

Christian Ministry Unit 1
Introduction to Theology
Week 6 – God’s Sovereignty & Human Choice in Salvation

Introduction

In this last lecture on soteriology, we want to consider whether an individual chooses to be saved or if instead God chooses to save them. At issue is the interplay between God's sovereignty and human choice with regard to salvation. Specifically:

- Do humans have free will to believe or reject the gospel?
- How should we understand the New Testament's statements about Christians being “elected,” “chosen,” and “predestined?”
- How do our answers to these questions affect our commitment to evangelism?

Calvinism & Arminianism

“Calvinism” is a theological position which emphasizes God’s sovereignty in salvation.¹ Classical Calvinism asserts five “points,” known by the acronym “TULIP.”

- **T**otal Depravity: As a result of Adam's sin, people are born constitutionally unable to submit themselves to the gospel (see Rom. 3:11,12; Jn. 6:44,65).
- **U**nconditional Election: Salvation is completely dependent on God's choice to bestow it. Because of total depravity, humans are unable to choose God on their own. Instead, for his own good reasons, God sovereignly chooses which individuals he will save (Eph. 1:4,5; Rom. 9:16-24). “Unconditional” means that there are no conditions that humans must meet, including faith. Saving faith is a gift of God (Rom. 12:3; Eph. 2:8). If human-generated faith plays a part in salvation, salvation is not entirely by grace.

Some Calvinists also affirm “double predestination”—that God is equally active in predestining the elect to heaven and in predestining the non-elect to hell.

- **L**imited Atonement: Christ died for the purpose of saving only the elect. Calvinists infer this from the passages that say that Christ died “for his people” (Matt. 1:21; Jn. 10:11,15,26-27; Jn. 15:13; Acts 20:28). Since God sovereignly elected some to salvation, he sent Christ to die only for them. Not all Calvinists hold to limited atonement.
- **I**rresistible Grace: God's grace in salvation includes imparting saving faith to the elect. This grace is irresistible since it does not depend on human will (Rom. 9:16; Jn. 6:37,44,65; 15:16). God causes the elect to believe the gospel (Acts 13:48), even though they may not be aware of this fact.

¹ John Calvin did not emphasize predestination in his *Institutes* (only 4 chapters). Calvin warned against delving too deeply into this subject (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 3, Chapter 21, section 1). However, it became the controlling principle in Reformed Theology, expressed by the Synod of Dort in 1618-1619.

- **P**erseverance of the Saints: Because election depends on God, those who are elected cannot lose their salvation (i.e., eternal security). However, the elect will show evidence of their election by continuing to believe in Christ and manifesting good works consistent with salvation (2 Pet. 1:10; Heb. 3:6,14; Col. 1:23).

Implications for Evangelism

POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
<p>“Since Christ has elected people to salvation, I can persevere in witnessing with the confidence that I will be fruitful.” Campus Crusade founder Bill Bright, and many effective evangelists and missionaries have been motivated in this way.</p>	<p>“If God has already decided who will be saved and irresistibly calls them, does it really matter whether I witness or not?” This was the logic of those who told William Carey: “Sit down, young man! If God wants to save the people in India, he can well do so without your help.”</p>

“Arminianism” a theological position which emphasizes that God wants all people to be saved, and that all humans are free to receive or reject salvation. Classical Arminianism formulated its own “five points” in contrast to Calvinism (TCURP).²

- **T**otal Depravity: People cannot respond to the gospel without God’s help. Arminians agree that left to themselves, people are unable to respond to the gospel. However, God in his (prevenient) grace has enabled all people to respond to his convicting influence (John 12:32; 16:8)—he has given the gift of faith to everyone.
- **C**onditional Election: God’s election of people to salvation is conditioned upon their faith response to the gospel. Faith is not a work, since faith merely receives the gift that God offers (Rom. 4:4,5; Gal. 2:16). Predestination and election are based on God’s foreknowledge (presumably) of our decision to trust Christ (1 Pet. 1:1,2; Rom. 8:29).
- **U**nlimited Atonement: Christ died for the whole human race. His atonement is *sufficient* for all people, but *effective* only for those who believe (Jn. 1:29; 1 Jn. 2:2*; 2 Cor. 5:19; 1 Tim. 4:10; Heb. 2:9).
- **R**esistible Grace: It is God’s will that all people be saved (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9*), but people can reject God’s will (Mt. 23:37; Lk. 7:29,30).
- **P**resent Assurance of Salvation: Believers can have present assurance of salvation (1 Jn. 5:13), but they can also lose salvation for various reasons.

² Arminianism is named for Jacob Arminius (1560-1609), a Dutch theologian who strongly objected to the Calvinistic system described above—especially limited atonement. His position was published posthumously in the *Remonstrance* of 1610.

NOTE: While most Arminians do not believe in eternal security, it is neither logically nor biblically necessary for Arminians to reject eternal security. In Xenos, we hold a moderately Arminian position while also believing in eternal security for the reasons stated last week.

Implications for Evangelism

POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
<p>“I am motivated to share my faith because I know that more will be saved if I am faithful as Christ's ambassador.” The logic of Arminianism makes it easy for Christians to believe that evangelism is both a privilege and a responsibility.</p>	<p>“Evangelism is a heavy burden since my friend's salvation depends on my witness.” Arminians need to be careful to fully emphasize God's role and non-Christians' responsibility as they evangelize. Otherwise, they may become unhealthily anxious or pushy, taking on more responsibility for people's salvation than is rightfully theirs.</p>

Passages Arminians must harmonize

The following passages are interpreted differently by Calvinists and Arminians.³ We believe that the passages teaching the Arminian position are clearer, and that it is easier to harmonize the following passages with this position than it is to harmonize passages supporting Arminianism with the Calvinistic perspective.

Jn. 6:37 - Calvinists argue that this passage teaches irresistible grace. The individual cannot refuse God's choice. Therefore, all those given to Christ will respond.

Arminians reply that “those given to me” in 6:37 are the same as those who “believe in him” in 6:40. In other words, when God foresees that some will believe, he gives them to Christ. Jesus was speaking to Jews who all thought that they believed in God, but Jesus is saying (6:37,45) that the proof that they had truly responded to God's instruction is that they entrust recognize him as the Messiah and entrust themselves to him.

Jn. 6:44,65 - Calvinists usually hold that these passages teach total depravity and unconditional election. This is because “No one can come to me . . .” because they are totally depraved. “. . . unless it has been granted him from the Father,” and “. . . the Father draws him,” imply unconditional election—unconditional because the cause is the Father, not the individual.

Arminians agree that these passages teach total depravity. However, they argue the Father draws all men to Christ (Jn. 12:32; 16:8). They further hold that to assign

³ See the last section of this week's notes for additional passages.

the cause exclusively to the Father ignores 6:29,35,40,47, which clearly state that all who choose to believe will be saved.

Romans 9:1-24 - Calvinists normally hold that Romans 9 teaches unconditional election (9:16,24) and double-predestination (9:18,22,23).

Arminians argue that Rom. 9:1-23 deals with God's choice of nations and their roles in his plans—not about individuals' salvation.⁴ Paul has already addressed the issue of individual salvation in Rom. 1-8. In Rom. 9-11, he is answering the charge that God's present choice of the church (the international Body of believers in Jesus) contradicts God's Old Testament election of Israel as his chosen nation. In 9:1-24, Paul begins by refuting the position that God chose Israel to be his unique nation because of their merit. NOTE:

In 9:4,5, Paul is referring to *national* choice. 9:6,7 confirms this, because all Israelites were not saved, and all Ishmaelites were not damned.

In 9:8-12, Paul is referring to God's gracious choice to make the *nation* of Israel from Jacob rather than from Esau. 9:12 refers to the nation of Edom serving the nation of Israel; Esau did not serve Jacob.

In 9:13, Paul cites Mal. 1:2, in which God says that he favors *the nation* of Israel over *the nation* of Edom. Furthermore, the phrase "I hate/I love" is a Hebrew idiom meaning "I do not favor/I favor" (see Luke 14:26 for another example of this idiom).

9:16 refers to God's choice of how to lead the *nation* of Israel through the wilderness, which was independent of Moses' will in the matter. Personal salvation is not in view in the original passage (Ex. 33:19).

9:18: is in the context of 9:16 (see above) and 9:17, which refers to God's *temporal* destruction of the Egyptians when they wanted to destroy Israel. The verse teaches that God caused his choice of Israel to stand regardless of Moses' attempts to help or Pharaoh's attempts to hinder. Neither Moses' nor Pharaoh's personal salvation was in view in these passages.

9:19-24 refer to *nations* which God determines to have either a glorious or judgmental role in history (see Jer. 18:6-10). On the one hand, God allows evil nations to exist and often uses them to bless the chosen nation Israel (e.g., Pharaoh and Egypt). On the other hand, God has the right to divide the nation of Israel into two vessels: unbelieving Israel, which has become a "vessel of wrath prepared ("fit" or "suited") for destruction," and believing Israel which, along with Gentile believers, has become a "vessel of mercy" according to God's predetermined plan. In other words, God can temporarily change his chosen nation from national Israel to the Church without being unfaithful—

⁴ NOTE: Any interpretation of Rom. 9 must account for the transition that Paul makes from national choice in 9:1-23 and individual salvation in 9:24-33. Therefore, neither view can claim that the other is completely out of context. The question becomes one of which transition is more believable, and makes the most sense of the Old Testament quotations.

especially since he will ultimately fulfill all of his promises to Israel (Rom. 11:25-29).

Eph. 1:4,5 – Calvinists cite this passage as teaching unconditional election. God “chose us . . . before the foundation of the world.” He “has predestined us to adoption as sons . . . according to the kind intention of His will.” These phrases are taken to mean that God has sovereignly decided in advance who will be saved, completely irrespective of human choice.

Arminians agree that 1:4 is teaching God’s election of the believer to salvation.

However, they call attention to the significance of the phrase “in Him.” This phrase, it is argued, means that Christ was the chosen One (Is. 42:1) and that believers corporately participate in his chosenness because they are identified with him when they believe (Eph. 1:13).⁵

Acts 13:48 – Calvinists hold that this verse teaches unconditional election.

Arminians point out that the participle translated “had been appointed to” (*tetagmenoi*) is the middle-passive voice form of *tasso*. In Greek, the same form is used to designate both the passive voice (the subject receives the action) and the passive voice (the subject initiates the action). The NASB translates it in the passive voice. However, if it is translated in the *middle* voice, the passage would read “. . . as many as set themselves to eternal life believed.” The context indicates that Luke may have intended the middle voice in 13:48. In 13:46, Paul says of the Jews, “. . . you repudiate it (the gospel), and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life.” Luke seems to be purposefully contrasting the Jews' response to that of the Gentiles, who “began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had set themselves to eternal life believed.” Because of this grammatical ambiguity, neither view should base its position on this passage.

SUMMARY: An Arminian approach that affirms eternal security is preferable to the Calvinist position outlined above. There are many passages that clearly call people to believe in Jesus for salvation, and it is easier to harmonize “Calvinist” passages with this view than vice-versa. But remember . . .

Practical implications of God’s sovereignty

GOD'S SOVEREIGN WORK IN HISTORY: *No one and nothing can thwart him from ultimately accomplishing his purposes.* Arminians correctly affirm that God has permitted humans to freely choose their salvation. But the Bible emphasizes that in many areas of life, the ultimate outcome is controlled by the sovereign will of God and *not* the free choices of human beings. Western people, who prize individual freedom and autonomy, are often ignorant of or resistant to this truth, but God’s sovereignty has profound implications for the broad sweep of history.

- God chooses *nations* for specific roles (Ezek. 38:4; Ps. 33:10,11; Ps. 2:1-6).

⁵ With regard to 1:5, some Arminians hold that this verse is referring not to God’s choice of who will be saved, but of God's choice that those who believe will be ultimately glorified. They interpret “adoption as sons” as a reference to the glorification of believers (cf. Rom. 8:23 for Paul's use of “adoption” in this way).

- God selects *individuals* for specific roles in his national strategy (2 Sam. 7:8; Isa. 45:1; Dan. 4:32,34-35).
- God can work through the *evil choices* of human beings to advance his purposes (e.g. the death of Christ in Acts 2:23; 4:27,28).
- God intervenes at the end of history to *establish his kingdom* (Dan. 2:44; Rev. 11:15; 19:15-20:15). We will cover this in more detail in the weeks ahead.

GOD'S SOVEREIGN WORK IN OUR DAY-TO-DAY LIVES: A key aspect of the gospel is that as God's adopted children, we are now under his sovereign care. He shapes, guides, refines, etc.—it is not all up to us!

- God decides what *spiritual gifts* we get (1 Cor. 12:11) and calls individuals to *specific ministry roles* (Acts 9:14; Galatians 1:15,16; Jer. 1:4). This is why Eph. 2:10 is such an encouraging verse! God has a special plan and purpose for each of our lives!
- God will *protect* and *provide for* his people. Jesus reassured his disciples that God would look after their basic needs (Matt. 6:19-34). While they may face danger, suffering and even death, he promised to preserve them through it (Matt. 10:28-31). He said they would never perish and that no one would snatch them out of his hand (Jn. 10:27-30). “If God is for us,” Paul asked, “who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31), because nothing can separate us from his love (Rom. 8:38,39).
- God will *work through adverse circumstances* to advance his purpose for his people. God used the treachery of Joseph's brothers to preserve Jacob and his family from famine (Genesis 45:4-8; 50:20), and he used their stay in Egypt to grow them into a great nation. This is true of every Christian (Rom. 8:28,29). Everything that comes into my life must first go through his wise and loving hands. It is not just that God can advance his purpose *in spite of* adverse circumstances; it is that he advances his purpose *through* them (CROSS; 2 Cor. 4:7-12).

APPLICATION: God's sovereignty gives us the assurance that God is with us and active in our lives. Like a TAPESTRY, we often see only the underside—a confusing mass of colored knots. But God is weaving the top-side—a beautiful picture that glorifies Christ. Trusting that God will be utterly faithful to play his big role in our lives provides the proper foundation for us to be faithful in our smaller (but significant) roles, and us to face every area of our Christian life with confidence! **INSTRUCTORS:** pick some of the areas below and cover as time allows.

- **DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES:** If I affirm God's sovereignty, I realize that all persons and all situations in my life can be used by God as part of his wise design to develop me spiritually. Everything I go through can benefit me if I choose to cooperate with God—even if I don't see the benefit immediately. I am not ultimately a victim because no person or situation can thwart God's plan to make himself known to and through me.

We tend to think: “If it was not for _____, I would be an effective employee, student, teacher, leader, etc. “

But in fact: “If it was not for _____, I would lose an opportunity to be stretched spiritually. _____ is God’s gift to me.”

- **FEAR:** The biblical antidote to fear is directly tied to an awareness that God is with me (Ps. 46), that he will ultimately protect me (Ps. 27), and that his purposes will not be thwarted (Rev. 1:17;2:10). 366 times, God says “Do not be afraid”—and the reason he gives is “I am with you.” If you focus on enemies and obstacles, they will grow and Jesus will shrink. But if you “set apart Jesus as Lord” (1 Pet. 3:14,15), he will grow and they will shrink.
- **“NEED” FOR CONTROL:** When I trust God's sovereignty, I don't have to get my way and manipulate people into doing what I want (e.g., JACOB). I can trust that God may choose to work through different means and/or at a different time than I had in mind (e.g., JOSEPH). When I try to control, I am acting as if I believe people can deprive me of what God has promised me.
- **FELLOWSHIP:** The composition of my home group is not an accident. If I trust in God's sovereignty, I will view the other members as people God has brought to me so I can give God’s love to them and receive God’s love from them. A sense of “compatibility” will not be my main concern. “Different” and “difficult people are God's tools to shape my character. I will also realize that God sends people to me to teach and correct me.
- **CONFLICT** takes on a vertical dimension—it is allowed by God, and God wants to work through it for our good and for his glory. Managing conflict in a godly way becomes a key stewardship entrusted to me by God. Seen apart from God's sovereignty, conflict is simply “me vs. you”—me defending myself, me proving I'm right, me winning, etc. Under God’s sovereign grace, I can look for what God may be trying to say to me rather than just be defensive—even if the other person is wrong and/or misunderstands me.
- **PARENTING:** Without a perspective on God's sovereignty, I will tend to increase my attempts to control my children, or to despair and/or reject them if they rebel. God has a plan for our children, and he is utterly faithful to pursue them even when they run from him. When we affirm this and focus on prayerfully collaborating with his plan, we become more godly and our children see a great model of God’s love!
- **MY MINISTRY:** My service to God is not something I make happen or force; it is me collaborating with what God is doing (Jn. 5:19), depending on his authority and presence (Matt. 28:18, 20). God often works through ministry reversals to teach me valuable lessons and advance his work in unforeseen ways. This dependence on God’s sovereignty enables me to work hard—but with hope and without being crushed by the sense that it is all up to me (Matt. 11:28-30).
- **EVANGELISM:** If I trust in God's sovereignty, I know that God is drawing people to himself, and that he will orchestrate events so that I will cross paths with people who want to know him (Acts 8-10). This motivates me to pray for such opportunities, and to take advantage of them by sharing my faith with humble

boldness. Without this trust in God's sovereignty, I will tend to either shrink back in timidity, or put inappropriate pressure on people.

- **DISCIPLESHIP:** Hope and vision (rather than fatalism and discouragement) is based on the belief that God is actively involved in the life of the people I am discipling (Phil. 1:3-7; 2:13). This motivates me to pray for insight into what God is doing, and it gives me the patience to invest over the long haul.
- **FAILURE:** Under God's gracious sovereignty, failure is an important part of my training and spiritual history. Otherwise, failure is simply a waste and/or a shame—something to be avoided, denied, or blamed on others (including God). Oswald Sanders has a different perspective on failure based on God's sovereignty: "The God of Jacob is preeminently the God of the second chance to Christians who have failed and failed persistently. The second chance does not avert the consequences of past failure, but even failure can be a steppingstone to new victories. To the child of God failure can have an important educative value. God does not waste even failure. The outstanding lesson of Jacob's life is that no failure need be final. There is hope with the God of Jacob for any disposition or temperament. No past defeat puts future victory out of reach. When God has saved and apprehended a person, he pursues him with undiscourageable perseverance that he might bless him. God will turn the tables on the Devil by creating a wider ministry out of our very defeats."⁶

Memory Verses

1 Peter 1:1b-2* – Election is based on God's foreknowledge (evidently of who chooses to believe in Christ).

1 John 2:2* – Jesus Christ died for the sins of the whole world, not just of believers.

2 Peter 3:9* – God's will is for all people to be saved.

Assignment

1. Read 1 John 2:15,16* Describe what you believe each of the 3 "things of the world" are, and give an example of each. Why would Satan use these as tactics on the non-Christian? Christian?
2. Church Visitation assignment (due this week if taking only Mod 1)

APPENDIX: Other passages Arminians must harmonize

John 15:16 - Some Calvinists view this passage as a proof text for unconditional election, emphasizing the irrelevance of human choice.

Arminians point out that the statement is made to the disciples with reference to their apostleship, not to their salvation. This interpretation accords well with the next phrase "that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain. . ."
See also Jn. 6:70 referring to the same choice. Clearly, Judas was chosen, but not saved.

⁶ J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Maturity* (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1994 edition) p. 33.

Galatians 1:15,16 – Calvinists interpret this passage to mean that God irresistibly called Paul because he was elected to salvation. They further argue that Paul's salvation is typical of all Christians in this regard.

Arminians point out that Paul's election and calling were based on God's foreknowledge of Paul's decision to believe. Some Arminians acknowledge that Paul may have been unconditionally elected and irresistibly called by God, but point out that this does not prove that God deals with all people in this way. There is no reason to think that God cannot deal with some people differently than others. Arminians argue that the burden is on the Calvinist to demonstrate not just that God elected someone unconditionally, but that he elects all Christians in this way.

2 Thessalonians 2:13 - Calvinists interpret this passage to teach unconditional election.

Arminians point out that “from the beginning” could refer to the beginning of their Christian lives (i.e., conversion). Paul uses this same phrase in Phil. 4:15 to refer to people's conversion. If the term “salvation” refers to glorification (2:14) or spiritual maturity (1 Thess. 5:23), Paul is simply reminding them of God's purpose for their lives.

1 Peter 2:8 – Some Calvinists find support for double-predestination in this passage. God appointed certain people to "doom" and therefore they rejected Christ.

Arminians point out that the specific cause for their stumbling is not God, but that “they are disobedient to the word.” Peter is not saying that God made them disobey, or that they cannot repent. He is simply saying that God has ordained judgment for those who reject the gospel.

Jude 1:4 – Calvinists hold that this passage teaches double-predestination. The false teachers were “long ago marked out [by God] for . . .condemnation.”

Arminians point out that the participle “previously marked out” (*progegrammenoi*) can also be translated “previously written about.” For an example of this usage, see Rom. 15:4. Since Jude goes on to cite several recorded examples of the destruction of ungodly persons (1:5-18), this translation is seen as preferable.