

## The Salvation Debate

TULIP (The Calvinist View)  
God Wants All to Be Saved (The Arminian View)

### Posing the Question

From Anne's perspective, the weekly Bible study had been going well for the several months of its existence. As the group made its way through Paul's letter to the Romans, people seemed to be learning and growing together. The discussion time was always vigorous and challenging. It seemed that each evening ended with general agreement regarding what Paul had been trying to communicate and how his words could be applied, practically, in daily life.

Then came Romans 9. By the end of the evening, Anne wasn't sure what to think. In fact, the only thing she was sure of was that the group discussion that night had produced far more "heat" than "light." Randy had argued strongly that this chapter clearly shows that God is sovereign over all things. More specifically, God has sovereignly chosen only some people—the elect—to receive salvation by grace. Steven, on the other hand, strongly disagreed. He quoted 1 Timothy 2:4, which states that God desires all people to be saved. Anne felt caught in between, because she believed both in God's sovereignty and his love. She left that evening with far more questions than she had arrived with.

### The Center and Its Contrasts

Evangelical Christians agree on many things when it comes to the issue of salvation. One of the central defining points of evangelicalism is the conviction that a personal conversion experience is necessary for salvation. Evangelicals unanimously affirm that we are saved by grace through faith and not of ourselves. "It is a gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may

boast" (Eph. 2:8–9). Evangelicals of all varieties confess that God is both our sovereign Creator and our loving Redeemer. There is complete agreement that it is through the sacrificial death and victorious resurrection of Jesus alone that we find forgiveness of sins and peace with God.

While there is much agreement on these central dogmas about salvation, there is wide disagreement as to how these dogmas are to be understood in terms of their doctrinal detail. For example, evangelicals concur that the ideas of **predestination** and **election** are central to a biblical understanding of salvation, for they are clearly and consistently taught in Scripture (e.g., Romans 8–9; Ephesians 1). However, when it comes to the questions of *how* election works and on *what basis* God predestines people, evangelicals exhibit a diversity of opinions.

This is not a new debate. The issue of the nature of salvation has been debated throughout church history. Some of the more pressing questions include: What is the proper balance between God's sovereignty and God's love in the salvation process? What is the nature of God's grace, and how does it work in a human life? To what degree has sin affected human freedom? And does human freedom play a central role in conversion?

With other orthodox Christians, all evangelicals agree at least in their opposition to one certain perspective on these matters: **Pelagianism**. Pelagius was a fifth-century monk who gained a following in Rome and emphasized the need for moral striving in the Christian life. Although his aspirations were noble, the theology he developed to express them was problematic. Among other things, he claimed that Adam's sin did not affect human nature. He thus maintained that human beings have the innate ability to live sinless lives. God's grace helps us live holy lives before God, but he denied that we are saved by grace alone. All evangelicals agree that Pelagius was overly optimistic in his assessment of fallen human nature and thus did not properly emphasize our need for grace in order to be saved. Although evangelicals agree in this regard, they are divided on other matters related to the nature of salvation.

The two essays that follow represent perspectives that have long and distinguished histories. The Calvinist perspective, expressed in the first essay, has roots that extend back to the famous fifth-century theologian Augustine and his interpretation of Paul's letter to the Romans. Other well-known Christians who have held this view include the great Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin, as well as the noted revivalists George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards. Today, this view has been ably articulated and defended by evangelical scholars such as R. C. Sproul and John Piper. At the heart of this view is the conviction that in his wisdom and sovereignty and from before the foundation of the world, God mercifully chose to save a certain number of people—the elect—from among sinful humanity.

The second essay represents a perspective known as Arminianism, named after Jacob Arminius, an early seventeenth-century theologian. The roots of this view also wind their way back into the early church. In the fifth century,

one of the people who challenged Augustine's interpretation of salvation and the workings of grace was a monk named John Cassian. He argued that while Augustine was right to challenge the errors of Pelagianism, he had gone too far in denying that human freedom had any real role in the salvation process. Cassian's basic conviction was reiterated during the Reformation age by the Catholic scholar Desiderius Erasmus and the Anabaptists. Others who have held to this perspective include the revivalists John Wesley and Charles Finney. In more recent years, this view has been espoused by Christian thinkers such as C. S. Lewis and Clark Pinnock. A fundamental conviction of the Arminian perspective is that while salvation comes to humans by God's sovereign grace alone, this grace allows human beings freely to accept or reject God's offer of eternal life. Put simply: God desires a love relationship with his human creatures, and love—real love—must be chosen.

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## TULIP (The Calvinist View)

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### The Biblical Argument

The Calvinist view of salvation is customarily organized around five points, signified by the acronym TULIP. The T in TULIP stands for **total depravity**. Scripture teaches that because of the fall all human beings are incapable of responding positively to God on their own. Had Adam not fallen, things would have been different. But as it now stands, we are "in Adam" (1 Cor. 15:22), a race of rebels incapacitated by our sin. Scripture goes so far as to say that humans are "dead in sin" (Eph. 2:1, 5). We are not merely wounded, as though the fall just made it more difficult to obey God, and therefore, God now has to assist us. We are corpses in relationship to the things of God. A corpse cannot respond to anything. Hence, if people are to enjoy a relationship with God, God must do nothing less than resurrect them. This, in fact, is precisely what Scripture declares God does to those he makes his children (Eph. 2:4–5). Apart from God's grace, all humans would be hopelessly doomed.

Scripture drives home our total depravity in a number of ways. Paul says unregenerate humans are "by nature children of wrath" (Eph. 2:3). We can no more change our nature on our own than we can change the color of our skin (Jer. 13:23). If we are to become objects of God's love, God is going to have to change our nature. God does this to those he makes his own (Eph. 2:1–7). Believers are literally made into new creations (2 Cor. 5:17) and form a new humanity (Eph. 2:15).

Scripture elsewhere declares that humans are "slaves to sin" (Rom. 6:16, 19–20) and slaves to Satan. Slaves cannot free themselves from their master. If slaves are to be set free, someone must help them. This is what God does for his elect. He frees them from the punishment and bondage to sin, frees them from the power of Satan, and frees them to do what they could never do on their own—namely, choose him, love him, and obey him.

Because of our self-chosen bondage, we cannot make a positive movement to God on our own. We cannot even choose to accept salvation unless God empowers us to do so (Rom. 9:14–23; Eph. 2:8). Paul powerfully summarizes our state when he writes:

There is no one who is righteous, not even one;  
there is no one who has understanding,  
there is no one who seeks God.  
All have turned aside, together they have become worthless;  
there is no one who shows kindness,  
there is not even one.

ROMANS 3:10–12

No one on his or her own is righteous before God or even seeks after God. This is what total depravity means.

The U in TULIP stands for **unconditional election**. If we are indeed spiritual corpses, nothing in us merits God's choice to save us. If God nevertheless chooses to save us, the reason for doing so must lie in God, not in us.

Paul proclaims that "[God] chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. . . . He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will" (Eph. 1:4–5). So, too, Paul says that God "saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began" (2 Tim. 1:9). Before the foundation of the world, God chose some to be his children from among the mass of sinful humans, and he did this not in accordance with their works but in accordance with his own purpose. This is why Scripture refers to believers as God's elect (Matt. 24:22, 24, 31; Rom. 8:33), and this is why God's election is unconditional. Nothing in fallen human beings "conditions" God's choice.

The L of TULIP stands for **limited atonement**. Christ's death is sufficient for all the sins of the world, but it was intended to save only those whom the Father has predestined to be saved. Jesus does not work at cross-purposes with the Father, wasting his blood on people who are destined for destruction (Prov. 16:9).

We see something of Christ's particular focus on the elect in Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17. Jesus prays to the Father, "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world" (v. 6). Jesus did not intend to make the Father's name known to everyone, only to those the Father gave him. Shortly after this Jesus prays, "I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them" (vv. 9–10).

The Son of God knows the Father's will perfectly. He thus knows from the start who belongs to the Father and who does not (John 10:14–16, 25–29). He knows who the Father is drawing to him and who the Father is not drawing

(John 6:44, 65). He reveals the Father only to the elect, and he prays only for the elect. The same applies to the atonement. It would be odd indeed for Jesus to die with the goal of saving people the Father did not intend to save and people whom he knows will not be saved.

The I of TULIP stands for **irresistible grace**. Scripture makes it clear that people are saved by God's will, not their own wills. God's election "depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy" (Rom. 9:16). Christians are born again "not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13). Since humans are totally depraved, if matters were left up to them, they would willfully resist God forever. This, in fact, is precisely what those who are lost do. But God graciously changes the wills of his elect. God turns their hearts and places a love for him in their inner spirits (Jer. 31:31–34). God's grace is irresistible because God changes the wills of those who would otherwise resist it.

Finally, the P in TULIP stands for **perseverance of the saints**. (See **eternal security**.) When people have been elected by God and changed by God's irresistible grace, they cannot fall away. They will undoubtedly struggle and may even temporarily lapse into sin, but they will persevere in their faith until they receive their eternal reward. This marvelous teaching pervades the New Testament. For example, believers are said to have (not hope for) eternal life (John 3:36; 6:47). An eternal life that could possibly come to an end would not be eternal. Similarly, Jesus assures believers that they cannot be "snatched" out of the Father's hand (John 10:28–29). The New Testament also consistently emphasizes that believers are "kept safe" by the power of God (1 Peter 1:4–5; Jude 1).

The New Testament teaching on salvation begins with the grim but realistic teaching of the total depravity of humans and ends with the glorious proclamation of the eternal security of the elect. God's unconditional choice, Jesus' sufficient death, and the Spirit's irresistible work transform sinners into secure believers.

### Supporting Arguments

1. *Logical coherence.* The five points of Calvinism are interconnected and thus form a logically coherent understanding of salvation that the Arminian view lacks. Because humans are totally depraved, God's choice to save some of them has to be unconditional. There clearly is nothing in humans that would merit God choosing some while leaving others in their sin. Because God's election is unconditional and restrictive (*viz.*, not all are elect), Jesus' death could not have been intended to save all, for the Son cannot work at cross-purposes with the Father. Because the wills of the elect are as depraved as those of all sinners, the Spirit has to work irresistibly in their hearts so they will choose God rather than reject him. Finally, because individuals have nothing to do with being saved, they have nothing to do with their continuing salvation. They are called and kept by the power of the omnipotent God.

By contrast, the Arminian understanding of salvation is contradictory. It asserts that humans are depraved while also maintaining that God elects people on the basis of their faith. But how are humans capable of faith if they are truly depraved? And what is the force of saying that *God* elects people if the deciding factor as to whether a person is elect or not is what *they* do (namely, have faith)? Moreover, according to Arminianism, the intent of Jesus' death was to save all, but adherents also believe that not all are saved. This leads to the contradictory conclusion that Jesus' death was an atonement for many people whose sins are never atoned for. Either a person's sins are atoned for—in which case that person is forgiven and saved—or they are not. Hence, either Jesus' death is intended only for the people it actually atones for (the Calvinist view), or it is intended for all people and thus all are saved (universalism). Arminianism tries to find a middle ground between these two alternatives, which results in a contradiction.

Similarly, Arminianism is contradictory in maintaining that people can choose to yield to or resist the saving work of the Holy Spirit, though they also affirm that people are saved wholly by grace. If the difference between the saved and the unsaved is that the former yield to the Spirit while the latter do not, how can people avoid the conclusion that the saved are better than—or at least less sinful than—the unsaved? And how can people credit God alone with their salvation? Similarly, if people must keep themselves saved by continually producing faith, as Arminianism teaches, how can they avoid the conclusion that those who persevere are better than those who do not? Arminianism insists that it is God's grace that saves and keeps people, but it does so inconsistently.

2. *All the glory is God's.* Calvinism alone gives God all the glory for people's salvation. It does not credit the human with anything—not even with having enough goodness or spiritual insight to accept God's offer of salvation. God is the beginning, middle, and end of the salvation process. Calvinism thereby paints a picture of the sovereign, gracious Lord that is glorious and altogether consistent with the New Testament.

3. *The confidence of the believer.* Finally, because it identifies God as the sole originator and preserver of salvation, Calvinism offers believers a security and confidence that Arminianism cannot offer. Calvinists need not trust in their own ability to produce and sustain faith to become or stay saved. On their own humans would not and could not produce or sustain anything of spiritual value. For adherents of Calvinism, their confidence rests in the power of the omnipotent God to rescue them from sin and to keep them from falling.

### Responding to Objections

1. *God is not fair.* One of the most frequent objections people raise against the Calvinist understanding of salvation is that it isn't fair. It's not fair that God would choose to save some but not others when he could have saved all. Four points may be made in response.

First, suppose that God was in fact fair according to our human standards. Suppose God exerted the same effort toward all people to bring them into the kingdom. If this were the case, we would have to be consistent and conclude that ultimately people, not God, are responsible for their salvation, for God did to those who were saved exactly what he did to many other people who were not. But this undermines the clear New Testament teaching that salvation is the result of God's choice, not ours, and that we are saved by grace, not works.

Calvin makes this point when he writes:

We shall never be clearly persuaded, as we ought to be, that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God's free mercy until we come to know his eternal election, which illumines God's grace by this contrast: that he does not indiscriminately adopt all into the hope of salvation, but gives to some what he denies to others.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, either we must accept that God offers to some what he denies to others, or we must simply stop claiming that we are saved solely by grace.

Second, is it not obvious that salvation is not offered equally to all? Because of where and when people are born, some have an opportunity to believe that others lack. Yet apart from faith no one can be saved. This inequality presents a difficult problem for Arminianism, but it is perfectly consistent with Calvinism.

Third, we must understand that humanity as a whole has rebelled against God and deserves hell. It would be fair for God to leave all of us in our self-chosen sin and doomed fate. If we are considering things from a scriptural perspective, then, the mystery is not that God didn't save all—the mystery is rather that God saved any!

Finally, and most importantly, we must remember that God is God and we have no right to stand in judgment of him. When Paul considers the question of unfairness in God's election (note, Paul concedes that God's election may appear unfair to the natural mind!), he simply responds, "Who indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God?" (Rom. 9:20). The final scriptural answer to the objection that God is unfair is a rebuke! Before the sovereign God, humans must stand in silent reverence.

2. *What about our freedom?* Some people are troubled by the Calvinist teaching that humans in their present fallen state are unable to choose freely to accept or reject God's offer of salvation. This seems to undermine free will. They point out that Scripture repeatedly calls people to choose to believe in Jesus Christ, promising them that if they believe they will be saved (John 6:40; 20:31; Acts 16:31; Rom. 10:9).

First, Calvinists do not deny that God calls people to make a choice to believe in him. They deny that this choice is *the basis* of their salvation. It is one thing to say that people are saved *if* they believe. It is another thing to say that they are saved *because* they believe. People are saved because they are elected by God. If they are elect, they will believe. If they are not, they will not. Hence, Jesus tells unbelievers, "Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason

you do not hear them is that you are not from God" (John 8:47). What comes first is that a person is either "from God" or "not from God." What comes second is that a person either accepts God's words or rejects them.

Second, Calvinists do not deny free will. Rather, they deny that fallen humans are able to choose God on their own. According to Scripture, all humans freely follow Adam and Eve in rebellion against God. The result of this rebellion is that humans are now totally depraved and unable to choose to respond positively to God. The freedom to do this is restored only when God opens their hearts (cf. Acts 16:14), changes their nature, and thus causes them to have a love for Christ they never otherwise would have had. "This is *the work of God*," Jesus says, "that you believe in him whom he has sent" (John 6:29, emphasis added).

3. *Does God want all to be saved?* Finally, many object to Calvinism on the grounds that certain passages of Scripture suggest that God loves the entire world, that he wants all to be saved (John 3:16; 1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9), and that he takes no delight in "the death of the wicked" (Ezek. 33:11).

First, when the Bible says that God "loves the world" and that Jesus died "for the sins of the world" (John 3:16; 1 John 2:2), it means that God's love and Christ's death are for people (his elect) from every part of the world. In other words, his love is not for people in any particular geographical region. His kingdom shall be composed of people "from every nation" (Rev. 5:9; 7:9).

Second, God does not delight in the destruction of any person (Ezek. 18:32; 33:11), even though he has eternally decreed it. It is possible for God to will on one level what he takes no pleasure in on another level. Consider the crucifixion of Christ. This was an unjust event that was carried out by people with wicked intentions (Acts 4:27–28). On this level the crucifixion did not please God. Indeed, he despised the event and judged those who carried it out. It involved incomprehensible suffering for his one and only Son. Yet Scripture also tells us that "it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain." Why? Because by doing so the Lord would "make his life an offering for sin" and "through him the will of the LORD [would] prosper" (Isa. 53:10; cf. Acts 2:23). The same can be said of the damnation of sinners. God does not delight in the destruction of any particular person, yet he chooses to incorporate it into his sovereign plan because of what it accomplishes. His glory is displayed in justly punishing sinners as well as in showing mercy toward his elect (Rom. 9:22–23).

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## God Wants All to Be Saved (The Arminian View)

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### The Biblical Argument

The Arminian understanding of salvation can be expressed and defended by discussing four motifs that run throughout Scripture. The first motif is that God loves all people. The second is that people are free to choose to accept or reject this love. The third is that God graciously influences people to accept

his love, but he does not coerce them. The fourth is that believers must continue to maintain their relationship with God for their salvation to be secure.

First, all Christians agree that God is perfect love (1 John 4:8, 16). No greater and no purer love can be conceived of than the love that constitutes the eternal nature of the Triune God. This love entails that God loves all human beings with a perfect love and wants them to be saved. If God loves only some humans enough to save them, as Calvinism teaches, his love falls far short of perfection. Fortunately, Scripture's depiction of God's attitude toward all people is consistent with its teaching that God is perfect love.

Though the Israelites usually missed it, God repeatedly emphasized that his purpose was to use them, his elect people, to reach the entire world (Gen. 12:3; Exod. 19:6). Over and over again we read in Scripture that God is not a God who shows partiality to one group of people over another (Deut. 10:17–19; 2 Chron. 19:7; Job 34:19; Rom. 2:11). He is never unfair or arbitrary, Ezekiel tells us, but wants to have mercy on everyone (Ezek. 18:25). Jeremiah adds that God “does not willingly afflict, or grieve anyone” (Lam. 3:33), a teaching that contradicts the Calvinist teaching that God consigns some people to hell before he even creates them.

The first-century Jewish Christians also initially had difficulty accepting the truth of God's universal love. Though Jesus repeatedly stressed the universal scope of God's love and of his mission (Matt. 28:18–20; Acts 1:8), God had to take supernatural measures to prod the early believers to reach out to the world to fulfill the **Great Commission** (Matt. 28:18–20). He gave Peter a vision that motivated him to preach the gospel to the Gentile Cornelius (Acts 10:9–16). At the beginning of his sermon, Peter [finally!] declares, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34–35, cf. Eph. 6:9; 1 Peter 1:17).

We must weigh Peter's words carefully: “no partiality.” Though as fallen humans we are often selective in our love, God is not. This means that God does not create some people whom he loves and others whom he plans to send to hell. The God of perfect love creates people out of love for the purpose of sharing his love with all of them. He expressed this universal love in the person of Jesus Christ. “God so loved *the world* that he gave his only Son. . . . God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that *the world* might be saved through him” (John 3:16–17, emphasis added).

Because he loves all, he wants everyone to be saved. God takes no delight in the destruction of any wicked person but rather desires all to repent (Ezek. 18:23, 32; 33:11). In the words of the apostle Peter, God is “not wanting *any* to perish, but all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9, emphasis added). He “desires *everyone* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4, emphasis added). Indeed, in explicit contradiction to the notion that Jesus died only for select individuals, Scripture tells us that God desires to be “the Savior of all people” (1 Tim. 4:10) and thus that Jesus died as “the atoning sacrifice . . . for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2; cf. Heb. 2:9).

Second, God loves everyone, but love is a two-way street. While love is who God is, humans are contingent beings who thus must choose it. This is why throughout Scripture God calls people to make decisions. Beginning in the Garden of Eden and extending through the Book of Revelation, God sets before us “life and death,” all the while pleading with us to “choose life that you . . . may live” (Deut. 30:19; cf. Josh. 24:15; Acts 17:30–31). In the New Testament, this choice is the choice to place one's trust in Jesus Christ or to reject him. Over and over we read the call to “believe in the Lord Jesus Christ” with the promise that if you do so “you will be saved” (Acts 16:31; cf. John 3:16; Acts 2:21; Rom. 10:13). The invitation is offered to everyone with the hope that all will choose to accept it.

It does not make sense for God to command people to make decisions unless they are free to make these decisions. It does not make sense for God to offer people choices if he has already predestined the choices they will make. And it does not make sense for God to offer salvation to everyone and tell us he genuinely wants everyone to be saved if he has already determined that some of them (or, many would argue, *most* of them) will not believe and will thus be damned. If God gives us decisions and tells us he wants us to choose life, it can only be because we are capable of choosing life and because he genuinely wants us to do so.

Third, most Arminians agree with Calvinists that our present fallen condition is such that we cannot choose God *on our own*. Were it not for God's grace, all humans would be hopelessly lost. All of us have freely chosen to follow Adam in rebelling against God (Rom. 5:12). We have freely placed ourselves under Satan's power and have thus become his slaves (John 8:34; 1 John 5:19). We are so helpless that Scripture says we are “dead” in our sin (Eph. 2:1). Our hearts have become “devious above all else” and “perverse” beyond understanding (Jer. 17:9). Our very nature has become hostile to God (Eph. 2:3).

God is incomprehensibly gracious, however. He did not abandon us in our sin, and his grace leads him to work with us, by the power of his Spirit, to keep the evil in our hearts in check. (This is what some Arminians call **prevenient grace**.) There are times when God sees that people are hopeless, and so he withdraws his Spirit and hardens their hearts by “[giving] them up to their passions” (Rom. 1:26; cf. vv. 24, 28; Gen. 6:3). But otherwise God's Spirit is at work in people's hearts, trying to soften them to acknowledge his lordship and walk in his ways.

As people yield to this loving influence, their hearts and minds are opened to the truth (Acts 16:14; 2 Cor. 3:13–18). Believers must profess that they would not have had the ability to believe were it not for the working of the Holy Spirit (John 16:7–14; 1 Cor. 2:9–13; 12:3; 2 Cor. 3:18). In this sense, even faith is a gift from God (Eph. 2:8–9). At the same time, Scripture is clear that people retain the power to resist the Holy Spirit, if they so choose. Scripture explicitly says that people can and do “frustrate” the Holy Spirit (Isa. 63:10). People can be persistently “stiff necked” or stubborn in their sinful stance against God (e.g., Exod. 33:3, 5; 34:9; Deut. 9:6, 13; 10:16; 31:27; Judg. 2:19; 2 Kings 17:14; 2 Chron. 30:8; 36:13; Neh. 9:16; Isa. 46:12; 48:4; Jer. 7:26; Hosea 4:16). People can and

do “reject God’s purpose for themselves” (Luke 7:30). The God of perfect love “longs to be gracious” to these sinners (Isa. 30:18) and persistently pleads with them to yield to him (Isa. 65:2; Ezek. 18:30–32; 33:11; Hosea 11:7ff.; Rom. 10:21). Yet, he will not coerce them into believing.

This willful rebellion always grieves God to the heart, for he wishes it were not so. It is this grieving heart that Jesus expressed when he cried out to Jerusalem: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Matt. 23:37). Though the people of Jerusalem were persistently rebellious, rejecting God’s invitations over and over again, God *still* wanted to forgive and shelter them. But *they* “were not willing.” Passages such as this mean nothing if God always gets his way in terms of who is saved and who is not.

Finally, we have seen that God’s Spirit works in hearts to bring people to the point of freely entering into a relationship with Christ. We must also say that God works in people’s hearts to keep them in this relationship with Christ. He is forever at work not only to keep us in the faith but to help us grow in spiritual maturity (Eph. 4:11–24; 2 Peter 3:18). Yet even here humans retain their free will. Hence, Paul says that we must “work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12–13). The text is clear: God is at work in us enabling us to do God’s good pleasure, but we must cooperate with God’s Spirit by working out our salvation. (See **conditional security**.)

This implies that it is possible for Christians to forsake their relationship with Christ and thus lose their salvation. This, in fact, is precisely what Scripture teaches. For example, Scripture warns that it is possible to have your name blotted out of the Book of Life by rejecting the Lord who first wrote it there (Ps. 69:28; Rev. 3:5). Paul worries that this is the case with certain Christians at Galatia: He suspects they have “fallen from grace” (Gal. 5:4). So, too, Paul warns Timothy about “Hymenaeus and Philetus . . . who have swerved from the truth” (2 Tim. 2:17–18), while Peter speaks of certain “false teachers” who “will even deny the Master who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves” (2 Peter 2:1). These passages argue against the Calvinist teaching that anyone who falls from the faith was never really saved in the first place. The names of the people spoken of in these passages were written in the Book of Life, and these people were in grace and bought by the Master.

The possibility of believers losing their salvation is also clear in Scripture’s many warnings to believers not to fall away. For example, Peter writes:

For if, after [people] have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overpowered, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than, after knowing it, to turn back from the holy commandment that was passed on to them.

Clearly, it is possible for people who have been made righteous “through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” to reject this salvation and end up in a state worse than the one from which they were saved. This is why Jesus taught that “[anyone] who endures to the end will be saved” (Matt. 24:13). Those who fall away from the faith are no longer saved.

## Supporting Arguments

1. *Affirmation of God’s perfect love.* One of the greatest advantages of the Arminian understanding of salvation is that it alone can affirm with logical consistency the perfection of God’s love. There simply is no way to do so if one believes that God chooses not to save some (or most) of the people he could save. While not denying that God would be just in sending all humans to hell, Arminians simply deny that God is perfectly loving if he does not save all whom he could save. A person who threw out only one lifeline to ten drowning people when he had ten lifelines available would not be considered perfectly loving—even if the people themselves were responsible for going overboard. God throws out lifelines to everyone. That some choose to drown is not his fault nor his desire.

2. *Confidence in evangelism.* Arminians can be confident that God loves all people, that Jesus died for their sins, and that the Holy Spirit is at work in their hearts. These facts provide a confidence and motivation to preach the gospel “to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15; Col. 1:23). While Calvinists sometimes make great evangelists, their theology cannot supply this confidence or motivation. If they are consistent with their theology, they cannot say to every person they meet, “God loves you” or “Jesus died for you,” because the person they are talking to may not be one of God’s elect.

Conversely, since Calvinists believe there is no chance that the elect will *not* be saved, Calvinism undermines the urgency of evangelism. In the Arminian view, since people are saved only when they believe, and since they cannot believe unless they hear the gospel preached to them (Rom. 10:13–17), it is urgent that Christians take upon themselves the responsibility to evangelize.

## Responding to Objections

1. *This view is not consistent with election.* Many argue that Paul’s theology of election is not consistent with Arminianism. Paul says that “[God] chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4) and that God “saved us” and gave us grace “in Christ Jesus before the ages began” (2 Tim. 1:9).

The classic Arminian interpretation is that God elected people on the basis of his foreknowledge of their faith. Before the foundation of the world God foreknew who would and would not believe. He chose (elected) those who would believe to be his children and predestined them “to be holy and blameless before him in love.” These individuals are in this sense saved and given grace “in Christ Jesus before the ages began.”

An alternative Arminian interpretation maintains that Paul's concept of election in these passages is corporate, not individual. The church is God's elect people in the same sense that Israel was God's elect nation. According to this interpretation, before the foundation of the world God chose to have a people (the church) who would believe in him and would be predestined "to be holy and blameless before him in love." When a person chooses to be incorporated into this group by believing in Jesus, all that is predestined *for the group* now applies to that person. Hence, Paul can say to all who have chosen to become part of the church, "He chose us [as a group] in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children" (Eph. 1:4–5).

Either of these interpretations is more plausible than the Calvinist interpretation, which depicts God as deciding who would (and thus who would not) believe in him before the foundation of the world.

2. *This view suggests that we get credit for our salvation.* It is often argued that Arminianism logically undermines the scriptural teaching that we are saved by grace alone. If the ultimate reason a person is saved or not lies in that person, not in God, then the credit for salvation must go to the person, not to God. Three things may be said in response to this argument.

First, salvation is a gracious gift by God, but a gift is not less of a gift because it is accepted. For example, a man recently donated several million dollars to a trust fund for disadvantaged teenagers. Would it not be absurd for someone to claim that his gift was not really a gift because the trustees of the trust fund accepted the gift? Would anyone claim that the trustees must take credit for the donation because they could have rejected the gift? So it is with God's offer of salvation. The gracious gift is offered to all and is no less a gift because we must choose to accept it.

Second, Scripture never portrays the choice to have faith as a work. When New Testament authors stress that salvation is not arrived at by works, as first-century Jews, these authors are referring to works *of the law*. They are saying that God's righteousness does not come by external obedience to the law, as some Jews of their day supposed. God's righteousness cannot be earned. It can come only as a gift (Rom. 4:4–16). But the New Testament nevertheless also teaches that the gift must be accepted by faith.

Finally, most Arminians agree that even the ability to accept the gift of salvation is given by God, as said above. Arminians differ from Calvinists on this matter only in that they deny that the Spirit works *irresistibly*. God graciously makes it *possible* for people to believe, but he does not make it *necessary* for them to believe. It is one thing to claim that without the Holy Spirit we *cannot* believe and quite another to say that with the work of the Holy Spirit we *must* believe. Scripture affirms the former but not the latter. In any event, this demonstrates that Arminianism does not undermine the truth that God is to receive all the glory for salvation.

### Further Reading

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