

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

**Introduction**

- 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 (Rom. 3:11,12; Jn. 6:44,65).
- **U**nconditional Election: Salvation is completely dependent on God's choice to bestow it (Eph. 1:4,5; Rom. 9:16-24).
- **L**imited Atonement: Christ died for the purpose of saving *only* the elect (Matt. 1:21; Jn. 10:11,15,26-27; Jn. 15:13; Acts 20:28).
- **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; Acts 13:48).
- **P**erseverance of the Saints: Because election depends on God, those who are elected cannot lose their salvation (2 Pet. 1:10; Heb. 3:6,14; Col. 1:23).

Implications for Evangelism

POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
<p><b>“Since Christ has elected people to salvation, I can persevere in witnessing with the confidence that I will be fruitful.”</b></p>	<p><b>“If God has already decided who will be saved and irresistibly calls them, does it really matter whether I witness or not?”</b></p>

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

“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).<sup>2</sup>

- **T**otal Depravity: People cannot respond to the gospel without God’s help. However, God in his *prevenient* grace has enabled all people to respond to his convicting influence (John 12:32; 16:8).
- **C**onditional Election: God's election of people to salvation is conditioned upon their faith response to the gospel (Rom. 4:4,5; Gal. 2:16; 1 Pet. 1:1,2\*; Rom. 8:29).
- **U**nlimited Atonement: Christ died for the whole human race (Jn. 1:29; 1 Jn. 2:2\*; 2 Cor. 5:19; 1 Tim. 4:10).
- **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.

NOTE: Based on our understanding of the biblical data, we would agree with the Arminian position on the first four points, and with the Calvinist position on the last point.

Implications for Evangelism

POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
<p><b>“I am motivated to share my faith because I know that more will be saved if I am faithful as Christ's ambassador.”</b></p>	<p><b>“Evangelism is a heavy burden since my friend’s salvation depends on my witness.”</b></p>

## Passages Arminians must harmonize

**Jn. 6:37** - Calvinists argue that this passage teaches irresistible grace.

Arminians reply that those “the Father gives me” in 6:37 are the same as those who “believe in me” 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

**Jn. 6:44,65** - Calvinists usually hold that these passages teach total depravity and unconditional election.

Arminians agree that these passages teach total depravity. However, Jesus draws all people (Jn. 12:32), and the Holy Spirit convicts all people (Jn. 16:8). This is why Jesus calls his hearers to believe in him (Jn. 6:29,35,40,47).

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

Arminians reply that the context of Rom. 9-11 is not about individual salvation (Paul covered this in Rom. 1-8), but about God's choice of nations through which he works out his redemptive plan. NOTE:

- In 9:4,5, Paul is referring to national choice.
- In 9:8-12, Paul is referring to God's gracious choice to make the *nation* of Israel from Jacob rather than from Esau.
- In 9:13, Paul cites Mal. 1:2, in which God says that he favors *the nation* of Israel over *the nation* of Edom.
- 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.
- 9:18 is in the context of 9:16,17, which refers to God's *temporal* destruction of the Egyptians when they wanted to destroy Israel.
- 9:19-24 refer to *nations* which God determines to have either a glorious or judgmental role in history. 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.

**Eph. 1:4,5** – Calvinists cite this passage as teaching unconditional election.

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." Christ was the Chosen One (Is. 42:1), and believers corporately participate in his chosenness because they are identified with him when they believe (Eph. 1:13).

**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*. 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 (13:46) indicates that Luke may have intended the middle voice in 13:48.

SUMMARY:

## Practical implications of God’s sovereignty

GOD'S SOVEREIGN WORK IN HISTORY:

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

GOD'S SOVEREIGN WORK IN OUR DAY-TO-DAY LIVES:

- God decides what *spiritual gifts* we get (1 Cor. 12:11) and calls individuals to *specific ministry roles* (Acts 13:1,2).
- God will *protect* (Matt. 10:28-31) and *provide for* (Matt. 6:19-34) his people.
- God will work *through* adverse circumstances to advance his purpose for his people. (Genesis 45:5-8; 50:20; Rom. 8:28,29).

APPLICATION: God's sovereignty gives us the assurance that God is with us and active in our lives.

- **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 (Jas. 1:2-4).
- **FEAR:** The biblical antidote to fear is directly tied to an awareness that the sovereign God is with me (Ps. 27:1-3; 46:1-3; 1 Pet. 3:14,15).
- **“NEED” FOR CONTROL:** When I trust God's sovereignty, I don't have to get my way and manipulate or intimidate people into doing what I want.
- **FELLOWSHIP:** If I trust in God's sovereignty, I will view the other members as people God has brought into my life so I can give his love to them and receive his love from them.
- **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.
- **PARENTING:** God has a plan for our children, and he is utterly faithful to pursue them even when they run from him.
- **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; Matt. 28:18, 20)
- **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).

- **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).
- **FAILURE:** Under God's gracious sovereignty, failure is an important part of my training and spiritual history.

“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.”<sup>6</sup>

### 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.

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<sup>6</sup> 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.