. The same with doctrine. A good way to grasp the essence of justification is to understand what it is not.

Justification does not refer to the process of spiritual growth in the life of the Christian. *Sanctification* is the correct term for that. Justification deals with the issue of our legal relationship with the Father, as compared with his holy law. A common mistake among Christians in the study of justification is to imagine that justification means *be made righteous*. It means, *declared righteous*, or *vindicated*.⁸

Nor is justification a reward for our faith. As we saw in the previous section on the new birth, saving faith is a work of divine grace. Although God requires faith as a condition of justification, we must not assume justification is a reward for our faith. A consequence is not the same as a reward.

Neither must we assume that faith replaces the requirements of God's moral law. This law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, forms part of an eternal covenant and is irreplaceable. Some accused the reformers of teaching that if we have faith, we need not perform good works. The reality of the matter is that the works of sinners are not valid for salvation because they proceed from a corrupted source.

So, the *works* are not accepted if the *person* is not accepted. The imputed righteousness of Christ, granted through faith alone, is the only basis of acceptance.

The central idea in justification is how the righteousness of the law accrues to our account despite our inability to keep the law. According to the Bible, Christ alone accomplishes this as our substitute under the law.

The following question highlights the point: Does God require that the righteousness of the law be fulfilled in the Christian?

...in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. Romans 8:4

Yes! God requires that the righteousness of the moral law be fulfilled in us. Here is where some believers get confused. They read verses that say we are not under the law and cannot be justified by it. From this they draw the illogical conclusion that the law no longer has value and God does not require the righteousness that it represents.

The Jews fully understood that the law represented the righteousness of God. So their supposed justification came by obedience to it. They erred because no one can keep it consistently. Paul showed us that the righteousness the law represents comes to us by means of faith in Jesus Christ as a gift from God.

We agree with the Jews on one essential point. God always requires the righteousness of the law. We differ from the Jews in how to obtain that righteousness. They believe keeping the law is the means. We believe God grants it as a gift through faith alone in the Jewish messiah, Jesus.

Thus, it is essential to understand that the moral law was never annulled in every sense. It is annulled only as the means of justification. The law retains a defining function. It defines

important moral words such as righteousness, sin, good, and evil. For example, 1 John 3:4 declares sin is the transgression of the law. Logically, the word "sin" would be meaningless without the law.

For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Romans 5:13

For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. Romans 3:20

The law is the only standard of righteousness the Bible recognizes. Without the law, there would be no sin and therefore no condemnation.

The problem with the demands of the law is that nobody can keep them. As Paul said, it

For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Romans 8:7

This brings us to the second question. How does the righteousness of the law become credited to us? Here we touch on a beautiful principle in biblical theology: the substitution of Christ.

Jesus was our substitute under the law. He fulfilled the law in our place in two senses. First, he lived a perfect life under the law, fulfilling all its demands (Romans 3:21-26). Second, Christ accepted in his body the punishment the law requires for transgressors—death.

Paul develops this theme in Galatians.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law (5), to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. Galatians 4:4-5

This clarifies why Paul felt it unnecessary to invalidate the law as a condition of salvation. *Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law (Romans 3:21).* The death of Christ was necessary precisely because the moral law is eternal and always in effect. If it were not so, no one would be counted a sinner, and Christ need not have died.

Would the law be a means of justification if a person were to keep it? Paul answers,

For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. Romans 2:13.

Key point! Grace does not consist in a change of the conditions for salvation from something man cannot do (keep the law) to something he can do (believe in Jesus). Faith is a gift of God, not something man generates out of his will. The sinner is just as incapable of saving faith as he is of keeping the law.

Is faith the basis of our justification?

That question is a bit tricky because technically, the answer is *no*. Faith is not the basis of our justification. The perfect righteousness of Christ is the basis. Faith is simply the necessary means by which that righteousness is received.

To illustrate, let's consider the process of laying the foundation for a building. The foundation framework represents us. The cement we pour represents the perfect righteousness of Christ. The metal conduit down which the cement is poured represents the faith through which the righteousness comes.

Before the cement arrives, the framework is empty. No foundation exists. The same with us. Without Christ, we are empty of all righteousness. We have nothing to contribute and everything to receive. God himself installs the conduit, which is faith. Through this conduit, God pours the cement, the perfect righteousness of Christ, and creates the legal foundation on which we construct our lives.

Sanctification is like the process of building the house once the foundation has been laid. This continues throughout life. The success of the process varies between believers. Some trust Christ more than others in building their house.

Justification is not a process, nor can it ever be repeated. It is a divine act accomplished once and for all at the moment of the believer's conversion to Christ. The perfect righteousness of Christ can never change.

Sanctification, on the other hand, means "be **made** righteous" or "**be** righteous" or "set apart for holy use."⁹ It involves the daily outworking of righteousness in our lives.

As we mull this over, it becomes clearer why some believers feel insecure about their acceptance with God. They confuse the difference between sanctification and justification. They imagine their acceptance with God depends on their degree of sanctification. The result is emotional and spiritual instability because sanctification is a process that can vary. They know they can lose their sanctification to one degree or another and assume they will lose their acceptance along with it.

Basing our acceptance with God on our degree of sanctification is a formula for trouble. We move immediately into performance-based righteousness, rather than faith-based righteousness. Since our performance is rarely perfect, we open wide the door to doubts, insecurities, and a lack of boldness before God and man.

Legalism finds fertile ground in those who base their acceptance with God on their degree of sanctification. To assure themselves that God still approves of them, they must invent rules and regulations by which to measure their performance: dress codes, avoiding certain entertainments, or other restrictions. It is interesting to notice the rules they invent are always less stringent than the demands of God's moral laws. After all, *faith* is an abstract concept, difficult to use as an objective measurement of performance. Spiritual failure and emotional instability are virtually guaranteed from this legalistic syndrome.

A subtle trap develops out of this. The so-called *faith* that such believers think they have is really faith in their ability to be obedient. This is faith in self, not faith in Christ.

Consistent with the teachings of Paul, Dr. Charles Hodges notes the substitution of Christ with these words,

“Hence Adam is the type of Christ. As the one is the head and representative of his race, so the other is the head and representative of his people. As the sin of the one is the ground of the condemnation of his posterity, so the righteousness of the other is the ground of the justification of all those who are in him.”¹⁰

Since justification is an absolute, the great apostle Paul is no more justified than a new believer in Christ. More sanctified, yes. Not more justified.

A minister friend of the author started a Bible study with these words: “There is no one on earth more righteous than I!” A lady in the audience exclaimed, “How could you say such a proud thing?” He explained, “I did not say, ‘I am more righteous than anyone else.’ I only said that there is no one else who is more righteous. I have the perfect righteousness of Christ imputed to me as a free gift. But this is true of every other believer in the world, including you!”

<p>False Concept of Justification</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 150px; height: 80px; margin: 0 auto; display: flex; align-items: center; justify-content: center;"> <p>(Empty)</p> </div> <p>Sins Erased But Without The Righteousness Of Christ</p>	<p>Biblical Concept of Justification</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 150px; height: 80px; margin: 0 auto; display: flex; align-items: center; justify-content: center;"> <p>Perfect Righteousness (Indelible Ink)</p> </div> <p>In heaven, we will be no more justified than we are now. The glory we will experience may vary between believers. But it will be placed on the most glorious and immovable foundation that could exist: the righteousness of Christ himself.</p>	<p>Ironically, the weakest believer can say the same. He cannot, of course, claim the same understanding, maturity, or degree of sanctification. The reason for his acceptance with God as his child remains the same.</p>
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The entire Fourth Chapter of Romans illustrates how the perfect righteousness of Christ becomes ours. Paul uses Abraham as the example.

Abraham lived more than four hundred years before the law of Moses. He had no written law of God. The only thing he had was his conscience and his faith. So Paul comments, *Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Romans 4:3.*

However, his faith was not *in place of* righteousness. Faith was the means by which God accomplished the justification. The word “for,” in Greek here, is difficult to translate. It means something like “with a view to.” It does not mean “instead of.”

For whom is justification by faith designed?

And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also

justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. Romans 8:30

Justification by faith is reserved for the elect. Their eventual glorification is as certain as any other part of the chain of events Paul mentions in this text.

Can a believer lose his justification?

Only if Christ can lose his righteousness.

*Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.
Romans 8:33*

God accepts no accusations of sin against his elect and sanctified people with regard to their eternal destiny. Why not? Because Christ has granted them his perfect righteousness, which never changes. If justification could be lost, it would have to be for another cause than sin.

Paul declares clearly that God accepts no accusations for sin against his elect. Paul never says that Christians are without sin, only that any remaining corruption is no longer a cause for condemnation.

Such teaching seems strange to the carnal mind because sin is always supposed to result in condemnation. But God has driven a wedge between these two things. That wedge is called *justification*.

In jurisprudence, a trial cannot take place until the court receives a written accusation. If for some reason the judge does not acknowledge the accusation, no trial can take place and the prisoner goes free. The judge is under no obligation to say to the prisoner, "Oh, what a wonderful person you are!" He need not say anything. He is making no declarations of guilt or innocence. The judge means only that the accusation is legally inadmissible.

Imagine this scene in heaven. Satan appears and says, "God, look at what your kid did! She gossiped. She has a loose tongue. She caused all sorts of problems in the church!" God replies, "Who do you think you are, coming in here and accusing my kids! You are not even a part of the family. I can take care of my own family and do not need your advice. Get out!" Satan leaves.

Does that end the story? Not quite. After God slams the door on Satan, he says, "Daughter, come here a moment. There is a little matter I'd like to discuss with you."

Right there is the difference between justification and sanctification. This difference is not theological hairsplitting. It makes the difference between defeat and victory, legalism and freedom in our relationship to the Father.

We are free to assume the Father is delighted with us until he says otherwise. He is proud of his kids and rejoices over us. He is truly glad to have us in the family.

*...he will rejoice over you with gladness... he will exult over you with loud singing.
Zephaniah 3:17*

Is all this a license to sin?

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? Romans 6:1-2

Paul sees justification as a license to pursue righteousness with a new confidence, looking ahead to his infallible victory. He declares that freedom from sin, along with a sincere pursuit of righteous practices, characterizes those justified by faith in Christ.

How do we become the friends of God?

The same way Abraham did: justification by faith.

Review Questions: Justification by Faith

1. True or False: _____ God requires that the righteousness of the law be fulfilled in us.
2. True or False: _____ Faith is the basis of our justification.
3. True or False: _____ God accepts faith in Christ as a substitute for righteousness.
4. True or False: _____ The word “justification” means “to be made righteous.”
5. True or False: _____ Justification is something that God accomplishes in us when we accept Christ, and never changes.
6. True or False: _____ Justification is a process.
7. True or False: _____ Sanctification is a process.
8. True or False: _____ Sanctification is merely a theoretical doctrine and has no practical applications in the life of the believer.
9. True or False: _____ Now that we are justified by faith, the law ceases to have any value.
10. True or False: _____ God’s intention was that all of humanity should be justified.
11. The war cry of the Reformation was _____.
12. The Catholic priest of the sixteenth century who discovered in the Bible the doctrine of justification by faith was called _____.
13. The doctrine of justification by faith serves to:
 - A. _____
 - B. _____
 - C. _____
14. Christ was our substitute under the law in two senses: In his _____ and in his _____.
15. True or False: _____ It is possible that a believer may lose his justification.
16. True or False: _____ God does not accept accusations against his chosen and justified people.
17. What is the chief characteristic of those who are justified?

Answers: 1=T; 2=F; 3=F; 4=F; 5=T; 6=F; 7=T; 8=F; 9=F; 10=F; 11=Justification by faith
12=Martin Luther; 13=Freedom from fear; relating to the Father better; avoiding legalism;
14=Life, death 15=F; 16=T; 17=A righteous life.

Chapter Four: Election by Grace

In a faraway city, once upon a time, there lived a famous sculptor of rare qualities. He also practiced martial arts. In both domains he was a superb master.

Unfortunately, several of his friends misunderstood him. Some believed his occupation as a sculptor revealed effeminate traits, delicate and sensitive. Others assumed a karate master would be hard and violent, so they feared him.

One day, he invited his friends to a private party.

Before his guests arrived, the sculptor took a mass of clay and divided it into two parts. He molded one part into a beautiful country scene with people, animals, and flowers in a lovely forest. He painted the work and hardened it in a furnace. With the other part, he formed a simple square block and hardened it in the furnace also.

When the friends arrived on the appointed day, he took out the first sculpture, the beautiful forest scene, and set it before them.

“What a delightful work of art!” they exclaimed. “How delicate and charming! You are such a sensitive artist!”

The master replied, “Thank you for your compliments. But I practice another art as well.”

The guests glanced at one another, puzzled by this statement. They watched as the master stepped into his adjoining studio and carried back to the room a big chunk of hardened clay.

“Certain arts do not require the same kind of sensitivity as sculpturing,” he said in a serious voice.

The master put the block on the table in the middle of the room and took a short step back from it. He raised his right hand high over his head and, with a powerful cry, slammed it down on the block. The hardened clay smashed into pieces, dust flying.

The guests understood. True, the master was gentle and delicate but also a strong and dangerous martial artist. It was wise to stay on his good side.

The Lord God is like this artist. Some see him as a loving father who would never harm anyone. Others perceive him as a mighty God who establishes justice and who punishes and reproves. Both are correct. The apostle Paul put it like this:

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. Romans 11:22

In the story above, the sculpture represents the elect, and the block is the reprobate.

Neither the grace of God nor his righteous judgment could be manifested if there were no sinners. We must therefore love God and fear him also. His mercy and his divine justice are complementary and interdependent. Like the two sides of a coin called *predestination*, one side reads *election* and the other, *reprobation*.

The controversy about election

If someday the reader were struck with the mischievous desire to provoke an argument among Christians, a good way to do it would be to vocalize the word "predestination"!

For some, this word is a treasure house of comfort that helps them understand God better. For others, it is the worst of slanders on the righteous character of God. The source of the controversy surrounding this word is not found in a lack of biblical data.

In fact, *predestination* is four times easier to prove from Scripture than even the deity of Christ. In the New Testament we have about ten verses that directly express Christ's deity. More than forty declare the doctrine of predestination. Yet the same Christians ready to defend to the death the deity of Christ will fight with equal fury to refute predestination.

We'll see why a little further along. Let's define some terms first.

The meaning of predestination



Predestination means "destined beforehand." It refers to the divine arrangement of circumstances to accomplish his decrees established from before the foundation of the world.

Election refers to the divine decree to create, among lost humanity, certain individuals to be beneficiaries of the free gift of salvation. God did this without reference to merits, the state of their will, or foreseen faith in the elect. Yet this was not arbitrary.

God obliges no one to sin. Neither is he the author of the sins of anyone. As for those not elect, he simply allows them to continue in the direction of condemnation they themselves have chosen. In theology, we call this *reprobation*.

Although the concepts of predestination and election are similar, they are not exactly the same. Predestination is the more general term and refers to God's arrangement of reality to accomplish his decrees. Election focuses on the decree to save certain persons in particular.

To illustrate, suppose we want to teach a horse to run in circles. First, we obtain a horse. (This is like election.) Then we construct a circular corral so that he will be obliged to run circles rather than some other pattern. (This is like predestination.) The corral represents the circumstances of life within which we have liberty of action. So, we have liberty in one sense but not in another.

God arranges the circumstances of our lives to accomplish his decrees for our lives that he made in eternity.

How important is the doctrine of election?

Election is a spotlight shining on the word “grace.” Without this light, grace could be perceived as a reward for goodwill or efforts. This would be a drastic misunderstanding that could affect our entire walk with God.

If the correct definition of *grace* is “unmerited favor,” then grace must be independent of any human contribution. The moment we grasp this concept, it becomes clear that grace and election are inseparable. We must hold to both or neither. Paul expressed this bond with the words, *Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace. Romans 11:5*

The paradox proofs

Only two arguments exist to refute the doctrine of election: the concept of *justice* and the concept of *foreknowledge*.¹¹ Paradoxically, these also constitute the two most powerful arguments in favor of election. They backfire on their proponents. That’s why we call them *the paradox proofs*. Let’s see how this works.

Argument from the concept of justice

Anti-predestinationists say predestination cannot be true because God would be unjust to choose some and not others. If the will of God is irresistible, how could God hold man responsible for sin?

Paul anticipated this objection in Romans 9:14-16.

What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means! 15 For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” (16) So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.

It seems that anti-predestinationists forget that Paul anticipated their objection and dealt with it firmly. Moreover, he does so without the slightest apology. In fact, he shows little inclination to even answer the objection thoroughly. He simply reaffirms God’s right to show mercy or withhold it, according to his good pleasure. He underlines that election does not depend on the human will any more than it does on human works.

So then it depends not on human will or exertion... verse 16

This seems hardly designed to satisfy the anti-predestinarian. Paul makes it worse for those who object by a rebuke for their presumption in asking the question!

You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” (20) But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?” Romans 9:19, 20

Paul answered this objection before it ever came out of the mouth of the first anti-predestinarian. The paradox is this: If absolute sovereign election were not what Paul was teaching, he would not have anticipated the primary objection to it nor bothered to rebuke the objectors.

To put it more positively, sovereign election is proven by Paul anticipating an objection to it and then refuting the objection.

To say election is unjust is back-talking to God. Paul seems reluctant to enter into the philosophical details, not because they are unanswerable, but because he understands too well the impossibility of satisfying the pride of men who consider themselves captains of their own fate and masters of their own soul. Since pride, rather than intellectual acumen, is the real basis of the objection, a rebuke is more appropriate than an explanation.

But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Romans 9:20

Nevertheless, God is indeed rational and just. So Paul exposes a hidden illogicality behind the objection: we all merit condemnation. If God were to leave the whole human race condemned, he would be doing no injustice to anyone. How then could God be guilty of injustice for saving anybody? Some of us receive mercy. Others receive justice. Nobody receives injustice. Initially, it seems unfair. In fact, it is *more* than fair!

The concept of fairness is rooted in the idea of merits. If Johnny gets a piece of cake, then I should get one also. That is only fair. If Joe gets a good attendance award at school, then I deserve one also if my attendance is equal to his. If the other guy gets something good, then I deserve the same thing under the same terms. Likewise, if God gives salvation to my neighbor, then certainly I deserve the same consideration if I am no worse than he.

Within these analogies is the assumption of human dignity. Relative to mundane matters like a piece of cake or an attendance award, the term "human dignity" may have some value. Relative to the holy law of God, it has no value at all because both my neighbor and I deserve to be thrown forthwith into hell.

Our only appropriate response to the question of election is to shut our mouths and tremble. God reserves for himself the right to do with his creation as he pleases.

Argument from the concept of foreknowledge

Does God choose some and not others because he sees beforehand their faith and obedience?

Those who answer *yes* to that question base their view on two verses. These are:

To those who are elect...according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood... 1 Peter 1:1-2

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his

Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. Romans 8:29

Although at first glance it may seem these texts defend the foreknowledge argument, they actually do the opposite. Why? Nothing good in fallen man exists to foresee.

It is not saving faith God could have foreseen because saving faith itself is based on predestination.

...and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. Acts 13:48 ¹²

If faith itself is produced by grace, then God is the cause of it. Therefore, faith is not something simply foreseen by God.

... those who through grace had believed. Acts 18:27

On this point Augustine commented, “Man is not converted because he desired it, but because it was ordained to be so by election.” ¹³ No positive quality exists in man for God to foresee.

Nor was it good works God foresaw. The works of God’s people are just as predestinated as those who performed them.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2:10

The Greek word translated as “foreknowledge” also means “foreordained.” In the verses quoted above, obedience is a **result** of foreknowledge and not the **cause** of it. Peter declares, *for obedience* and not *because* of obedience (1 Peter 1:1). Paul also expresses in Romans 8:29 *to be conformed* and not because he saw they were good. Ironically, these two verses serve as support for predestination rather than as refutations.

It is interesting that in 1 Peter Chapter 1, the apostle uses the word “foreknowledge” in connection with the coming of Jesus, and it is translated “foreordained.” (Verse 20) It would be ridiculous to say the Father simply *foreknew* Jesus was going to come. The same with Acts 2:23: *him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death...*

When used in relationship to divine activity, the term “foreknowledge” clearly means “foreordained.” Rather than refuting the doctrine of predestination, this term supports rather than refutes it. This is the second *paradox proof*.

Further, no necessary link exists in the Bible between election and divine foreknowledge about how people may respond to him. For example, Jesus said,

Woe to you, Corazon! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Matthew 11:21

If these populations would have repented at seeing miracles, why didn't God send them a prophet? Answer: They were not the chosen people.

God chose Israel as his people despite his foreknowledge of their rebellion.

But of Israel he says, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people." Romans 10:21

So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. Romans 11:5

When God sent Ezekiel to the Jews, he warned him they would reject the message. Why did God bother? Because the Jews as a nation were God's chosen people then, according to God's sovereign will, not because he foresaw they would respond favorably.

Even more curious is God's declaration that if he had sent Ezekiel to a heathen nation, they would have listened! Why then didn't God do that? The doctrine of sovereign election is the only explanation. The reasons are hidden in God's own eternal counsels, and we have no access to that in this case.

For you are not sent to a people of foreign speech and a hard language, but to the house of Israel— (6) not to many peoples of foreign speech and a hard language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely, if I sent you to such, they would listen to you. Ezekiel 3:5, 6

In 1 Corinthians 2, Paul assures us God has predestined us for a special wisdom, hidden from the rulers of this world. God knew if this wisdom had been revealed to the rulers of this world, they would not have crucified his Son. Why then did God not reveal it to them? This wisdom is for us, not them.

But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. (8) None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 1 Corinthians 2:7, 8

It would be perfectly reasonable for God to base his elective decrees on some positive reaction in man, if fallen man were capable of seeking him. However, Romans 10:20 denies any such ability.

I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.

What are we then to think of people who appear to be seeking God? This could be a work of grace in progress as God draws them. Or they may be seeking a god of their own imagination that will accept them on the basis of their imagined worthiness. In either case, fallen man without grace cannot seek God.

Common sense also excludes divine foreknowledge as an explanation of election. For example, suppose God foreknew that John Doe would be born in circumstances that would provoke him to reject Christ. God, being omnipotent, could change those circumstances to predispose him otherwise. The inference is inescapable. If God does not change those influences, then it is because John Doe is not elect.

Scripture and reason show the concept of divine foreknowledge supports sovereign election.

Three illustrations from Romans 9

Mystery, mystery, where is the mystery?

Whatever our system of theology, we quickly crash headlong into an inscrutable mystery. This occurs because God has infinite intelligence. Inevitably we can expect him to say or do something that will puzzle us. Paul's long discourse in Romans 9-11 ends with,

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! Romans 11:33

At some point, we do a double take in our studies and wonder if we understood correctly. We encounter a *point of mystery*. Every system of theology has this point of mystery.

For those advocating a foreknowledge view of election, the point of mystery resides in the question, why did God bother to create those whom he knew would be lost? It seems to answer the *fairness* question but leaves out the idea of immutable sovereign decrees.

So if neither side can solve its own particular *mystery* question, how do we decide which system is valid? Shall we assume neither is knowable with certainty? This would be an easy out if no means existed to decide the issues. However, a means *does* exist. Better still, the answer comes with certainty.

The solution lies in something more simple than solving the mysteries. It resides in taking a look at where the Bible places the point of mystery. This is where Romans 9 enters the picture. That chapter defines which of the two views is correct by identifying the point of mystery.

Paul exposes his arguments via three striking illustrations: Jacob and Esau, Pharaoh, and the potter and the clay.

First illustration: Jacob and Esau, verse 6-13

Paul insists on two parallel concepts: national election and individual election. He uses national election to illustrate individual election. It is important to clarify that Paul is not speaking only of national election, which is the choosing of Israel over other nations. From verses 6 to 8, along with 24, the focus of his teaching is on individual election.

But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, (7) and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." (8) This means that it is

not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. Romans 9:6-8

He underlines the same point in verse 27 by making a distinction between saved Jews and lost ones.

Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved. Romans 9:27

In verse 11, Paul focuses on Jacob and Esau to illustrate election:

...though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—Romans 9:11

Jacob and Esau were twins. Yet before they were born, God had already chosen Jacob instead of Esau, without regard to characteristics foreseen in them.

If God had chosen Jacob because he foresaw in him a heart sensitive to the things of God, the verse would read something like this: “That the purpose of God may remain according to a good heart and not according to him who calls.” Paul does everything in his linguistic power to make it clear that election has its ground in God’s effectual call, not in any foreseen quality in Jacob. This explains why Paul takes the trouble to show the elective degree was already in place before the twins were born, without regard to whatever evil or good they may do.

In verse 11 Paul links divine love with election:

As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” Romans 9:13

God loves by his free elective choice, not because the elect are lovable. His love is a powerful and personal force that drives him to seek, save, and preserve his elect. He is the shepherd who seeks the lost sheep.

His love is active, not passive; personal, not general; and voluntary and not forced.

Jacob and Esau symbolize the elect and the reprobate. Where, then, does the love of God fit in?

Three basic viewpoints deal with this delicate and complex subject. We’ll take a look at all three and leave it to the reader’s discretion to decide which carries the most weight. In theology, we frequently run across issues with evidence for more than one view. The crux of the issue is, who does God love and how much?

Does God love everyone equally? Does he love Hitler in hell as much as the apostle John in heaven? Did he love Pharaoh as much as Moses? Is the love of God both universal and equivalent?

A very common view today among Christians is that the love of God is both universal and equivalent.¹⁴ He loves everyone to an equal degree. He loves no one more than anyone else.

Two snags greet this view. The above text, Romans 9:13, is the toughest snag. Even if we accept that the love of God is universal, it clearly cannot be equivalent. The phrase, *Jacob I loved and Esau I hated* cannot be made to mean that God loved Esau in the same way as he loves Jacob. Even if we grant that "hated" means an inferior kind of love, as some have suggested, a distinction of some sort remains.

The text is a quote from the prophet Malachi, who prophesied that the divine hatred toward Esau would result in the total annihilation of Esau's descendants. Total annihilation seems a peculiar way to express affection.

Another snag in the *universal* view of God's love is less obvious but equally striking. Every reference in the Bible to the love of God is associated with his people. A concordance verifies this. Some texts even make a point of linking the love of God to the elect.

...as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, ... Colossians 3:12

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, 1 Thessalonians 1:4

Even the popular verse John 3:16 is connected to believers and therefore lends no support to the *universal* view. Even if the word "world" meant "everybody who ever lived," nothing indicates the love of God is the same sort for everyone.¹⁵

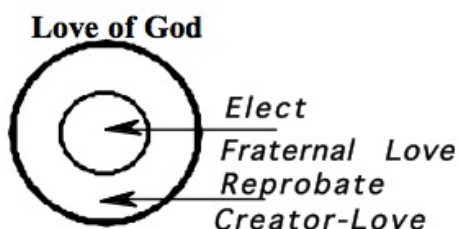
A lady approached the venerable Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon and mentioned she was bothered by the phrase, *...but Esau I hated*. Spurgeon answered, "That point is not what bothers me, madam. What bothers me is that God was able to love Jacob!"

We *must* preach the love of God in a balanced way, by affirming with it the holiness of God and the Lordship of Christ. Otherwise, such a proclamation may produce in the mind of the hearer the concept of God as a benign heavenly grandfather who would never harm anyone, whose love is passive and frustrated, who loves everyone in general without loving anyone in particular; an impotent, frustrated deity who hopes in vain that man will respond to his pleadings to love him. Such a concept of God is popular in our epoch because he represents no danger at all.

Should we then be surprised that we live in a generation that has lost the fear of God?

Throughout the New Testament, the apostles preached repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ but reserved the message of love primarily for believers. A few texts on this point are Psalms 5:5; Pr. 15:9; John 13:1; John 14:21, 23; Romans 1:7; Romans 11:28; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; Hebrews 12:5, 6; and James 2:5

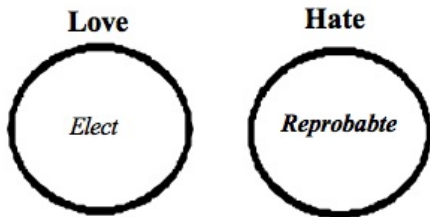
A second viewpoint on God's love affirms he loves all humanity in his capacity as Creator, but his children in his role as Father. His love extends to all because as Creator, his children are also



part of his creation. His love as Father does not extend to all because not all are his children.

This view is based largely on blessings that God distributes to everyone indiscriminately. These include preservation of the race (1 Timothy 4:10), rain and harvests (Matthew 5:45), and provision of habitation for the various people groups (Acts 17:26).¹⁶

This view declares the universality of God's love but distinguishes between the elect and the reprobate. The diagram expresses this.



The third view divides the elect and reprobate into separate categories: God loves his elect and hates the reprobate. It assumes the illustration of Jacob and Esau must be taken literally. The diagram to the left illustrates this.

Let's focus now on the principle point in Romans 9:16, which Paul expresses as, *So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.*

Paul introduces a devastating conclusion with the words, *So then*. This verse excludes both will and works as a basis for election. Yet Paul never denies the existence of the human will nor even the value of works. He simply denies their relevance to the question of election. To Paul, it would be like disputing the quality of a cement foundation for a house when the house will never be built there anyway.

Second Illustration: Pharaoh, verses 17 and 18

Paul now introduces the difficult doctrine of reprobation, in which God passes by some in his elective decree. If God elects some for salvation, then others exist who are not elect.

Election and reprobation do not work the same. The rules are different. In election, God changes the sinful heart to dispose them to accept Christ. In reprobation, God changes nothing at all. He simply leaves them in the state that they themselves have chosen and in which they prefer to remain. No need exists for God to act in any way for these to be reprobates. They sin quite efficiently without any outside help at all!

Several texts in Exodus indicate that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Others say Pharaoh hardened his own heart. Which is right? Both. God hardens the heart of the reprobate by confronting him with truth. Pharaoh reacted in accord with his own sinful nature and hardened his own heart.



God does no injustice to the reprobate. He allows them to have what they want most: their own autonomy. Their most profound desire is for God to leave them alone and not interrupt their autonomy or their pleasures. This illustrates one of history's greatest paradoxes: Some receive from God what they least desire until God changes their sinful hearts, and they will be grateful forever. Others receive what they most

desire and will regret it forever. This is no injustice. It is a justice that is truly poetic.

Let's remember we all merit Pharaoh's fate. Before Christ found us, we had the same hard heart. The difference was God's mercy, not moral superiority in the elect.

*Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens.
Romans 9:18*

Third Illustration: The Potter and the clay, verses 19-22

Some have argued that Paul's illustration could scarcely refer to an individual human being. People have a will, they say. Mere vessels of clay have none.

Paul does not deny that man has a will. He simply rejects the notion that the will of man is the basis of election.

God, the potter, prepares vessels for dishonor (the reprobate), as a demonstration of the righteous judgment of God, and vessels of honor (the elect), to express the glory of his grace.

The contrasts are clear: the love and mercy of God toward the elect are eternal, likewise with his holy anger toward the reprobate. These two groups are at the extremes of eternity and can never be reconciled. Everyone is one vessel or the other, with none in between.

Again, human pride is dashed to the ground, and the truth triumphs: We exist for God's glory, and not he for ours.

Ephesians 1: The question of causes and effects, verses 3-11

All our spiritual blessings have their cause in the elective decree of God before the foundation of the world. Thus, election is the cause, and the spiritual blessings are the effect. One of these blessings is holiness. ...*that we should be holy and blameless before him. Ephesians 1:4*

Paul does not leave us the luxury of reversing this order, nor does he suppose foreseen holiness to be the cause of our election. Otherwise, we would have to say that God put us in Christ because he foresaw we would be holy, not because he saw we were sinners and needed it. We would wind up with another so-called "gospel" of merits, rather than of grace alone.

What are these spiritual blessings derived from election, according to the context? Holiness (verse 4); love of God (verse 5); adoption (verse 5); complete acceptance (verse 6); redemption by the blood (verse 7); wisdom and spiritual intelligence (verse 8); knowledge of the will of God (verse 9); inheritance in heaven (verse 11); sealed by the Holy Spirit (verse 13).

Several arguments have been proposed in an attempt to refute this literal interpretation of Paul's teachings. A common one asserts that the election mentioned in Ephesians simply refers to the divine plan to include Gentiles in the offer of salvation, not the election of specific individuals.

The problem with this interpretation is that Paul was not a Gentile, yet he included himself in the context. He was a Jew and used the terms 'we' and 'us' in such phrases as '*we have obtained an*

inheritance. He included himself in the ‘plan’ of predestination. But in verse 13 he says, *in whom you also*. This clearly shows that his thinking was not limited to Gentiles specifically until verse 13. Between verses 1 and 12, he could only have meant Christians in general, not Gentiles specifically.

The precedence of election

Our salvation is like a multi-faceted diamond ring. The base of the ring is election, which supports the diamond. The base must be prepared beforehand before the jewel can be mounted. Likewise, it is essential that the decree of election precede every aspect of our salvation. Let’s look at some of the other facets of salvation, outside of Ephesians One, that demonstrate the precedence of election.

Election precedes saving faith

...and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. Acts 13:48

Election precedes good works

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2:10

Election precedes the covenant

I have made a covenant with my chosen one; Psalms 89:3

Election precedes effectual call

And those whom he predestined he also called (Romans 8:30).

Knowledge of our election is a source of inexhaustible joy. Its profound and practical benefits incite us to *the praise of his glorious grace* and produce stability like no other teaching can (Ephesians 1:6; 2 Peter 1:10).

How do we know we are elect?

...remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. (4) For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, 1 Thessalonians 1:3-4

Paul knew that these Thessalonians were elect because he recognized in them the three cardinal virtues: faith, hope, and love. He understood how the development of these qualities characterizes the elect.

Though God wants us to have the security of our election, this confidence may not come easily. Diligence in the practice of these virtues is central to such security. We have no right to it merely because we pray a sinner’s prayer or perform a so-called “decision” for Christ. Those are not proofs of election. The Bible always focuses on character. As Peter exhorts,

Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. 2 Peter 1:10

Some unbelievers, by force of carnal will, develop such virtues. Eventually human efforts fail, and the carnal nature will come blasting through. For the Christian, the process of sanctification is long-term and only possible through the power of the Holy Spirit. Persistence in this process is the key characteristic of the elect.

Summary

The doctrine of predestination exposes the central question in redemption. What is man's contribution to his salvation?

Human nature supposes salvation must be a cooperative work between God and man. God responds to man's efforts by granting grace. If this is correct, then grace is not sovereign. The various false gospels differ as to precisely what it is that man contributes. Some want to contribute good works and penitence. Others respond that the only thing we contribute is faith through our good will, along with the resolve to be obedient to evangelical norms. None of that is the gospel.

Self-deception is at work in such "gospels" because they miss the key point: it is not *what* we contribute but whether we contribute anything at all!

How the doctrine of sovereign election benefits us

Election confronts us with our own corrupt nature like no other teaching. It exposes our inability and leads us to a confrontation with God's holy and sovereign nature. It assaults human self-sufficiency mercilessly. It exposes humanism of every brand, secular and religious. Human pride cannot stand up to an assault like this. Carnal pride, even among the regenerate, *must* oppose this teaching because it cannot bear the demeaning thought that man contributes nothing to his own salvation. Pride must choose to be dashed to pieces or turn away.

The doctrine of election is as painful as it is glorious; powerfully comforting; bitter as it is sweet. It gives strength in trials, perseverance in persecution, confidence in prayer, and security in our relationship with the Father. It puts man in his place. More importantly, it puts God in *his* place as sovereign Lord.

For the believer, election soon becomes more than a doctrine. It draws us into a magnitude of experience where we touch something hidden and profound. We feel eternity in our souls.

Questions about election

Question 1: In 2 Peter 3:9 we read... *not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.*

Does this text contradict the concept of election?

Answer: The context of the verse confirms election, rather than contradicts it.

In verse 8 we notice that the recipients of Peter's letter are the elect, the *beloved* of God, according to Colossians 3:12.

More importantly, to what *promise* is Peter referring in verse 9? *The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise...* The promise in the context is of the second coming of Christ and the day of the Lord. It is not the promise of an offer of salvation for all humanity¹⁷, but rather a promise to the Church about final liberation from this corrupt world.

Peter is exhorting Christians about the delay in Christ's return. He reminds them the delay is for a reason. When the body of Christ has been completed with the addition of every last member meant to be added, then Christ will return.

Another glaring problem with the above question is this: If God intended to save all, why not send Christ immediately? Is God unaware that five million children are born in the world every day and that, according to statistics, only a small fraction of these will come to salvation?

Therefore, considering both context and logic, the only possible interpretation of the phrase, *not wishing that any should perish*, resides in the divine intention to redeem all the elect and not humanity in general.

Let's run through 2 Peter 3:9 again, with some explanatory comments to clarify it:

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise [of the second coming of Christ] as some count slowness, but is patient toward you [the elect], not wishing that any [of the elect] should perish but that all [the elect] should reach repentance.

Question 2: Paul affirms in 1 Timothy 2:4 that God *desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*

Doesn't this suggest that God wants everyone to be saved, and therefore that election and reprobation are false?

The context of the phrase "all people" brings to light the correct interpretation:

In verse 1, Paul exhorts Timothy to pray for all people. Then in verse 2, he clarifies he means people of all kinds, including kings and those in authority. Paul exhorts Timothy not to limit his prayers to the poor only but to extend his vision to the ruling classes also. We see, in this way, that the phrase "all people" means "all without distinction of classes," not "all without exception of person."

The expression "all" or "all men" is repeated scores of times in Scripture. In fewer than 10 percent of the cases does it mean all of humanity. Normally it means all sorts of people without regard to ethnicity or social class.

Another helpful text is Titus 2:11. Paul says, "For *the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people*.... The message of Christ had not been revealed to the Chinese or to the Aztecs. Paul simply means the universality of the gospel, which transcends racial and cultural boundaries. For Paul, *all people* means Gentiles also and not just Jews only.

Question 3: If election is true, why bother to evangelize?

We evangelize because God commanded it. Although God is all-powerful and can use any means he chooses, he has ordained the preaching of his word as the means to save his elect.

Question 4: If election is true, why pray to God to save souls?

Likewise, if salvation depends on the will of man, why bother to pray to God? Why not erect an altar dedicated to the Will of Man and pray to it? For if God is waiting passively and impotently in heaven for man to decide, then we are wasting our time to pray to him.

As with the preaching of his word, so God uses prayer as a means to accomplish his purposes. He gives us the privilege of participating in those purposes.

Other evidence

Although the Bible is the story of God's elective decrees, the limitations of this study prevent a detailed analysis of all the texts on election.

We recommend that the student avoid a common error in the study of this theme: getting lost in the details and forgetting the overall pattern of the Bible as a whole. The pattern is simple: God, by his sovereign will, chose a people for salvation without taking into account their merits. God instituted a covenant of grace and provided a blood sacrifice to confirm and guarantee the preservation of the participants. The order of events is clear: election, covenant, sacrifice, and preservation. Any other order is a mistake.

Other texts on election are:

John 13:18; Mark 13:20; Romans 11:5; 1 Corinthians 1:27-28; Titus 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:4; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 1:9

Review Questions: Election

1. Election is controversial because: (Mark one)
 - A. Not much evidence exists in the Bible to support it.
 - B. Human pride rebels against it.
 - C. This doctrine dishonors God.

2. Predestination means: _____.

3. Election means: _____.

4. True or False: _____ The words "predestination" and "election" are similar but not exactly the same.

5. True or False: _____ Those who deny the doctrine of election do not understand correctly the meaning of the word 'grace.'

6. The two paradox proofs are:
 - A. _____
 - B. _____

7. In what text does Paul anticipate the objection based on the concept of justice?

8. The only correct doctrine concerning election is that it tempts man to say, _____

9. Paul answered the objection based on the concept of justice by: (Mark one)
 - A. An apologetic attitude in the face of the objection.
 - B. Answering the objection by a detailed explanation.
 - C. Affirming the right of God to do with what belongs to him, without explanations or apology to anyone.

10. To suggest that God is unjust in his decrees of election is no less than _____.

11. In an election, some receive _____, others receive _____, but no one receives _____.

12. The word "foreknowledge" means _____.

13. There are three things that just don't count as the causes of election because they also are works of grace in man. These are:
 - A. _____
 - B. _____
 - C. _____

14. When the Scriptures use the word "foreknowledge" in reference to God's activities, then it can only mean _____.

15. True or False: _____ In the Scriptures, there exists a clear relationship between election, and the way in which God foresees that people will respond.

16. To support the idea of *foreknowledge* as a refutation of the doctrine of election, it is necessary to deny one of two important attributes of God. These are:

- A. _____
- B. _____

Questions on Romans 9

17. Romans 9 contains three illustrations on election. These are:

- A. _____
- B. _____
- C. _____

18. True or False: _____ In the first illustration, Paul speaks only of personal election, not national election also.

19. Some say that in Romans 9, Paul is speaking of national election only and not about personal election. Some refutations of this are:

- A. _____
- B. _____

20. Jacob and Esau are symbols, respectively, of the _____ and the _____.

21. True or False: _____ God chose Jacob rather than Esau because he saw beforehand that Jacob had a good heart.

22. True or False: _____ God has a special, private love for the elect that he does not have for humanity in general.

23. The love of God is _____ and not _____.

24. The most important verse in Romans 9 to show that election has no basis in the will of man is

25. In the second illustration, that of Pharaoh, the doctrine of _____ is revealed.

26. Explain in your own words why election and reprobation do not work exactly in the same way.

27. True or False: _____ In the third illustration, Paul denies categorically that man has a will.

28. The reprobate exists to demonstrate _____. The elect exists to demonstrate _____.

29. True or False: _____ God's primary concern is the welfare of mankind.

Questions relative to Ephesians 1

30. All spiritual blessings belong to us because: (Mark one)

- A. God chose us before the foundation of the world.
- B. God foresaw us beforehand as being in Christ.
- C. We are evangelicals.

31. Some of the spiritual benefits belonging to the elect are: _____

32. Two of the anti-predestinarian arguments, in the face of Ephesians 1, are:

- A. _____
- B. _____

33. True or False: _____ The phrase "chosen in Christ" means chosen because we were in Christ.

Questions on reprobation

34. True or False: _____ The doctrine of reprobation is agreeable to man.

35. To reprobate a person, God must: (Mark one)

- A. Oblige the person to sin, whether the person wants to sin or not.
- B. Tempt the sinner.
- C. Act in accord with the sinful choices that the sinner himself desires to make.

36. True or False: _____ God does no injustice to the reprobate in condemning them.

37. True or False: _____ God is completely passive in reprobation.

38. God hardens the hearts of the reprobate by: (Mark one)

- A. Hiding from them the truth of the gospel.
- B. Presenting them the truth, letting them act in accord with their own sinful natures.
- C. Simply ignoring them.

39. True or False: _____ God gives the gift of faith to all.

40. True or False: _____ God always works for the salvation of everyone.

Answers: 1=B; 2=Foreordained 3=Divine decree to chose some for salvation; 4=V; 5=V; 6=Objection on the grounds of concept of justice and objection on the grounds of foreknowledge 7=Romans Chap. 9; 8=That is not fair!; 9=C; 10=Arguing with God; 11=Mercy, justice, injustice

12=Know beforehand 13=A. Faith B. Good works, C. Good will; 14=Fore-ordained; 15=F; 16=Omniscient; 17=Jacob and Esau; Pharaoh; Potter and clay; 18=F; 19=A. Nations are made up of individuals. B. The context refers to individuals 20=Elect, reprobate 21=F; 22=V; 23=Particular, universal; 24=verse 16; 25=Reprobation; see text; 27=F; 28=God's justice, God's mercy 29=F; 30=A; 31=Holiness, love, adoption, redemption, sealed (See Ephesians One); 32=A. Refers to the plan of God to include the Gentiles; They claim the phrase "in Christ" means that God foresees we were going to accept Christ; 33=F; 34=F; 35=C; 36=V; 37=F; 38=B; 39=F; 40=F

Chapter Five: Sacrifice of Christ

In the previous chapter we saw that God divides humanity into two camps: the elect and the reprobate. We saw how the reprobate serve to demonstrate the righteous judgment of God. The question we must now consider is whether God sent Jesus to save reprobates.

The answer is obvious. God is too wise to send Christ to save those whom he did not elect.

Before proceeding, we must clarify a misunderstanding: The sufficiency of the cross for all mankind has never been questioned among Christians. The sacrifice of Christ contains enough virtue and power to save a whole universe of sinners. It could even save the devil and all his demons if that had been the intention of the Father. Whether or not an individual is savable depends on the *intentions* of the Father, not on his *ability*. The cross is unlimited in saving power.

Clearly a limitation of *some* sort must exist if not all are saved. Defining our terms will help clarify where the point of limitation is located.

Definition

The death of Jesus guarantees the salvation of all the elect. He fulfilled all the conditions in such a way that man contributes nothing. Even the necessary conditions of salvation, such as faith, obedience, repentance, and perseverance, were provided for in that moment of death.

The faith and obedience of the elect is born out of the cross, not out of the free will of man. God owes no thanks to the elect for their obedience. Quite the reverse. They owe it all to the cross.

So when we preach about the completed work of Christ, we mean the cross accomplished all the purposes for which it occurred; no more and no less. It was not a partially failed enterprise. In theology, we use the term "efficacious" to describe this concept.

If we say a hammer is efficacious, we mean it can drive nails into a board. If we say a detective is efficacious, we mean he is good at catching crooks. We cannot say a thing is efficacious if it fails to fulfill its purpose.

Other terms for this doctrine are "particular redemption" or "limited atonement." These express that the Father sent Jesus with the mission of saving certain individuals in particular, not to save all humanity in general. The opposite of this teaching is called "universal atonement." 18

Essentially, if any of those for whom Christ died could perish, then we should stop calling the cross *efficacious*.

So, this issue deals with two inseparable questions: First, what effect did his sacrifice have on those for whom he died? If we answer this one clearly, then we already have the answer to the second question: For whom did Christ die?

Why is this question important?

It is central to the stability of our walk with God. If the faith and obedience of the elect may be ultimately attributed to their own will, rather than the efficacy of the cross, then Christ is a partial savior only and deserves only a part of the glory. We would again have a performance-based relationship with God, rather than one grounded in a work completed by God himself.

Every false religion in the world and every distorted version of the Christian gospel says, "Do!" The true one says, "Done!"

The biblical evidence

Particular redemption in the Gospel of John

Before the Reformation, those who taught that Christ came to save the elect were sometimes called Johannian scholars because they based much of their thinking on the Gospel of John. The term "Augustinian" was also used because St. Augustine in the fifth century was one of the first theologians to teach the doctrines of grace systematically. These scholars taught that the correct doctrine regarding redemption could be deduced from the following considerations:

1. Christ came to accomplish the will of the Father (6:38).
2. The will of the Father was to save only those he gave to Christ (6:39).
3. Christ accomplished with complete success the work the Father had given him to do (17:4).

The logical conclusion is that Christ came to save the elect, not the entire world, and he accomplished this task with complete success. He did not come to save the whole world and then return to heaven having succeeded only in part. He is a completely successful savior.

Of sheep and goats: John Chapter 10

In this chapter, Jesus revealed that he came to give his life for *the sheep* ... *I lay down my life for the sheep*, (verse 15).

A man stood up in church to give a testimony. He explained how the Lord had changed him from a goat to a sheep. His intentions were good, but the illustration was defective: Goats never change into sheep nor sheep into goats. Different species! A lot can happen to sheep. They can get lost, get dirty, or be robbed, injured, or killed. But they can never change into goats.



**He Came To Save
His Sheep**

John Chapter 10 illustrates both the limitation and the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice. He perceives the sheep as his own before he even comes to save them. *I came that they may have life and have it abundantly* (verse 10). They were his but with a defect; they were dead. They needed resurrecting.

Christ transferred his life to the sheep via his sacrifice for them. *The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep* (verse 11). Notice he never said, "I came to give my life for both sheep and goats."

Nevertheless, the sheep are under the obligation to *believe*, right? Naturally! However, faith is

not the reason they are sheep. They receive the gift of saving faith *because* they are sheep. This kind of faith is therefore a *result* rather than a *cause*. Notice verse 26:

... but you do not believe, because you are not among my sheep ...

Let's take a careful look at this verse. Jesus does not teach we are sheep because we believed. He says we believe because we are sheep.

In reference to the power of the cross, J.I. Packer mentions,

“Its saving power does not depend on faith being added to it; its saving power is such that faith flows from it.”¹⁸

Finally, the sheep receive eternal life (verse 28). They do not become sheep by the act of receiving eternal life because they were already sheep.

What determines that some become sheep and others not? Their own faith or free will? No. They are sheep because of an elective decree of the Father. The work done in them is because they were given to Jesus, who never fails.

Those the Father gave to Jesus

Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus repeats in prayers to the Father the phrase, *those whom you have given to me*. This answers the central question as to whom the Father sent Jesus to save.

Let's open our Bibles and follow an analysis of John 6:37-45, 65.

First, we belonged to God the Father by a divine decree before we belonged to Christ. *All that the Father gives me will come to me (verse 37)*.

This phrase, *those whom the Father has given to me*, is the key to understanding the entire Gospel of John. God gave certain people to Christ as gifts in order to save them. He did not send the Savior to save whom he could, but to save those the Father gave him.

Second, those the Father gave him will come to him. How do they come? The Father will draw them.

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. John 6:44

In one brilliant statement, Jesus declares the following teachings:

1. Unsaved people are incapable of choosing Christ on their own initiative, (total inability)
2. The power of the Father alone brings people to Christ, and he alone conquers the natural resistance of the sinner (effectual call).
3. The Father saves infallibly all whom he draws and preserves them until the resurrection of the just (sovereign regeneration and security of the elect).¹⁹

Coming to Christ is not a notion sinners generate by their own initiative because they are incapable of that. The Father plants the idea and makes them willing to come.

The will of the Father is the determining factor in everything. Christ knows that the Father will accomplish his purposes. In John 6:39, Christ indicated the content of the Father's will.

And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.

It is impossible for any to perish of those whom the Father gave to Christ because an irresistible will undertakes to accomplish a salvation via an infallible Savior.

A good summary of the point from J.I. Packer,

“Christ did not win a hypothetical salvation for hypothetical believers, a mere possibility of salvation for any who might possibly believe, but a real salvation for his own chosen people.”²⁰

Analysis of John 17

This high priestly prayer by Jesus reveals the intentions of the Father in sending him to earth. What precisely were those intentions? Did Christ fulfill them in part or totally? This chapter repeats seven times the key phrase, *those you gave me*.

Verse 2 - Christ has power over all flesh. *...you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him*. This shows human flesh is unable to resist his will. According to the will of the Father, Christ gives eternal life only to those the Father has given him.

Verse 4- Christ completed the work the Father gave him...*having accomplished the work that you gave him to do*. Some believers have asked, why didn't Christ save the entire world? If this had been the work the Father had committed to him, he would have accomplished it.

Verse 6- Christ revealed the Father only to those the Father had given him. *I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me,...*

Verse 9 - If Christ came to save the entire world, why didn't he pray for the world? Yet he refused to pray for the entire world. He prayed for the elect only. *I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.*

Verse 11- Christ pleaded that the Father would preserve those the Father had given him. Does the Father answer the prayers of Jesus? *I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.*

Verse 12 - None of those whom Christ keeps are lost. He keeps those the Father gives him. *I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost...*

Kept from evil (verse 15), sanctified (verse 17), sent into the world (verse 18), united with God the Father (verse 21), God's glory is in them (verse 22), they will be with Christ forever (verse 24)

Verse 20—Was he referring to the twelve disciples only? *I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word.*

Verse 23- Notice the private and particular love of God for the elect. The Father loves the elect, just as he loves his only Son. *and loved them even as you loved me.*

Verse 24- Christ prays that those the Father has given him may be with him forever. *Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am.*

If we believe the intercessory ministry of Christ is effectual, then the elect receive all these benefits for which Christ prayed.

Summary of particular redemption in John's Gospel

The conclusion is inescapable. If Jesus came to save only those the Father gave him, then he died only for those.

We are gifts of the Father to Christ. God sent Jesus to secure the salvation of those the Father gave him. Christ provided for those alone a guaranteed salvation by his death on the cross and his ministry of intercession as high priest.

By his irresistible power, the Father draws the elect to Christ. He regenerates them and preserves them infallibly for his glory.

A glorious impossibility: Romans 8:32-34

Paul declares, without the slightest ambiguity, the impossibility that any for whom Christ died could be lost. God accepts no accusations against those for whom Christ died because that sacrifice justifies them. Paul identifies these as the elect.

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. Romans 8:32-34

According to verse 32, the benefits of the sacrifice of Christ invariably reach those for whom he gave his life. The phrase "us *all*" refers in context to all believers. It means those who are predestinated, called, and justified (verse 30), who receive God's favor (verse 31); the elect (verse 33), who are not condemned (verse 34), whom God loves and preserves (verses 35-39).

In verse 33, Paul shows that God accepts no accusations against his elect and justified people because Christ died for them.

In verse 34, it is impossible that any of those be condemned for whom Christ died and resurrected and for whom he intercedes.

In this text we see the doctrine of particular redemption is not a philosophical fantasy, nor the fruit of theological reasoning. Paul expounds it with the utmost clarity.

The covenant of grace: The foundation of the Bible

Imagine ourselves standing in front of a house with the blueprint in hand. The house is lovely, with a logical structure. Everything is functional and normal.

Strangely, the house does not correspond to the blueprint. The windows are different. The door is on the wrong side. Obviously the blueprint is for another house.

The New Testament fulfills the Old Testament blueprint of divine redemption. We can study redemption from two angles: by noting the pattern of Old Testament history, we can predict the what sort of redemption we will find in the New Testament. Or, by studying the New Testament, we could predict the general nature of Old Testament history.

Suppose biblical redemption were as follows: God intended to save everyone. So he sent Christ to die on the cross with the intention of saving them all. This created a covenant of grace for everyone that they could enter by their free will. Upon believing, they would enter the covenant where they would have salvation guaranteed if they continued contributing their goodwill and evangelical obedience.

Is this biblical redemption? If this is a valid possibility, then we ought to read in the Old Testament the following scenario:

God loved all nations and wanted to enter into covenant with them. So he sacrificed a lamb for all the nations so they could enter it via their free will. Then he sent prophets throughout the world to the Romans, Chinese, Aztecs, and others, inviting them to enter his covenant. Unfortunately, the only people that wanted to enter were good-natured people, known for their generosity, obedience to God, and rather good-looking, too. These were the Jews.

Is this the plan of redemption we see in the Old Testament?

We notice all nations lost in idolatry and depravity. Nevertheless, God chose a people by pure sovereign election. These were the Jews. He did this because of his grace alone, not because of merits or foreseen obedience in them. God entered into covenant with them. To ratify this covenant, he instituted a lamb sacrifice. The lamb was intended for them only, not for any other nation. By that sacrifice, God made his elect people acceptable.

By this scenario, we can deduce the kind of redemption story that should be found in the New Testament. God has a people chosen by grace, without consideration of merits foreseen in them. He entered into covenant with his elect and sent Christ to confirm it by his sacrifice. Thus, God saved all his elect.

Which of these two scenarios is biblical? Notice the clear order of events: First, God chose a people. He then made an eternal covenant with them. Finally, he provided a sacrifice to confirm it and sanctify his people. Since the cross of Christ confirmed the covenant made with the elect, it follows that the sacrifice was intended for the elect in particular and them only.

Election, covenant, sacrifice. This is biblical redemption and nothing else is.

Does Christ confirm the covenant for some or for all?

...for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. Matthew 26:28

The blood of Jesus was the *blood of the new covenant*. If the elect alone participate in the covenant and if Christ poured out his blood to confirm the covenant, then Christ died with the intent of saving the elect alone.

...how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. 15 Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance... Hebrews 9:14-15

Christ is the mediator of the new covenant for those called to it. Note here the idea of *effectual call*. His blood cleanses the conscience of these alone, and they receive the promise of an eternal inheritance. Both the power and the limitation involved in his sacrifice are clearly expressed. He died to guarantee the cleansing of all those called to an eternal inheritance.

The intercession of Christ as high priest

The ministry of the Jewish priest involved two activities: first, offering sacrifices for the sins of the people. Second, interceding for them on the basis of the sacrifice offered.

Notice the inseparable link between the sacrifice offered and the persons for whom the priest interceded. He never interceded for anyone without first offering a sacrifice for that person.

Suppose we could transport ourselves to a time about twenty-eight hundred years ago and enter the temple of Jerusalem to watch the rituals performed. We notice a priest cutting the throat of a lamb in front of the altar. We ask him, "Priest, why are you killing this lamb?" The priest answers, "I must approach the altar to intercede for a family that has sinned. The Lord will not allow me approach without the blood of the lamb." Immediately we understand the lamb was sacrificed for a certain family.

Suppose we return the next day but arrive late. The priest has already sacrificed the lamb and entered the temple to pray. We ask, “For whom was this lamb sacrificed?” It looks like we’ll never know because the priest has already entered the temple. Promptly, one of us suggests, “If we could hear the priest praying, we could deduce for whom the lamb was sacrificed.”

Quickly, we run around to the back of the tabernacle and put our ears to the wall. We hear the priest saying, “Lord, forgive the sins of the Josiah family, and have mercy on them.” Now we know for whom the lamb was slain because we know the priest intercedes only for those for whom the sacrifice was made.

How does this relate to the ministry of our high priest, Jesus Christ? Let’s listen again at the back wall. This time, we are listening to Christ himself in his intercessory ministry.

*I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.
John 17:9*

If Christ died with the intention of saving all, then why isn’t he praying for all? If he intercedes for some, it can only be because his sacrifice was intended for them alone.

Jesus, as our high priest, performs both functions of the priesthood: sacrifice and intercession. Like the priests of old, he fulfills these functions for the covenant people only.

The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest forever.’” This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant. Hebrews 7:21-22

Summary of Evidence

Theological reasoning is not the only evidence available to prove the particular nature of Christ’s sacrifice. The Scriptures declare it clearly that Christ came to save:

His people ... *and you shall call his name Jesus, for He will save his people from their sins. Matthew 1:21.*

His sheep: ... *and I lay down my life for the sheep. John 10:15*

His church: ... *the church of God which he obtained with his own blood. Acts 20:28*

His elect: *Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Romans 8:3, 33.*

Those who participate In his covenant: *Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, Hebrews 9:15*

Those for whom Christ intercedes: *I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. John 17:9*

Those the Father gave to Christ: *Of those whom you gave me I have lost not one. John 18:9*

Logical evidence

Since we know some will be saved and others not, it follows that a limitation exists relative to the sacrifice of Christ. Otherwise, all would be saved.

All evangelical Christians believe, therefore, in a limited atonement. We differ on the question of exactly *how* it is limited. The limitation could only involve one of two domains: Either the cross is limited in its *power*, or it is limited in its *intention*.

If we say the sacrifice is intended for everyone but not all are saved, then something is lacking in its power. A human supplement must be added to make it complete.

If we say it is unlimited in its power, yet not all are saved, then we are forced to conclude it was intended only for some.

The key question, though, is whether the cross depends on cooperation from man to make it efficacious. We have already seen that man contributes nothing to his salvation. Even the exercise of his faith and free will is the result of divine grace.

This forces us to a conclusion: The efficacy of the cross depends on itself alone, not on the cooperative actions of man. We cannot have it both ways. If the power of the cross depends on the cooperative work of man, then it is not a *completed* sacrifice. Conversely, if the cross is truly complete and effective in itself, then it cannot fail to produce the requisite cooperative actions in those for whom it is intended.

If the benefits of the cross come *infallibly* to those for whom Christ was given, then it was for them alone. This sacrifice is worthy of trust because it guarantees a complete work of sanctification.

How should the message of the cross be preached?

For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 1 Corinthians 2:2

A dilemma presents itself for those who understand the power of the Christ's sacrifice. They feel restricted from saying to an unbeliever, "Christ died for you." And they are right. In one sense, this is restrictive. If we cannot say this, what then *should* we say?

J.I. Packer notes this tension:

"We want (rightly) to proclaim Christ as Savior; yet we end up saying that Christ, having made salvation possible, has left us to become our own saviors. It comes about in this way. We want to magnify the saving grace of God and the saving power of Christ. So we declare that God's redeeming love extends to every man and that Christ has died to save every man, and we proclaim that the glory of divine mercy is to be measured by these facts. And then, in order to avoid universalism, we have to depreciate all that we were previously extolling and to

explain that, after all, nothing that God and Christ have done can save us unless we add something to it; the decisive factor that actually saves us is our own believing. What we say comes to this—that Christ saves us with our help; and what that means, when one thinks it out, is this—that we save ourselves with Christ’s help. This is a hollow anticlimax.”²¹

The answer to this tension is a beautiful paradox. The purpose of a clearer understanding of the cross is not to limit our preaching but to free us to focus better on the saving *power* of the cross. We tell people that the cross saves *completely* and *surely* all who trust in Jesus.

We have in the cross a sure salvation, a sovereign Savior who saves to the end and initiates reconciliation with an infinitely holy God. He pardons all our sins and incorporates us into an eternal covenant via a cross that preserves us forever. This is what the apostles preached.

On the other hand, the doctrine of *universal atonement* contains serious contradictions that can provoke a thoughtful person to reject the gospel. If Christ died with the intention of saving all, then he accomplished little more than a mere fraction of his intention. In this case, he is largely a failed savior.

Worse, he cannot save *me* unless I help him by cooperating with my free will and evangelical obedience. This translates ultimately into saving oneself with a bit of help from a so-called savior who could only give it a shot and hope for the best. Why bother to trust in a savior like that?

It is contradictory to preach a powerful cross if it is man, not God, who makes it work.

Moreover, it is difficult to preach a sovereign God unless he is able to fulfill his intentions. He could hardly be worshiped as wise if he undertook a purpose that he himself never intended to complete.

Finally, no such thing as security of salvation could exist for anyone unless the gift of perseverance is a benefit purchased in the cross. This would make salvation a gospel of merits. That is precisely what universal atonement leads to.

An intelligent unbeliever, upon hearing that Christ died to save everyone but few will be saved, would conclude instantly he is not hearing about a sovereign Savior. He would understand that such a cross has no power to save or preserve anybody. Fortunately, most are not so thoughtful. By God’s grace, ironically, unbelievers skip over the contradictions in modern preaching.

When we preach the cross, let’s declare a totally efficacious Savior. His cross guarantees a sure salvation for every believer. It is the certainty of a future perfection. We can explain that the final words of Jesus, *It is finished*, mean a complete salvation to which nothing can be added. All is of grace.

Questions on the sacrifice of Christ

Question 1: The concept of propitiation for the whole world is apparently proclaimed in 1 John 2:2 *He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.* Doesn't this refute the idea of a sacrifice limited to the elect?

Answer: This verse is considered the bulwark of the doctrine of universal atonement. It explains, supposedly, that the death of Christ expiates not only the sins of Christians but also those of all the lost. It is said that the word "our" refers to all Christians, and the phrase *the whole world* refers to all the lost.

Whether this interpretation is correct depends on rules of biblical interpretation. Two rules in particular apply here: Context and ordinary word usage.

First, let's give a clear definition of the key words used. What does the word "propitiation" mean? It signifies "appease wrath." The New Testament uses it five times to show the wrath of God is appeased regarding sin. According to 1 John 2:2, the wrath of God is appeased with respect to somebody. It is now necessary to deduce who those persons are from the context.

Let's assume God's wrath is appeased for everyone in the entire world. What then of the hundreds of verses that announce the wrath of God toward sinners? What of the book of Revelation, which depicts his wrath to be poured out on the whole world? The cross apparently did not appease the wrath of God toward the entire world because otherwise nobody would be condemned.

The word "propitiation" in Romans 3:25 expresses appeasement only for those justified by faith in Christ.

In 1 John 2:2, the apostle declares that God's wrath is appeased toward those brothers to whom he is writing and toward all other believers throughout the world. If God is angry with no one, then we are forced to the conclusion that all are saved.

Second, who are the brothers to whom John is writing? This epistle is directed to Jewish Christians. We read in John 2:7 of a divine commandment that the hearers had received *from the beginning*. Only Jews, not Gentiles, had received commandments from God.

The Book of Acts shows first-century Jewish Christians tending to forget that Gentile believers were just as accepted in Christ as they were. Their Jewish background led them to feel superior. John, in this letter, tells them Christ died for the scattered believers in the whole world, not just believing Jews.

Below is a study of the words "world" and "whole world" to show they rarely mean all of humanity.

- A. Believers in the world: Luke 2:1; John 12:19.
- B. Unbelievers in the world: John 15:18; 16:20; 17:14; 2 Peter 2:5; 1 John 5:19; Revelation 13:3; 16:14.
- C. The universe: Acts 2:4
- D. People of all ethnic groups in the world: John 1:29; John 1:10

E. The general public: John 7:4; 12:19; 14:22

Out of the 105 times John uses the word world in his writings, in only 11 cases can it mean *every human being*. Even in those 11 cases, such an interpretation is doubtful. The basic rule for interpreting biblical words is this: the meaning of a word is determined by its most frequent usage, unless the context shows the need for another meaning.

Question 2: Certain texts use the word all, in reference to the sacrifice of Christ. Examples:

...who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (6) who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time. 1 Timothy 2:4, 6

Other texts are Hebrews 2:9 and 2 Corinthians 5:14-15. How does this correspond with the idea of limited atonement for the elect?

Answer: We have already affirmed the hypothetical sufficiency of the cross for all mankind. The point we deny is that the divine intention in sending Christ was to save all. Nevertheless, it is easy to show the word "all" in these texts does not mean all humanity without exception of person. Let us focus principally on 1 Timothy 2:4, 6, because the same arguments that apply to this text apply to similar ones also.

The word "all people" or "all men" in this context means *all* without distinction of *class or race*, not *all* without exception of *person*. The context, along with a brief study of this phrase throughout the Bible, confirms this.

This phrase "all men" appears hundreds of times in the Bible. In less than 10% of the cases can it mean every person that has ever existed. Normally it means all sorts of people.

One example is Titus 2:11: *For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.*

At the time Paul wrote this, the grace of God had not *appeared* to everyone in the world. Is Paul exaggerating? No. He is simply saying the gospel is universal and transcends the limits of culture and race. God has elect people among the nations also, not among Jews only.

Another example is Acts 2:17, "*I will pour out my Spirit on all ...* In the day of Pentecost, only a few people received the Spirit. People of all *kinds* are mentioned here, without distinctions of ages or social standing.

Is there something in 1 Timothy that would lead us to ignore 90% of the biblical evidence concerning the use of the phrase all men? The context shows limitations as to the interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:4, 6.

Notice verses 1 and 2: *...prayers ...for kings and all who are in high positions...* Paul mentions civil authorities specifically. The gospel must be preached even to pagan rulers, with prayer

offered for them because some may be elect. In verse 7, Paul shows he has Gentiles in mind when he says *all people*.

The message of 1 Timothy 2 is that God wishes to save people of all kinds, Gentiles also, not just Jews; even some rulers, not just the poor. Nothing in that chapter text teaches universal atonement.

Below follows a brief study on the biblical usage of the terms "all" and "all men."

A. All believers: 3 Jn. 12; Acts 17:31; Acts 2:45; 1 Corinthians 7:7; Romans 16:19.

B. All unbelievers: Luke 21:17; Apoc. 19:18; 2 Timothy 4:16

C. People of every class (i.e., people without exception of class, but not without exception of person.) Mark 1:37; Luke 3:15; John 3:26; 13:35; Acts 2:17; 21:28; 2 Co. 3:2; 2 Timothy 4:16; Titus 2:11

D. Everyone present: Mark 5:20; Acts 4:21; 20:19; 20:26

Question 3: If limited atonement is the correct doctrine, then isn't God insincere in offering salvation to all based on the sacrifice of Jesus?

Answer: The cross of Christ is sufficient in power to save any number of sinners. Therefore, on the grounds of this sufficiency, it is not contradictory for God to offer salvation to all.

Speaking hypothetically, would God forgive a reprobate on the grounds of Christ's sacrifice were he to come to Christ? Yes! The *sufficiency* of the cross shows the barrier in coming to Christ resides entirely in the sinner. God never built a wall between himself and any man. The wall is in man's own nature, not God's.

Further, the question above contains a hidden presupposition that deserves careful examination.

The assumption is that the gospel is *primarily* an offer of salvation. We heartily agree it is an *offer*. We question whether this offer is what is intended by God *primarily*.

Let's look at a common element in the gospel as preached by prominent biblical figures:

...repent, and believe in the gospel. Mark 1:15

...and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. Luke 24:47

Repent therefore and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, ... Acts 3:19

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30).

...testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Acts 20:21

What is central in these verses? Repentance! Now let's ask, if Christ never came and died for anybody at all, would God still require repentance?

Absolutely! God's holiness must be vindicated above all. In the creature-creator relationship, rebellious subjects owe repentance despite any other considerations.

The call to repentance is inherent in the gospel. Therefore, it makes sense to offer the gospel to all mankind. The assumption is that God will accept the repentance of a sinner. Why a reprobate will not repent is another subject. To demonstrate that God is insincere in offering the gospel to all mankind, it would be necessary to prove he would not accept such repentance. Nothing in the doctrine of limited atonement suggests this.

Review Questions: Sacrifice of Christ

1. True or False: _____ The death of Christ accomplished all the conditions of salvation for the elect, except faith and obedience.
2. Other names for our doctrine are _____ or _____.
3. Universal atonement means that Christ died for: (Mark one)
 - A. The elect only
 - B. All of humanity
4. Limited atonement means that Christ died for: (Mark one)
 - A. The elect only
 - B. All of humanity
5. Explain in your own words why this doctrine is important.

6. True or False: _____ Conversion to Christ means God changes goats to sheep.
7. Christ came to give his life for the _____, according to John 10.
8. How does Christ transfer his life to the sheep? _____
9. True or False: _____ A believer's faith is a *result* of being a sheep, not the *cause* of being a sheep.
10. True or False: _____ We make ourselves the Lord's sheep by receiving eternal life.
11. We become the Lord's sheep by: (Mark one)
 - A. A decision of our free will.
 - B. By our faith in Christ.
 - C. By an eternal decree of God the Father in giving us to Christ.

12. The key phrase for understanding the Gospel of John is _____.
13. True or False: _____ We belong to God the Father by a divine decree before belonging to Christ.
14. An analysis of John 6:37-45 and 65 revealed to us certain important truths. These are
 A. _____
 B. _____
 C. _____
15. How many of the doctrines of grace are proven by John 6:44?
16. In which chapter of the Bible is found the high-priestly prayer of Christ before he went to the cross? _____
17. According to John 17, to whom does Christ give eternal life? _____
18. Christ accomplished: (Choose one)
 A. All the work the Father gave him to do.
 B. Part of the work the Father gave him to do.
 C. Whatever he could, according to the ability of man to the cooperation he could get from people.
19. When Christ said that he preserves all those the Father has given to him, he is talking about: (Choose one)
 A. The twelve disciples only.
 B. Believers of all epochs of history.
 C. Those who keep themselves faithful by the power of their free will.
20. The great impossibility that Paul expresses in Romans 8:32-34 consists in that _____.
21. In Romans 8:33, Paul shows that God does not receive accusations against his elect and justified people because: (Choose one)
 A. God only justifies those whom he knows beforehand are going to be faithful.
 B. Christ died for them.
 C. They are worthy.
22. True or False: _____ Our doctrine is the product of theological reasoning only and not because they are clearly expressed in the Bible.
23. The biblical pattern of redemption follows three specific steps in the two Testaments. These are: _____
24. For whom is Christ the mediator of the new covenant according to Hebrews 9:14-15?

25. The two aspects of Christ's sacerdotal ministry, along with the Jewish priests in the Old Testament, are:

- A. _____
- B. _____

26. True or False: _____ As a faithful high priest, Christ intercedes only for those for whom he made sacrifice.

27. True or False: _____ Christ interceded for the salvation of the world.

28. Fill in the following blanks:

- A. According to Matthew 1:21, Christ died for _____.
- B. According to John 10:15, Christ died for _____.
- C. According to Ephesians 5:25, Christ died for _____.
- D. According to Hebrews 9:15, Christ died for _____.
- E. According to John 17:9, Christ intercedes for _____.

29. The logical conclusion of the doctrine of universal atonement, if it were true, is that _____.

30. If all humanity is not going to be saved, then we must conclude that the cross had one of two limitations: (Choose one)

- A. Limited in its effectiveness.
- B. Limited in the extent of its intention.

31. The word "propitiation" means _____.

32. The correct interpretation of 1 John 2:2 is: (Choose one)
- A. Christ appeased the wrath of God toward all of humanity.
 - B. Christ appeased the wrath of God toward all believers throughout the whole world.
 - C. Christ did not appease the wrath of God toward anyone.
33. True or False: _____ The word "world," the term "whole world" in the Bible, normally refers to the entire human race.
34. In the Bible, the words "all" and "all men" normally mean:
- A. Every human being that has existed.
 - B. Every kind of human being.
 - C. All Gentiles but not all Jews.
35. True or False: _____ The doctrine of universal atonement contains more limitations than the doctrine of limited atonement.

Answers: 1=F; 2=Particular redemption; universal atonement; 3=B; 4=A; 5=See text; 6=F; 7=Sheep; 8=Gave his life for them; 9=T; 10=F; 11=C; 12=Those the Father has given Me; 13=T; 14=First, we belong to God by divine decree before belonging to Christ; Second, all those that the Father gave to him, will come to Christ; Third, the will of God determines everything; 15=Total Human inability; effectual call; sovereign regeneration; security of the elect; 16=Cap.17; 17=Those the Father gave him; 18=A; 19=B; 20=Those for whom Christ died could be condemned; 21=B; 22=F; 23=Election, covenant, sacrifice; 24=The Called; 25=A. Sacrifice B. Intercession; 26=T; 27=F; 28=A. His people, B. The sheep, C. His church, D. The called E. Those the Father gave him; 29=All will be saved; 30=B; 31=Appease wrath; 32=B; 33=F; 34=B; 35=T

Chapter Six: Unity and Universality of the Church

Which is the true church? We hear this question occasionally when we testify about Christ. Some churches declare themselves the only true one, outside of which salvation is impossible. Cults tend to do this.

The Bible reveals something surprising about this issue. The church Christ founded is an invisible organism, not a visible organization. Its structure is spiritual, not material. So, being a member of a religious organization of any kind is no guarantee that one belongs to Christ's church. Conversely, it is possible to be a member of a local church that does not belong to Christ at all.



All this can appear confusing until we analyze what we mean by the *unity and universality of the church*.

Who belongs to this church?

The church of Christ consists of all those saved by faith in Christ. In Acts 2:47 we read, *And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved*. So it is plain that all only those saved are part of the church of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 1:2 we read,

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

According to this text, God's church consists of people who are sanctified in Christ, called by God to a holy life, pray in the name of the Lord Jesus, and recognize his lordship. This is distinct from an occasional attendance at meetings, along with a few religious practices.

Viewing it this way, we can say without hesitation that some members of Christ's body belong to unbiblical churches. Others may attend true churches that preach the gospel without belonging to Christ at all. Not all who participate in meetings are necessarily regenerate. Some participate by custom or culture, without ever finding the Lord.

Jesus clarified in John 17 that those who belong to him have eternal life (verse 2), know God (verse 3), receive God's Words (verse 8), are hated by the world (verse 16), are sanctified (verse 17), and are united in love (verses 21-23). These alone will be with him in glory.

The universal character of the Church is seen in the words of Jesus in John 10:16,

And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

The Jews believed they alone were objects of salvation. Jesus reveals in John 17 that he has other sheep besides those present and will form a single sheepfold. His sheep have faith in him (verse 26), hear his voice (verse 27), and follow him (verse 27). The Father preserves them unfailingly so none are lost (verses 28, 29).

Organization or organism?

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, Ephesians 4:11-12

Further, the church of Christ has officials. These are apostles, prophets (preachers), evangelists, pastors and teachers, (verse 11). Their job is to prepare Christians to minister to humanity, to unite believers in the faith, and to bring them into a deeper knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ (verses 12, 13). Paul mentions nothing of popes, cardinals, or priests as officials of his church.

Though Christ's church has officials, it would be a mistake to suppose it is principally an organization. The following verses express a supremely important truth: His church is primarily an organism, not an organization. It is a *body* of which Christ is the head... *him who is the head* (verses 15,16). No one but Christ has the right to take to himself the title of *head* of the Church.

What should the body of Christ look like on the local scene?

In a legal sense, God perceives the universal church as united in Christ, justified, and acceptable before the Father.

Nevertheless, the body of Christ has visible manifestations as local churches. All these lack perfection to some degree. Some have such serious defects in doctrine and organization that we might ask ourselves if they qualify as legitimate expressions of our Lord's church. Although we would like to avoid a spirit of criticism, it is necessary to have clear criteria to help us distinguish between legitimate churches and false ones.

The word of God gives us such criteria, and we are going to study it now. Though some churches may be more mature than others, all should strive for the biblical ideal if they wish to be considered as a legitimate part of the body of Christ.

We have organized these criteria below according to four divisions to simplify their study: purity of doctrine, of organization, of behavior, and of worship.

Purity of doctrine

Doctrinal differences on minor points will always exist among Christians. These include the mode of baptism, the best way to hold services or matters of personal conscience such as food and drink. Certain doctrines are central to biblical thought and therefore non-negotiable. A denial of any of these is grounds for declaring a church doctrinally impure, without the right to call itself a part of the body of Christ.

These essential doctrines are: the infallibility of the Bible as the word of God and sufficient for all questions of doctrine and practice; the Holy Trinity; the deity of Christ, his virgin birth, his

death and bodily resurrection and his second coming; salvation by grace without merits; eternal judgment for sinners and eternal felicity for believers.²²

If a Christian finds himself in a church that denies any of these doctrines, he should separate from it immediately. Though good people may attend, God disapproves of it because it denies essential truths revealed in his word.

Purity of Organization

A legitimate body of believers recognizes Jesus Christ as the only head of the universal church. It rejects all authorities, whether civil or religious, that claim the right to govern all Christians on earth.

It practices a plurality of elders (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). The elders are spiritual leaders of the church, such as pastors, evangelists, and missionaries (Ephesians 4:11, 12). These govern with authority but are not authoritarian (1 Peter 5:1-3). They pastor the church and take care of it spiritually (Acts 20:28). One man alone must not govern the church as dictator or supreme authority. Those who rule *anything* without accountability are normally abusive. Such a church is profoundly impure in the organizational sense.²³

Final authority in the church resides with the elders, not with the congregation. The kingdom of God is not a democracy. God governs it through the elders and not by congregational voting. The elder is God's agent, not the congregation (Acts 20:28; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; Hebrews 13:17).

The local church has no authority to decide for itself what is sound doctrine. Church councils resolve theological difficulties. These consist of all the elders and missionaries associated with the same organization of churches. Such councils then impose the decrees on the local churches (Acts 15:1-31; 16:4).

A biblical example

In the first-century controversy over circumcision, it is important to note what the early Christians did **not** do: They did not write to some ecclesiastical authority to decree what is correct. Nor did they leave it to each congregation to decide for itself whatever appeared convenient. Nor did they decide that truth is merely a matter of personal conscience nor that each Christian has the right to his own opinion. A certain amount of liberty of conscience on minor issues is acceptable. On major matters, such as those touching on the means of salvation, early Christians handed down decrees based on the deliberations of the council of elders (Acts 15).

In the daily life of the church, the elders labor in doctrine and teaching, maintaining the standards of sound doctrine. Controversial questions that cannot be resolved by the creeds of the church become the prerogative of the council of elders.

Although some evangelical churches lack organizational purity, this is insufficient reason to separate. Some have received no instruction about biblical government but serve the Lord with sincere hearts. Organizational questions are less important than doctrinal or moral ones.

If, however, the conduct of leaders is authoritarian to the point that the spiritual development of the believer is hindered, it may be legitimate to search for another church. Similarly, if the leaders fail to exercise biblical discipline so that impurity runs rampant in the church, it may be time to separate.

Purity of testimony

A biblical church exercises moral discipline. The elders counsel members who persist in serious sin or place them under discipline according to the case. Those who refuse the counsel of the elders and persist in sin must be excommunicated. The biblical church must not have a bad reputation in the community as tolerant of serious sin (Ephesians 5:13).

The biblical church practices separation from the world. Legitimate churches have no fellowship with religious organizations that fail to maintain sound doctrine or practice idolatry.

Unity without truth is an ungodly union (2 Corinthians 6:14-18).

A biblical church does not practice legalism. It preaches righteousness based on faith in Christ alone, not in exterior matters such as clothing, types of food, or Sabbath observances (Galatians 3:1-6; Colossians 2:16).

A legitimate church evangelizes. It is contradictory for a church to consider itself normal if it fails to fulfill one of the major purposes for its existence. The Great Commission of Jesus in Matthew 28:19 expresses that purpose. *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...*

Purity of Worship

The word of God must be preached and taught faithfully, not social activism nor political theories nor human philosophies nor private opinions (2 Timothy 4:1, 2).

The ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper are administered faithfully (Acts 2:42).

Order exists in the services. Noise and disorder are not found there (1 Corinthians 14:23, 40).

Important to remember: New churches are in the process of development and normally lack some of these elements. This is tolerable. However, those that previously knew the truth but have veered from biblical standards are without excuse.

The Corinthian church was carnal, out of order, and immoral. Nevertheless, Paul called it *the church of God*. Why did he do this when the church was in such a deplorable condition? He knew they were "babes" in Christ and lacked teaching. They had come out of a pagan culture and lacked understanding. Would it have been legitimate for a believer to separate from such a church? No. It is better to remain and help the membership move toward maturity. Withdrawal is justified only if the church refuses to progress toward godly standards.

Important questions about the church

Are denominations legitimate?

This question is double-sided. Division among Christians is a clear sign of carnality and spiritual immaturity. In a certain sense, denominationalism contributes to division by tempting Christians to adopt exclusivist attitudes. Some imagine their denomination is spiritually superior to all others. They feel sorry for Christians who belong to other denominations, and their conscience bothers them little if they steal “sheep” from legitimate churches.

Yet denominations have played a profoundly beneficial role. With false cults proliferating, it seems reasonable for a group of churches to associate to maintain purity. Moreover, a presbytery could hardly exist, nor a council of churches, unless a denomination exists first. The idea of presbyteries and councils is biblical (1 Timothy 4:14; Acts Chapter 15). If the best way to maintain a biblical system of government is through a denomination, then it is legitimate.

Who has the right to exercise discipline in the church?

The spiritual leaders fulfill this function according to Galatians 6:1.

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

What are legitimate reasons for excommunication?

Provoking divisions or heresy (Titus 3:10; Romans 16:17), persistence in serious sin (1 Cor. 5:9-13).

Summary

The true church of Christ is a living organism, formed by those saved by faith in Jesus Christ. He alone is head of the church. The essential nature of the church is supernatural, not of human origin.

In its local expression, the church of Christ exhibits purity in doctrine, organization, behavior, and worship.

Review Questions: Unity and universality of the Church

1. True or False: _____ The church of Christ is no kind of organization.
2. True or False: _____ The church of Christ is primarily an organism and not an organization.
3. True or False: _____ The church of Christ has one head, the pope.
4. True or False: _____ Those who are saved, and those only, are part of the universal church of Christ.
5. True or False: _____ It is entirely possible that some Catholics are part of the body of Christ, while some Evangelicals are not.

6. True or False: _____ The church of Christ, in the universal sense, is a visible organism.
7. True or False: _____ The church of Christ is principally a spiritual entity, not a terrestrial one.
8. True or False: _____ Being a member of a local church that preaches the Bible guarantees personal salvation.
9. True or False: _____ All churches that call themselves Christian are legitimate expressions of the universal body of Christ.
10. True or False: _____ Legitimate churches always fulfill all the biblical criteria mentioned in this study.
11. True or False: _____ A biblical church will have sound doctrine on the essential points of Christianity along with biblical worship.
12. True or False: _____ To be correctly organized, a local church must have a plurality of elders.
13. True or False: _____ Elders means the elderly gentlemen of the church.
14. True or False: _____ The presbytery consists in all the elders of all the churches associated in a region or city.
15. True or False: _____ The council or presbytery consists of all the elders who belong to a body of associated churches.
16. True or False: _____ A member in good standing in a local church, although not an elder, may vote in council or presbytery meetings.
17. True or False: _____ According to the democratic ideal of the Bible, a local congregation has the authority to decide for itself what is sound doctrine.
18. True or False: _____ If a local church is not perfectly organized, the Christian has the right to separate from it immediately.
19. True or False: _____ It is right for churches to participate in ecumenical movements with churches that do not maintain sound doctrine, to display a spirit of tolerance.
20. True or False: _____ In our epoch, it is proper that the pulpit may be used for social activism.

Answers: 1=F; 2=T; 3=F; 4=T; 5=T; 6=F; 7=T; 8=F; 9=F; 10=F; 11=T; 12=T; 13=F; 14=T; 15=T; 16=F; 17=F; 18=F; 19=F; 20=F

Chapter Seven: Security of the Elect

Mr. Jones lived a life of unabashed perversity until the day he attended an evangelistic meeting. There he responded to the invitation to accept Christ and make a public profession of faith. During the following months, he dutifully attended the discipleship meetings, read the Bible and showed definite improvements in his conduct.

One day he turned up drunk on the street. During the following weeks, various Christians tried to help him but he refused all counsel. He returned to his old ways and vehemently denied the gospel. He remained in this state for several years and afterwards died.

Did Mr. Jones go to heaven or hell?

For generations, Christians have discussed this vital issue: Can a Christian lose his salvation?

In the sixteenth century, a certain religious party raised this question and insisted that a born-again Christian could lose his salvation by persisting in serious sins or apostatizing from the faith. They would affirm that Mr. Jones is in hell.²⁴

Others rejected this view and said such Christians would go to heaven despite their apostasy because they were once born again.²⁵

The first party said their doctrine was necessary to put the fear of God into Christians because otherwise they would have a license to sin. Others insisted that only a doctrine of absolute security could avoid contaminating the gospel with a philosophy of salvation by merits.

Fortunately, the two viewpoints above are not the only options. Another exists, clearly taught by the reformers. This doctrine is called the *perseverance and preservation of the elect*.²⁶ The other two views are really perversions of the original Reformation teaching.

A definition of the doctrine of preservation is as follows:

God has an elect and justified people that he preserves from a life of sin and from ultimately apostatizing from the faith so as to lose their salvation. He accomplishes this by his grace through the Holy Spirit, his word, chastisements, threats, exhortations, and by planting his love and fear in their hearts.

Notice this definition differs radically in important points from the other two views.

First, our preservation is linked intimately with two other important doctrines, election and justification.

Second, the doctrine asserts that certain conditions exist by which a Christian would lose his salvation if he were to fulfill them. These are, living a life of sin or apostatizing from the faith. In

this sense, preservation agrees with the first party at least hypothetically. It differs in that God preserves his people from apostatizing, since the basis of preservation is the cross, not human effort.

Third, the doctrine affirms that the elect do not lose their salvation. In this sense it agrees with the second view but differs in two important particulars: It denies the possibility that God would allow an elect person to apostatize ultimately and finally. It also grounds preservation in the doctrines of election and justification, rather than in the idea of being born again. This, again, takes preservation out of the domain of human abilities and puts it into the dimension of God's decrees.

Finally, though preservation may be a gift of grace, it operates by practical means that have to do with Christian living as a whole.

Ironically, the other two viewpoints, while seeming exact opposites, have something crucial in common: both are rooted in something man thinks or does.

Misunderstandings are easy at this point. To clarify, let's see precisely what the doctrine of preservation does **not** mean.

We are **not** teaching it is a license to sin. This would involve us in a contradiction because God preserves his people from acting in such a manner. The ground of our security of salvation is God's ability to preserve us from conditions that might result in losing our salvation.

Nor does the doctrine of preservation affirm that Christians are relieved from the responsibility to apply means for their preservation. God knows how to make life uncomfortable for negligent believers.

Nor does preservation mean God deprives his people of their freedom of will. We affirm that God's people can apostatize if they wish. How God employs means to ensure they never wish to do so, is the subject of the next section.

The biblical evidence

If election is true, then preservation must be true. To be chosen from eternity implies God will use whatever means necessary to ensure the elect attain the goal for which he created them. Although the logic involved is sufficient verification, nevertheless, the Scriptures themselves portray it by associating election with preservation in many New Testament texts:

1. Our glorification is the final fruit of predestination in Romans 8:30.

And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. Romans 8:30

2. John greets the elect lady in 2 John 1, 2 and then declares that the truth *will be with us forever*.

3. According to Jude 1, the called are *beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ*:

4. The good works of the elect are just as predestined as the elect themselves. We must never forget this in any discussion of preservation. Notice Ephesians 2:10.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

5. Also, Isaiah observed that all the good deeds that the people of God do are works that God has done in them.

*O LORD, you will ordain peace for us, for you have indeed done for us all our works.
Isaiah 26:12*

If the good works of the elect are predestined by the Lord himself, how could they do works that would condemn them?

If justification is true, so is preservation. Here, the imputation of the righteousness of Christ plays a vital role. If Christ's righteousness is received apart from our merits, then our demerits cannot be a cause of its removal. If it is not our righteousness to start with, then neither is it ours to change. Our degree of sanctification may change but not our justification. The latter is grounded in a divine decree, not human merits.

No such thing is found in the Bible as a doctrine of de-justification. Never does the Bible teach that a justified person can return to an unjustified state.

That is why Paul says that God does not accept accusations against his elect and justified people.

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Romans 8:33

Does God simply ignore the sins of his people? No! He understands how to chastise them. In Romans Chapter 8, Paul refers to final condemnation. The first verse introduces the principle theme: *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.* Paul never teaches that Christians cannot sin, only that sin has ceased to be a cause of condemnation for the Christian.

The remainder of Romans 8 is a description of what the elect are like. They do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. They have the inward testimony of the Spirit with no desire to live a life of sin.

Let's be absolutely clear on this point: Paul is not stating conditions here, as though he were saying "do these things and you will be saved." If he were, he would be contradicting himself since he just finished seven chapters showing why salvation is by grace alone without merits.

Chapter 6 of Romans emphasizes the same. Paul points out the impossibility of sinful living, now that we are dead to sin through justification.

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? Romans 6:1-2

In the three previous chapters, Paul explained how justification works. Then in Chapter 6, he explains how justified people really live.

Sin no longer reigns over believers because they are dead to it. They are slaves to righteousness. How then could they fail to persevere?

A line of logic frequently pops up in discussions of preservation. It goes like this:

- Serious sin brings condemnation.
- Some Christians commit serious sin.
- Some Christians are therefore condemned.

Rather convincing at first glance, but it fails for several reasons. First, the Bible never teaches only serious sins cause condemnation. All sin deserves condemnation. To be consistent with the above logic, therefore, we must say all Christians are condemned, since all sin daily in one fashion or another.

Yet a more serious error lurks in the above logic in that it ignores justification. The entire purpose of justification is to erect a barrier between sin and condemnation. If justification failed in this, there would be no point in being justified. Christ imputes his righteousness to the believer precisely to form this impenetrable barricade between sin and condemnation.

So the first premise is weak. Sin does not always result in condemnation. For God's elect, it never brings condemnation because God accepts **no** accusations against them.

Does this give Christians a license to sin? No, it gives them a license to struggle toward sanctification without the dread of an austere heavenly Father threatening to abandon them if they fail to perform adequately.

Genuine Christians never want a license to sin. According to the Bible, the news of their security causes them to want to persevere. This, ironically, is one of the signs of their election.

And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. 1 John 3:3

Every one of the doctrines of grace imply preservation

- If God is sovereign and all things exist because of his immutable will, then none of his intentions can be frustrated, including the salvation of his elect.
- If we are totally unable to save ourselves, then likewise, we are unable to preserve ourselves. God does both.
- If the sacrifice of Christ is truly efficacious so that none of those for whom he died can perish, then his people will be preserved. How much more so if Jesus intercedes for them as their high priest? Is he not the surety and mediator of a new covenant made for them?
- The elect are united with the body of Christ. He cuts off none of his own members.

- Our sanctification and effectual calling are linked with our preservation, according to Jude 1,

Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James, To those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ:

Plain texts as evidence

The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen. 2 Timothy 4:18

...who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 1 Peter 1:5

We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him. 1 John 5:18

Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, Jude 24,

He preserves the lives of his saints;... Psalm 97:10

Evidence from biblical logic

Any other doctrine than preservation results in a gospel of salvation based on the will and works of man. The basic problem with other views is that they presuppose that salvation is a cooperative work between God and man.

The Bible urges Christians to attain security in their salvation. This makes sense only if preservation is true (2 Peter 1:10; Hebrews 6:11, 19; 10:22; 1 John 5:13).

The Scriptures speak of the seal of the Holy Spirit believers receive. This seal is until the day of redemption (Ephesians 1:13; 2 Corinthians 1:22). What value would such a seal have if it can be broken?

God's faithfulness is the basis of our obedience, not our own human strength. He promises to maintain us faithful to the end so we will be without reproach and preserve us from the evil one.

...who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 1:8

But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one. 2 Thessalonians 3:3

God's power keeps us.

...who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 1 Peter 1:5

We can have confidence that God will complete in us the good work he began.

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. Philippians 1:6

The will of the Father is the final word in preservation. He wills that none of those he has given to Jesus may perish.

And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. John 6:39

Jesus confirmed and guaranteed this by declaring that none of these have perished.

This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken: "Of those whom you gave me I have lost not one." John 18:9

The immutable will of the Father is the ground of our consolation.

So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath (18), so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. Hebrews 6:17, 18

Since the elect cannot be deceived, they will not apostatize.

For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. Matthew 24:24

Our preservation is no less certain than the efficacy of Christ's intercession for his people.

Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. Hebrews 7:25

Christ prays our faith may not fail and the Father will preserve his own.

And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. John 17:11

The doctrine of sanctification implies preservation because our final sanctification is guaranteed.

And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. Hebrews 10:10, 14

God promises our entire sanctification.

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it. 1 Thessalonians 5:23, 24

If a Christian were to live a life of sin, would he go to heaven anyway?

That is the crucial question when a discussion of preservation arises. Let's lay out several other questions of the same sort to expose the nature of the question above:

- What does a square circle look like?
- What is the color blue when it is green?
- If a sinner were perfect, would he be saved?

All these questions are in the same category, including the one about a Christian living in sin. They make no sense because they are self-contradictory. The idea of a lost saint is as absurd as a perfect sinner or a square circle.

Remember Mr. Jones at the beginning of this chapter, who was born again and lived a life of sin? One view says he is in hell. Another view says he is in heaven. The biblical view says he never existed.

No answers exist for illogical questions. This is a fundamental law of logic. The only proper reply to the question, above is, stop talking self-contradictory nonsense!

Nothing could be clearer on this point than 1 John 3:9,

No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.

According to John's theology, whoever is born of God cannot practice a life of sin. We know, of course, this does not mean temporary lapses or single instances of sin.²⁷ After all, John made it clear that anyone claiming to have no sin is a liar.²⁸ However, we have the Lord Jesus Christ as our advocate whenever we fall into sin.

John explains **why** the regenerate do not practice sin. Jesus protects them from that.

We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him. 1 John 5:18

Biblical writers sometimes employ a teaching device called hypothesis contrary to fact. Jesus himself used this tactic when he said, *If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. John 8:55* Under the condition stated, Jesus would have been a liar. A mere hypothetical condition could not make that a reality.

The apostle Paul used a similar example in Romans 2:13 while discussing justification by the law. He makes it clear that if anyone were to keep the law, he would be justified.

For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.

Did Paul really believe that people exist who had been justified that way? Certainly not. Throughout Romans, we learn no one keeps the law, and therefore nobody is justified by it. Paul speaks hypothetically to illustrate a spiritual principle.

The question about the fate of the soul of a sinful believer is in the same category. Hypothetically speaking, we could say he would go to hell. This is a hypothesis only with no connection to reality because God preserves his people.

In practice, how do genuine believers react when they hear about preservation? Do they take it as a license to sin? What does John say?

And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. 1 John 3:3

This good news leads believers to want to purify themselves. This is the answer for those who fear that preservation is a license to sin.

Are there people who try to take advantage of the grace of God and use preservation as a pretext to sin? Yes, Jude 4 describes such people.

For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Those who attempt to take advantage of the doctrine of preservation in order to live in corruption prove themselves to be reprobates.

How does God preserve his people?

One of the most frequent objections against preservation is based on biblical exhortations to persevere. Supposedly, a command to persevere implies the real possibility of some not persevering and thus being lost.

The book of Hebrews is replete with warnings against falling away. Threats of imminent condemnation abound for those who apostatize. Since apostasy results in condemnation, this ought to be a real danger for the people of God. Otherwise, the threats are in vain.

The answer to this objection is involved with a paradox expressed in Jeremiah 32:40,

I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me.

God preserves his covenant people by putting his fear in their hearts. Fear of what? Fear of God himself. Fear of falling.

How does God accomplish this? By means of exhortations, threats, and admonitions. These very things are the means he employs to ensure his people remain faithful.

According to the above verse, the eternal nature of the covenant makes it impossible for God to stop blessing his people. A key way he blesses them is by putting his fear in them, to ensure their faithfulness to the covenant.

So, a paradox exists between the responsibility of the believer to obey versus the divine activity in preservation. God himself guarantees the faithfulness of his elect.

Paul expresses this paradox in Philippians 2:12, 13.

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, (13) for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

In the first part, Paul exhorts the church to work out their own salvation, as though it were up to them.²⁹ We already know, however, that fallen man is incapable of promoting his own salvation by any effort of will or work. God produces in them the willingness and the ability to obey.

Here's the paradox: Born-again believers can apostatize if they want to. They never want to, though, because God himself gives them better sense.

A good example of the same strategy occurs in evangelism when God threatens eternal condemnation on all those who refuse to repent. Is this threat insincere toward the elect? From the viewpoint of God's eternal decrees to save his elect, it might seem so. Nevertheless, God uses this very threat as the means to provoke them to repent. Although repentance itself is a gift of grace, it comes via this threat. It is no contradiction to say that repentance is both a responsibility of man and a gift of God.

The doctrine of preservation is similar. God reveals to his people the extreme danger of apostasy, putting his fear in their hearts. The paradox lies in the use of this means to guarantee the danger will never happen.

In Chapter Two of this book, we learned the existence of a command never proves a human ability to obey it. The same with exhortations and threats about falling away. A warning against apostasy proves nothing about whether this has happened to any Christian. So, warnings and exhortations against apostasy never constitute evidence against the doctrine of preservation.

It is impossible to prove from the Bible that any born-again believer has ever been eternally lost.

False faith: Religious unregenerate

Big problem: How to distinguish between those born again and those who simply seem to be. Some folks are good actors. Others are sincerely religious and think they are saved.

Let's console ourselves a bit with this fact: The problem is not new. Even the apostles had this difficulty from time to time. Some people live a life of such consecration to Christ, accompanied by conspicuous fruits of the Spirit, that doubting them is absurd. Others live in a gray area between light and darkness and we wonder if they are really saved.

The entire epistle of 1 John was written to deal with this problem. In it, John emphasizes he wants us to have security of our salvation. This would make no sense if the doctrine of preservation were incorrect.

John wants us to have a fullness of joy in the knowledge of this security. It does not come cheap, however. He gives us criteria throughout the epistle of 1 John to help us distinguish between true believers and people who fake it.

How do those born of God really live? According to John, they are in fellowship with God and love their fellow believers. They remain faithful to the church, do not live in sin and testify of their faith in Christ to the world. They are generous in helping with the needs of the believers, both spiritually and materially.

Having a mouth full of religious words is not one of John's criteria. Jesus himself put it this way:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ 23 And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”
Matthew 7:21-23

Christ will not say, “Depart from me, you backsliders!” He will say, *I never knew you.*

The religious people mentioned in this text failed to do two things reflecting salvation. They did not do the will of the Father nor live godly lives. Instead, they did other things that have nothing to do with salvation: preaching and miracles. Their faith was phony.

Another example of phony faith was Simon the magician. In Acts Chapter 8, we learn he believed and was baptized. Later, Peter reproved him because he perceived Simon's heart was not right in the sight of God. Simon had a type of superficial faith but not saving faith. He participated in the religious activities of God's people, even to the point of being baptized. But he was not regenerate.

James devoted part of the second chapter of his epistle to this question of false faith. Even demons have a kind of “faith,” but not a *saving* faith (James 2:9). Genuine faith results in an obedient life that produces good works, such as the two examples mentioned in the chapter, Abraham and Rehab.

People have religious experiences of all sorts, whether saved or not. In churches emphasizing experience over objective truth, this is especially dangerous. Some individuals even experience a superficial kind of repentance through which they liberate themselves from various vices. This is the case with false prophets in 2 Peter 2. The chapter describes how these religious people infiltrate themselves into Christian assemblies and even occupy ministerial offices.

Peter tells us they escaped the corruption of the world through the knowledge of Christ. Through this intellectual assent, they experienced a measure of deliverance. Yet they are wells without water, born for destruction.

Outwardly, their profession is correct. Inwardly, they have eyes full of adultery. They preach for money and possess tremendous charm. They speak of freedom but are slaves of corruption.

Can the regenerate commit serious sin or fall away temporarily?

Absolutely! David fell into adultery and murder. This was a temporary fall, not a lifestyle over the long run. God restored him. A believer committed incest in 1 Corinthians 5. Through church discipline, he was restored.

Yes, Christians fall into sin, even serious ones. A Christian in such a state may be indistinguishable from the lost. Sometimes only time will tell.

How much assurance should be given to new converts?

Modern evangelical culture has invented a series of repentance rituals which have nothing to do with salvation. Most of these are harmless, so long as no one gets the idea they will cause salvation. These repentance rituals may include going forward at a meeting, praying a sinner's prayer or raising one's hand in a meeting.

Unfortunately, some groups give assurance based on the performance of these acts. Such assurance is unscriptural at best and potentially dangerous, since none of these actions are a condition of salvation. They must *never* be presented as grounds for assurance. Doing so not only communicates a false gospel but also may give assurance to an unconverted sinner. That would be tragic.

It seems more advisable to proceed as did the apostles. First, they exhorted professing believers to continue in the faith. Then they taught them in their homes. During the studies, the rationale for a security of salvation became clear.

Some receive assurance immediately from the Holy Spirit. For others, it comes slowly as they perceive God's grace working in their lives.

We may give new converts assurance only when their lives show the characteristics of born-again believers. This is the approach John took. We must do the same.

Summary

The doctrine of preservation says God has a people he preserves for heaven. Many Bible verses show this doctrine sustains itself without the need of theological logic. Nevertheless, theological arguments based on related doctrines would be sufficient to prove it even if clear texts were absent. Intellectual honesty requires this teaching be given serious consideration.

Opponents to the preservation doctrine invariably imagine it grants to Christians a license to sin. The objection is self-contradictory because sincere Christians do not want a license to sin. Other views lead to a gospel of salvation by merits.

Preservation is a gift of grace granted by God to his elect. The Christian is responsible for applying the means God has provided for his preservation. God himself undertakes to ensure that the elect do just that.

The doctrine of preservation provides inestimable consolation for sincere Christians in their struggle against sin, giving them a substantial basis of security concerning the outcome.

Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, (25) to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen. Jude 24, 25

Objections

Though we dealt with the main objections in the chapter, certain ones are common enough to merit special treatment.

Hebrews 6:1-6

This text is the bulwark of the opponents of preservation. They suppose it refers to backslidden Christians and shows that these have lost their salvation.

Answer: The most obvious problem with the above interpretation is that it proves more than the objectors intended. In verses 4 and 6, we read that those once enlightened cannot be restored to repentance. If the text refers to backslidden Christians, then we must declare it is impossible to restore a backslider. Few who base their views on this text are willing to affirm that. We all know Christians who have fallen away and later been restored. The Bible itself mentions examples. This alone is sufficient grounds to suspect this text does not refer to backslidden Christians.

Objectors often give three reasons why they assume Hebrews 6:1-6 refers to Christians.

First, they claim the doctrines mentioned here are uniquely Christian. Second, the spiritual experiences mentioned are distinctive to Christians, namely repentance, illumination by the Holy Spirit, and tasting of the powers to come. Third, the phrase *crucifying once again the Son of God* shows a knowledge of the gospel. These three points are proposed as ample evidence that the lost individuals are those who were once born again.

A careful reading of the entire chapter, along with the previous one, shows the above presuppositions are groundless.

It is untrue that the doctrines mentioned are uniquely Christian. They are also Jewish. The Old Testament teaches them all. Let's remember that Jesus taught nothing essentially new but simply fulfilled what was revealed before. These Judaic doctrines, therefore, were the foundation principles of his ministry.

Since these doctrines were also Jewish, no reason exists for assuming the illumination and tasting of the Spirit must refer to the born-again experience. The Jews had been illuminated by the Spirit through the Scriptures. They tasted the powers to come via the miracles and teachings of the prophets.

Second, the author addresses here a completely different audience than in the first part of the chapter.

Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation. Verse 9

He calls this group *beloved*, a term never used in Scripture apart from God's people. He is persuaded of better things concerning them, as opposed to those curses mentioned before.

The author of Hebrews considers his audience a people devoted to works of love in the name of Jesus and who minister to other believers.

For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do. Verse 10

They are heirs of the covenant of Abraham, with a sure anchor for the soul.

For when God made a promise to Abraham... We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul,... Verses 13, 19

Nothing in Hebrews 6:1-6 mentions anything like this. It is clear, therefore, that the author is distinguishing between those saved and those merely religious.

Thirdly, as for the knowledge of the gospel, nothing in the text proves this was a saving knowledge.

In summary, Hebrews 6 is not a contrast between backslidden Christians and faithful believers. It compares Jews vacillating between Christianity and Judaism with Jews fully committed to Christ. It is a warning to the indecisive to decide one way or another.

Galatians 5:4

You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.

Based on this text, opponents of preservation affirm that believers can fall from grace and lose their salvation, cut off from Christ.

Answer: We have never affirmed this to be impossible. Given certain conditions, this could happen. What we deny is that God has ever allowed that to happen to any of his justified, elect people because he is faithful to his covenant promises.

Further, Paul is warning the church as a whole of the danger of placing part of their justification on another basis than Christ. He simply means the church as a whole is in danger of apostatizing. He says nothing about individuals losing their salvation.

The doctrine of preservation is contrary to the idea of free will

Answer: The objection misunderstands free will. *Free* means the capacity to choose what one wants. What a person is determines what he wants. Since the will of a sinner is bound to his sinful nature, he rejects Christ. The regenerate man, on the other hand, wants to persevere because he has a new nature. God does not need to force him to do so.

Preservation is a license to sin

Answer: Born again people do not want a license to sin. The good news of preservation motivates them to purify themselves (1 John 3:3). Those who use the doctrine of preservation as a license to sin, prove themselves to be reprobates.

Jesus said, *the one who perseveres endures to the end will be saved*. This appears to contradict the doctrine of preservation.

Answer: This objection reads several hidden presuppositions into the text. It supposes some believers do not persevere and thus are lost. What in the text obliges us to assume that? It is true those who persevere will be saved. Why must it follow that some elect have not persevered?

Remember, a command to persevere proves only what we ought to do, not what we can do without grace. Such an objection would be as senseless as saying that faith is not a gift of God simply because God commanded us to believe and be saved.

1 Corinthians 9:27

But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

This text seems to express Paul's concern about losing his salvation. How do we square this with preservation?

Answer: Let's suppose the term "disqualified" meant "lose salvation." This would still constitute no negation of preservation. It would simply show Paul understood the importance of self-discipline as a means of preservation.

Nevertheless, it seems peculiar to affirm the term "disqualified" can only "mean lose your salvation." If it can mean "disqualified from ministry" through indiscipline, then no reason exists for assuming it must mean loss of salvation.

Chapter Eight: The Golden Chain

The unity of the doctrines of grace in the eternal covenant

The doctrines of grace are like keys on a golden chain. They open our understanding of God's gracious purposes. What is this golden chain that binds them together? Let's call it the *covenant of grace*.

What is a covenant?

"Covenant" means "contract," "agreement," or "alliance." The Bible sometimes uses the word *testament*. Essentially a covenant means an agreement between two parties.

When people make agreements, they do so because of expected mutual benefits in which each gives something to get something in return.

In the covenant of grace, another principle dominates. God makes a covenant with man, although man is unable to contribute anything. We have nothing to offer God in exchange for his grace. So the divine covenant has a unique character. It is more like an immutable decree in which all the benefits accrue to our side. The only benefit God receives is the opportunity to display his grace and love.

How was the covenant of grace instituted?

Sometimes the covenant is called the Abrahamic covenant because God instituted it with Abraham. Although God manifested his grace beforehand in believers like Noah, Enoch, and others, God declared it to Abraham in the formal sense of a legal agreement.

What are the essential elements of the covenant?

In Genesis 12, God spoke to Abraham about the fundamental nature of the covenant. Then in Chapter 17, he outlined some key elements.

The condition of the covenant

In Genesis 17:1, God reveals the basic condition: walk with God and be perfect.

Big problem! Nobody arrives at perfection in this life. Must we therefore wait until we get to heaven to enjoy the benefits of the covenant? Thanks to the imputed righteousness of Christ through justification, we experience covenant benefits now.

Curiously, the covenant seems conditional and unconditional simultaneously, depending on the way we look at it. On one hand, it is conditional because God requires perfection. On the other, it is unconditional because Christ accomplished perfection for all the elect as their substitute.

The duration of the covenant

God calls it an everlasting covenant in Genesis 17:7. Paul also, in Galatians 3, underlines the immutable character of the covenant by comparing it with human contracts. He argues that even if it were a mere human contract, no one annuls it or removes anything from it. How much more sure then, is a covenant made by God?

Brethren, I speak in the manner of men: Though it is only a man's covenant, yet if it is confirmed, no one annuls or adds to it. Galatians 3:15

The Bible emphasizes the eternal character of the covenant in such texts as Isaiah 55:10; 59:21; 61:8-9; Galatians 3:6-15.

It is a family covenant

The covenant includes believers and their children. God emphasizes this throughout Genesis 17. The point is supremely important because on the grounds of this principle, we enter the covenant made with Abraham. Paul explains in Galatians 3 and 4 that Jesus Christ was the promised seed of Abraham. We also are Abraham's children through faith in Christ and participants in the same covenant.

Although the term "descendants of Abraham" has a figurative and spiritual aspect, it also contains a literal element. The offspring of believers enjoy certain advantages because of the covenant, although they may never be saved. The family element is central to the covenant.

This is notable in God's discourse with Abraham. In Genesis 17:18, *And Abraham said to God, Oh, that Ishmael might live before you!* Abraham supposed God was referring to Ishmael when he received the promise. God explained that Sarah would give birth to another son, Isaac, who would be the real heir of the covenant. Nevertheless, God blessed Ishmael also with earthly blessings, simply because Ishmael was a child of Abraham.

The Bible abounds in precious promises regarding the children of the righteous.

"And as for me, this is my covenant with them," says the LORD: "My Spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring, or out of the mouth of your children's offspring," says the LORD, "from this time forth and forevermore." Isaiah 59:21

The offspring of the righteous will not lack food (Psalms 37:25). They will live securely (Psalm 102:28). They will have hope (Proverbs 14:26). They will be blessed (Proverb 20:7).

The apostles recognized this family aspect of the covenant. Peter declared in his sermon at Pentecost: *For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself. Acts 2:39*

Paul recognized a certain legal sanctification, although not regenerative, on the families of believers in 1 Corinthians 7:14,

For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

The sign and seal of the covenant

God gave circumcision to Abraham as the external sign of the covenant (Genesis 17:10; Romans 4:11). This sign was to continue until Jesus came and changed it to baptism (Colossians 2:11, 12). The two signs symbolize the same thing: the change of heart that God gives to his people (Romans 2:28, 29 cf. Titus 3:5, 6).

The word “sign” means “symbol” and suggests the relationship of the believer to the covenant. The word “seal” indicates the divine promise to fulfill the benefits of the covenant.

What are the benefits of the covenant?

A story is told about a poor man from Europe who wanted to immigrate to the United States to have a better life. He barely had enough money for the ticket on the ship but not enough for food for the trip. He bought the ticket and boarded the ship with the little food he had, a loaf of bread and a cheese. He hoped that food would last until he arrived in New York.

For three weeks this gentleman lived on his bread and cheese, avoiding the dining room where it pained him to see the other passengers enjoying the sumptuous dishes. On the last day of the trip, he happened to notice something written on the back of his ticket: All meals are included.

The covenant of grace is like the ticket of the poor passenger. Some Christians live deprived of the promised benefits because they fail to understand what their “ticket” includes. Their prayers take the character of pleadings like beggars, instead of a solid faith, because they do not understand their rights under the covenant.

The promise of the Holy Spirit

In Galatians 3:14 we read, *...so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.*

Christ died on the cross to guarantee the power of the Spirit would reach all believers, Jews and Gentiles. This includes all the Spirit’s ministries: His power, gifts, and work of sanctification and liberation in the life of the believer.

The devil assails believers, trying to give them an inferiority complex. To the women he says, “You can’t have the power of the Spirit nor spiritual gifts because you are only a woman.” To the men he says, “That’s for women.” To the youth he says, “You’re too young. You need more maturity to be blessed with spiritual gifts.” To the elders he says, “You’re too old. The young people won’t listen to you.”

The promise of the Spirit is for all of Abraham’s children. At Pentecost, Peter said God would pour out his Spirit on all flesh:

And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,

and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams (Acts 2:17).

We pray with more confidence when we understand why God is willing to grant his power and gifts. Our “ticket,” the covenant of grace, includes all these.

Blessings on our children

The devil lies to parents, telling them it is scarcely worth the effort to pray for their wayward children because, after all, the children have free will. God would hardly see fit to violate *that*.

God never asked Isaac’s permission before declaring him heir of the covenant. The Lord promises blessing on the children of believers simply because they are children of believers, not because they have a cooperative “free will.” God has more regard for his covenant than he does for the state of their will.

The covenant of grace gives Christian parents a solid basis for praying for their children. Satan cannot prevent God from blessing their children because the grounds of such blessings is his covenant, not the will of the children.

An eternal inheritance

Christ died to guarantee those called of God would attain their eternal inheritance. Hebrews 9:15, *Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.*

Christians occasionally become discouraged when they consider their faults and weaknesses. It seems impossible to attain to the entire perfection that the Bible promises. The struggle against sin appears so difficult. But we have a covenant with God, along with a guarantor who guarantees the victory.

He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it. 1 Thessalonians 5:24

Victory over our enemies

God promised Abraham,

I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Genesis 12:3

Zacharias, father of John the Baptist, prayed,

...that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, 73 the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. Luke 1:71-75

God has surprising methods for liberating us from our enemies. Sometimes he converts them to Christ! Although Christians receive persecution, they know God even has this under control for the furtherance of the gospel. *For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.* 2 Corinthians 13:8

The acronym *Si*, Jesus and the doctrines of grace

These doctrines are component elements of the covenant of grace. Let's see how each relates to the covenant.

Sovereignty of God

The covenant is based directly on the immutability of the sovereign will of God. In the first chapter, we saw that nothing in God changes, including his eternal attributes. All his counsels are irresistible.

Few other Bible texts shed more light on the link between the covenant and God's immutable will than Hebrews 6:13-20. In ancient times, people sealed covenants with oaths. God accommodated himself to this custom by inaugurating the covenant with an oath.

For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself (14), saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you." Hebrews 6:13, 14

So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath (verse 17).

In thinking about our relationship to God within the covenant, it helps to remember the immutability of the divine decrees. This alleviates fear that God may remove us from the covenant for our faults. God helps us set aside such notions by basing the covenant in his own character, via an oath.

The nation of Israel had nothing to offer when God established the covenant. Through Ezekiel, God said in a parable, 'And when I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' Ezekiel 16:6

Israel was like an abandoned newborn child. Death awaited. But God, like a rich and compassionate man, took Israel and adopted him as his child.

We also were born dead in sin, insensible to divine things, selfish, and insensitive. Nevertheless, God bound us to himself with a covenant. In this doctrine of total inability, we see the unconditional aspect of the covenant. We contributed nothing.

Justification by faith

Abraham faced a terrible dilemma when God told him, *Walk before me and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you... Genesis 17:1, 2*

How discouraging to hear perfection is the condition for the covenant blessings! That is enough to dishearten the most saintly because nobody is perfect. Is there a solution?

Yes! Jesus Christ! He is the only one who fulfilled the condition of perfection necessary to obtain the covenant benefits. In this sense, God made the covenant with Christ alone. Since we are in Christ, we have the benefits in him through faith. *The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one. John 17:22*

Election by grace

Election proceeds from the covenant since God accomplished it for his elect only. *I have made a covenant with my chosen one (Psalm 89:3)*. He never made such a covenant with any other nation but Israel because it was the only elect nation. The covenant is particular, not universal.

Sacrifice of Christ

The cross bought something for Christ also. It purchased the right to act as guarantor, high priest, and mediator of the covenant (Hebrews 7:22 and Chapters 8, 9, and 10 of Hebrews).

A *guarantor* is a person with the authority to ensure that the participants in an agreement receive the benefits promised. *This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant. Hebrews 7:22*

When God gave to Moses the covenant of the law, he sprinkled with blood the books, the ark of testimony, and the other elements of the service as a sign of the confirmation of the covenant (Hebrews Chapters 8 and 9).

The same principle of confirmation by blood exists in the covenant of grace. The blood of Jesus is God's final confirmation of the covenant.

Universality of the church and spiritual unity of all believers

The people of God in both Testaments, Old and New, are bound together by the same covenantal relationship. Only one people of God exists, not two. As Paul showed through the example of Abraham, Old Testament saints were saved in essentially the same manner as we. They were justified by faith, had the same savior, and participated in the same covenant. Paul even called this covenant, *the good news*, which is the gospel (Galatians 3:8).³⁰

The Lord's Supper illustrates the unity of God's people in the covenant. Christ said, *For this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. Matthew 26:28* By saying, *Drink of it, all of you* (verse 27), he indicated the covenant bond is not only between us and God but with each other.

Paul underlined the same in 1 Corinthians 10:16 by comparing the bread of the Lord's supper with the church. Though the bread represents Christ primarily, it also symbolizes the spiritual unity we have with one another in the covenant.

Security of the elect

The immutability of the covenant, the efficacy of the ministry of the Lord Jesus as mediator, the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, and the efficacy of his sacrifice to confirm the covenant—all these covenant elements form the security of the elect.

Though God promises to chastise his covenant children who stray, he will never destroy them. From the viewpoint of pure justice, there seems no good reason for the Jews to exist today. Where are the Philistines and the Gibeonites? Extinct races all. The only explanation is,

*For I the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.
Malachi 3:6*

Though God destroyed other nations for committing the same sins as Israel, yet God preserved his elect nation.

But the LORD was gracious to them and had compassion on them, and he turned toward them because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not destroy them, nor has he cast them from his presence until now. 2 Kings 13:23

The inexpressible comfort of the covenant resides in that “the bond of the covenant is capable of carrying the weight of the believer’s heaviest burden.”³¹

Though God corrects his elect people and causes them to grieve over their sins, he never casts them away.

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. (2) God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Romans 11:1, 2

Let no one imagine that our participation in the covenant relieves us from participating in corrective disciplines. To the contrary, it is precisely because of the covenant that God corrects his children.

You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities. Amos 3:2

The covenant is a paradox: a profound security accompanied by a serious warning. It guarantees an eternal inheritance but promises no easy roads—just a definite destination. The covenant is an uncomfortable security in which God spares nothing to ensure our maturity and obedience.

Summary

By the sovereign will of God, the elect have an inviolable agreement with the guarantee of an eternal inheritance. It includes promises for their children, victory over enemies, and provision for their needs. Though the elect are entirely incapable and completely unworthy to enter the covenant, Christ died to confirm it. By the gift of faith, he justifies the elect and unites them with

the people of God of every epoch. He is forming them into one body with Christ, saved and kept forever.

We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, Hebrews 6:19

Questions for Review: The Golden Chain

1. The covenant of grace differs from human contracts in that:
 - A. God makes covenants only with those who do good works.
 - B. Man contributes nothing to the covenant.
 - C. The covenant of grace was never put in writing.
2. Sometimes the covenant of grace is called _____.
3. True or False _____ Before the covenant with Abraham, grace did not exist.
4. True or False _____ The covenant is conditional and unconditional simultaneously, according to our perspective.
5. True or False _____ God requires perfection as a condition of the covenant.
6. When God makes a covenant with a believer, he also includes _____.
7. God gave to Abraham the rite of _____ as an external sign of the covenant. In the New Testament this sign changes to _____.
8. The benefits of the covenant are:
 - A. _____
 - B. _____
 - C. _____
 - D. _____
9. The covenant of grace is a solid basis for our _____ of salvation.
10. The doctrine of the sovereignty of God relates to the covenant of grace in that, _____.
11. The doctrine of the total inability of man relates to the covenant of grace in that, _____.
12. The doctrine of justification relates to the covenant of grace in that, _____.
13. The doctrine of election relates to the covenant of grace in that, _____.
14. The doctrine of the sacrifice of Christ relates to the covenant of grace in that, _____.
15. The doctrine of the universality and unity of all believers relates to the covenant of grace in that _____.

16. The doctrine of the Security of the elect relates to the covenant of grace in that,
_____.

17. True or False _____ God promises to destroy completely our disobedient children if they fail to fulfill the requirements of the covenant.

18. True or False _____ Our participation in the covenant relieves us from all divine corrections for our sins.

Answers. 1=B, 2=covenant with Abraham, 3=F, 4=T, 5=T, 6=their children, 7=circumcision; baptism, 8=A) Holy Spirit, B) Blessing on the children C) Justification D) Eternal inheritance 9=Security 10=Believers of all ages participate in it 11=Man contributes nothing to the covenant. 12=Christ accomplished the requirement of perfection under the covenant, as our substitute. 13=The covenant is for the elect only. 14=The blood of Christ confirms the covenant, making Christ the guarantor and mediator of it., 15. Via the covenant, there exists only one people of God. 16. The covenant is the grounds of our security of salvation. 17=F; 18=F

Epilogue

Grace wants to go home

Occasionally someone asks me why I wrote this book. I experience a twinge of chagrin at this because I suspect the reader missed something in the message of grace.

Grace is restless. It cannot sit still and do nothing. It wants to go places and do things. The thing it most wants to do is glorify God. The place it wants to go is back home. Those who have received a generous portion of grace know this. Each, in his own way, feels compelled to give something back in gratitude.

What parent has not had a child hand him a gift that came from the parent in the first place? The difference with grace, though, is that when we give it back, we find it still in our hand but altered. It has grown bigger. It always wants to return to its Source, to be more than it was before.

I am a writer. I do not know how else to give back my portion. So I wrote this book for the simplest of reasons.

I wrote it because I could not do otherwise.

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¹ Matthew 26:55-56

² Spoken in this author's presence at L'Abri, Switzerland during a discourse to students, c. 1968.

³ Quoted from C.S. Lewis, in *Gathered Golden*, John Blanchard, Evangelical Press 1989 pp. 74.

⁴ *Isaiah 64:6*

⁵ *Romans 14:23*

⁶ *John 6:28*

⁷ *The Bondage of The Will* by Martin Luther. Section XVIII, No.783.

⁸ This is the meaning of the corresponding Greek verb, DIKAIÃO. A couple of good examples showing the *vindication* aspect of its meaning are: Romans 3:4- *That you may be justified in your words* . . . The text refers to the *justification*, (i.e., 'vindication'), of God relative to human accusation. It could hardly be said that *justified* here means "MAKE righteous." Another example is 1 Ti.3:16, in which Paul, referring to the incarnation of God in Christ, says, God was manifested in the flesh, Justified in the Spirit. That is, the work of the Spirit through Christ

vindicated his claims. Jesus, being God, was not MADE righteous, but rather declared by the Spirit to be so, and thus vindicated with regard to all accusations.

9 The “process” aspect of sanctification occurs in such texts as Hebrews 10:14, *For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified*. Notice the interesting parallel between the accomplished fact of redemption, *has perfected forever*, versus the continuous present tense application via sanctification as a process, *being sanctified*.

10 Hodges, Charles: *Systematic Theology*, Vol.2, pp.203

11 All other arguments are really just variations of these.

12 *The Translator’s Handbook*, a guide used by Wycliffe translators tells us that, *those who had been chosen for eternal life* is a phrase which occurs frequently in rabbinic literature. The meaning is clearly that those whom God had chosen became believers, and the translator must not attempt to weaken this meaning.

Chosen for eternal life may thus be rendered as “whom God had selected in order that they would have eternal life.” *A Translator’s Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles* by Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, Copyright 1972

13 Quoted in *Gathered Gold*, John Blanchard, Evangelical Press 1989, pp 74

14 It was not so common four hundred years ago during the Reformation. Some theologians feel that the popularity of this view among modern Christians owes itself more to the pervasive influence of renaissance humanism than to Reformation theism.

15 The term *world*, as used throughout the Bible, and especially by John, has at least five meanings. Of the 185 times that John uses it, perhaps we may interpret 11 this way, but even those are disputable. Normally the intent of the word is to communicate that the Gospel is for all ethnic groups, and not just for Jews exclusively. John, like the other apostles, seemed particularly concerned about communicating the universality of the gospel message. This was a key controversy in his day.

16 In theology we call these blessings, *common grace*, as distinguished from personal salvation, which is *special grace*.

17 We agree that the gospel is an offer to all, but this is not the point of Peter’s discourse here.

18 Packer, J.I.: Introductory Essay to: *Death of Death* by John Owen, Banner of Truth Trust, pp.10.

19 (Note: Some have affirmed that the word *draw* in this verse suggests a moral persuasion that the sinner can resist. The problem with this is that the Greek word *draw* used here, HELKYO, always means drag, in the sense of compulsion. Even if we did not know what it meant, we could deduce its meaning from the phrase, *and I will raise him up at the last day*. That is to say, all those who are objects of the Father’s drawing action will be saved infallibly. This leaves no room for an effective resistance by the sinner.

20 Packer, J.I.: *Introductory Essay to Death of Death* by John Owen, Banner of Truth Trust, pp.10.

21 Ibid pp.14.

22 In other words, the contents of the Apostle’s Creed.

23 The ancient dictum, “absolute power corrupts absolutely,” is as true in a church as anywhere else. Sometimes I think it is more so.

24 This was the Arminian party, founded in Holland by the Dutch pastor Jacob Arminius, born 1560. The Synod of Dort in Holland debated his views in 1618 and proved them heretical.

25 Some groups of Baptists hold this view, and label it the doctrine of *eternal security*.

26 Throughout the remainder of this chapter, we shall use the term *preservation* to distinguish the reformed doctrine from the other two views.

27 The sense of the Greek verb requires this interpretation.

28 1 John 1:8

29 Note that “work out” is not equivalent to “work for.”

30 The Greek word used there is *euangelion*, translated elsewhere in the New Testament as “gospel.”

31 William S. Plummer, *Gathered Gold*, John Blanchard, pp. 52.